**Peer Review: A Method for Teaching Reading, Writing, and Collaboration Skills**

Instructors teaching a writing-intensive course, or any course that requires students to produce a substantial amount of writing, should consider creating opportunities for students to read and respond to one another's writing. Such opportunities to engage in "peer review," when well planned, can help students improve their reading and writing skills, and learn how to collaborate effectively.

More specifically, participating in peer review can help students

- Learn how to read carefully, with attention to the details of a piece of writing (whether their own or another writer's);

- Learn how to strengthen their writing by taking into account the responses of actual and anticipated readers;

- Make the transition from writing primarily for themselves or for an instructor to writing for a broader audience—a key transition for students as they learn to write university-level papers and as they prepare for post-graduate work;

- Learn how to formulate and communicate constructive feedback on a peer's work;

- Learn how to gather and respond to feedback on their own work.

A common misstep that many instructors make in approaching peer review is to assume that students *already have* the skills described above and that incorporating peer review simply amounts to asking students to *apply* these skills to the tasks of reading and responding to one another's writing. Instead, instructors should approach peer review as an opportunity to *teach* these skills and for students to *practice* them.

***How Do Students Respond?***

Many instructors who have incorporated peer review into their courses report less than satisfying results. In fact, it is quite common to find that, when asked to participate in peer review, students rush through the peer-review process and offer their peers only vaguely positive comments, such as "I liked your paper," or "Good job," or "Good paper, but a few parts need more work." Furthermore, many students seem to ignore peer-reviewers' comments on their writing.

There are several possible reasons behind such responses:

1. Many students feel uncomfortable with the task of having to pronounce a judgment on their peers' writing. This discomfort may be the result of their maturity level, their desire not to hurt a peer's feelings (perhaps made more acute by the fact that they are anxious

about having their peers read and judge their own writing), or simply their inexperience with providing constructive criticism on a peer's work. A vaguely positive response allows them to avoid a socially uncomfortable situation and to create an environment of mutual support (Nilson 2003).

2. If students are not given clear guidance from their instructors, they may not know how to comment on one another's writing in a specific and constructive way. In addition, it should be noted that students may not understand how to comment on their peers' writing because over the years they have not received helpful feedback from instructors who have graded their papers. (For suggestions on how to write specific comments that can help students improve their writing, see the handout, "Tips for Commenting on Student Writing").

3. Some instructors ask their students to evaluate their peers' writing using the same criteria the instructor uses when grading papers (e.g. quality of thesis, adequacy of support, coherence, etc.). Undergraduate students often have an inadequate understanding of these criteria, and as a result, they either ignore or inappropriately apply such criteria during peer-review sessions (Nilson 2003).

4. Many students do not perceive feedback from peers as relevant to the process of writing a paper for a course. Especially at the beginning of their undergraduate work, students are likely to assume that it is only the instructor's feedback that "counts."

5. Even when they take seriously feedback provided by their peers, students often do not know how to incorporate that feedback when they revise their papers.

The approach to peer review discussed in this handout has been developed to help instructors respond to the challenges described above. For more detailed suggestions based on this approach, see the handout, "How to Plan and Guide In-Class Peer-Review Sessions."

*Key Strategies*

**1. Identify and teach the skills required for peer review.** As you are planning your course, make a list of the skills that students should be learning and putting into practice when participating in peer review. These might include reading skills (discerning a writer's main point, locating key points of support or relevant data, etc.), writing skills (writing clear, specific comments and questions), and collaboration skills (phrasing critiques in a descriptive, constructive way). Articulating what you see as the core skills involved in peer review will help you develop a coherent plan for integrating peer review into your course and will make more clear the specific instructions your students will need as they learn how to review a peer's paper and how to use the comments they receive during peer review.

**2. Teach peer review as an essential part of the writing process.** Emphasize to students that peer review is not just a course requirement: it is an essential part of the writing process that all successful writers engage in at some point. Your students may not realize the extent to which scholars and other professionals practice peer review as an integral part of producing effective writing in their fields. Consider explaining why, as a scholar, you find peer review helpful—even when you do not agree with or appreciate every comment made by a peer- reviewer. For example, you might tell them about a specific instance when a reader's comments helped you to clarify and strengthen your writing.

Remind students that the process of producing academic and professional writing generally involves three steps: *drafting, revising, and editing*. Peer review is often most helpful to student writers when it is utilized between the drafting and revision stages, or after each student has produced a complete draft, but while there is still time to make substantial changes. A writer might learn from peer-reviewers, for example, that a paper's introduction is its strongest point, or that the paper's main point or thesis is not yet clear, or that there are "gaps" in the logic or the support that detract from the paper's effectiveness, or that a paper's conclusion presents an interesting idea that leaves the reader with unanswered questions. The purpose of peer review as a prelude to revision is to help the writer determine which parts of the paper are effective as is, and which are unclear, incomplete, or unconvincing.

**3. Describe peer review as an opportunity for students to learn how to write for an audience.** Undergraduate students often do not perceive how completing academic writing assignments will prepare them for work in the professional world. One way to help them make this connection is to point out a fact that many instructors take for granted but that undergraduates need to be reminded of: no matter what university students end up doing after graduation, the quality of their ideas and their work will be judged, in a large measure, by how well they can communicate in writing to diverse audiences. Participating in peer review can help them learn to shape their written language as a medium of communication with readers. For example, seeking out peer feedback can help one student construct a convincing argument by anticipating and answering counter-arguments that his readers might pose, while peer review can help another student determine how to explain the significance of her research to readers who are not experts in her field.

**4. Define the role of the peer-reviewer as that of a reader, not an evaluator.** Develop guidelines for peer-reviewers that ask them to complete specific tasks: examples include indicating the strongest part of a paper; identifying or rephrasing the thesis; listing the major points of support or evidence; and indicating sentences or paragraphs that seem out of order, incompletely explained, or otherwise in need of revision. Some of these tasks are descriptive and others are evaluative. However, those that are evaluative should put the emphasis on the reader's

impressions and responses and should not require the peer-reviewer to pronounce a judgment on the paper as a whole (Nilson 2003). This approach should help you develop specific instructions to students that will clarify how they should respond to one another's writing and should also help you pare down your expectations of what students can realistically accomplish during in-class peer-review sessions. Defining the role of the peer-reviewer as a reader will also help you underscore the fact that it is up to the *writer* to decide whether and how to make changes to the paper through revision. In other words, the writer should think about *all* of the reviewers' comments, but may decide to ignore some of the comments and to make changes in response to others.

### *Increasing Students' Sense of Investment in Communicating and Collaborating Effectively*

Even though students as peer-reviewers should not be asked to use the same criteria the instructor uses when grading papers, by participating in peer review they should gain a better understanding of those criteria. After all, some of the most common criteria for determining the effectiveness of writing refer to the effects of a piece of writing on readers: for example, a sentence can be called "clear" when readers can discern its meaning; a description of research methods can be called "coherent" and "complete" when readers understand the process well enough to replicate it themselves; an argumentative essay can be called "convincing" when it conveys a position that readers find reasonable and compelling.

When students engage fully in the peer-review process, they should not only better comprehend the criteria used to determine whether a paper is well written. They should also start to see themselves as writers and readers who *have a stake* in learning to recognize and to produce effective writing—as peers who learn more when they learn to communicate more effectively with one another.

### *Sources and Recommended Reading*

Bean, John C. (2001). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Gottschalk, Katherine and Keith Hjortshoj (2004). "What Can You Do with Student Writing?" In *The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Millis, Barbara J. (2002). "Enhancing Learning—and More! Through Collaborative Learning. IDEA Paper 38. The IDEA Center. http://www.theideacenter.org/sites/default/files/Idea_Paper_38.pdf

Nilson, Linda. (2003). "Improving Student Peer Feedback." *College Teaching* 51.1 . 34-38.