

# Student Interpretation and Application of Peer Writing Comments in English 110: A 2012-2013 Lesson Study by Ryan Friesen, Bruce Handtke, and Jennifer Mohlenhoff-Baggett

## Relevant ENG 110 SLOs

- ◆ Students should have flexible strategies for generating ideas, revising, editing, and proofreading.
- ◆ Students should understand writing as a recursive process.
- ◆ Students should be able to critique their own and others' work and use feedback effectively.

## The Lesson

In Week 3 of an ENG 110 (College Writing I) course, students compose the rough draft of a 1200-word paper that analyzes a professional essay.

- ◆ On the first day of the lesson:
  - Groups of three students exchange essays and write comments on a peer editing rubric.
  - The peer editors then write additional comments on the hard copy of each writer's paper.The instructor encourages students NOT to have a prolonged discussion of comments and suggestions.
  - That discussion will take place on the following day, during which the lesson study team will observe.
- ◆ On the observation day, students complete a chart that instructs them to:
  - Summarize what comments they received,
  - Explain how they responded to each comment,
  - Describe how they will apply the comment, and locate where they will apply it.Students take turns discussing the written comments in depth as their groups address each paper individually. Our lesson study team takes field notes and completes a questionnaire based on our expectations for their discussion habits and revising discussions.
- ◆ Students revise their paper drafts outside of class. On the day the assignment is due, they turn in:
  - Rough drafts with comments from their peer editing group members,
  - Annotated rubrics,
  - Discussion charts,
  - Brief summaries of their revision strategy and impressions of the revising process.Our team retains these artifacts, as well as field notes, observations, and checklists for discussing revision.

## Questions

We wanted to know:

- Do ENG 110 students understand and value peer critique?
- How do these student writers read peer comments?
- What do they recognize within them?
- Can these students apply peer comments both globally and locally when revising their papers?
- How can this peer revision process be improved?

## Process

Over two semesters, we observed 42 students offering, interpreting, and applying comments made by their peers in response to a formal analysis paper they had written.

## Evidence

We collected evidence of:

- How students understand peer comments,
- How they translate them into a process,
- How they use peer comments to revise their writing.

## Conclusions

In this lesson study, we developed strategies for refining the peer critique process to benefit writers, readers, instructors, and the texts that students produce.

We have begun standardizing the language of peer critique to make the interpretive process more consistent. At the same time, we have discovered that a less-than-exact interpretation of peer advice does not invalidate or disable the revision process if the motive to revise has been stimulated, foregrounded, and authorized for student writers.

We value our lesson's function of reminding students that they must look beyond an imagined virtual audience and become aware of diverse readers with their own rationales and critical perspectives. Learning to value the critical feedback of their peers encourages this growth in student writers.

Some questions remain: Can the lesson be expanded in the long term to guide students toward becoming effective editors of their own and others' writing? Do they have the tools needed to evaluate both effective and troublesome writing patterns? Can they articulate these tools and patterns? How can we assess the long-term effects of these peer revision and editing lessons?

## Results

- ◆ The majority of students (**79%**) composed logically sound interpretations of their peers' comments. Many of these students (**34%**) alluded to specific, sophisticated writing strategies and techniques when interpreting their peers' comments.
  - Likely sources for this informed knowledge include in-class rhetorical study, past writing education, amassed experience as readers, and exposure to handbook content, all qualities which vary from student to student.
- ◆ Students who did misinterpret peer comments (**21%**) had, in some cases, constructed a "straw man" version of peer critiques that they had judged to be unfair or misguided.
  - Some of these students also described revising their papers using a simplified concept of what constitutes improvement (e.g. when a peer suggested improving sentence variety, the writer interpreted this as meaning that some sentences should be "changed up").
- ◆ Almost all students (**82%**) said they accepted and acted upon their peers' advice.
  - Only a few writers (**17%**) dismissed peers comments, claiming that they "didn't need help" or had already planned to make the suggested changes.
  - Devaluing peer advice seemed to indicate a lack of familiarity with writing as a dialogue that obligates writers to care how readers respond.
- ◆ Students sometimes mistook chronic spelling errors, grammatical mistakes, and faulty structure as local phenomenon.
  - As a result, many students (**23%**) were unable or unwilling to see peer diagnoses of errors as indicative of chronic failings; seeing comments in isolation, the writers didn't use them to develop a revision *strategy*.
- ◆ Occasionally, writers valued peer critique but took issue with specific criticism, citing creative ownership of the text.
  - Such students declined peer advice because they liked how a draft sounded or "flowed" without further edits.
  - Others asserted superior knowledge of conventions when deciding not to follow peer guidance.
  - Nonetheless, these negotiations encouraged thorough consideration of writer and reader expectations and required thoughtful interpretation of peer feedback.