

Peer Review in a Social Policy Course: Lessons Learned

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Abstract: *Peer review is a tool that provides students with a sense of how their work is perceived by others. Built on reflection and feedback, peer review assesses the quality of academic processes and products based on well-understood criteria. Peer review was implemented in a baccalaureate social work policy course to enhance writing and critical thinking skills. Students were surveyed on their experiences and indicated that peer review activities provided beneficial learning exercises. The information gathered suggests methods for future implementation of peer review in social work education.*

Keywords: *Peer review, education, social work, writing skills, critical thinking*

Writing assignments are an active form of learning, especially when students receive feedback and have the opportunity to revise their work (Althausser & Darnell, 2001). The structural process of peer review advances learning as students contemplate ideas and transfer their thoughts to words (Althausser & Darnell, 2001). Thus, peer review connotes a process in which students assess one another's work using specific criteria and provide feedback to each other designed to improve writing and critical thinking skills (Van Den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006). While peer review is common in the professional world with activities such as journal articles and grant proposals, few students have the opportunity to engage in the peer review process (Liu, Pysarchik, & Taylor, 2002).

Peer review is an important tool in social work education because it promotes self-examination, assessment, interpersonal interaction, and verbal and written communication—fundamental skills necessary for professional social work practice (Lemieux, 2001). Although useful strategies for incorporating peer review in the classroom setting are available for instructors (Fitzgerald, 1989; Topping, 1998; Van Den Berg et al., 2006), there is little research found on students' perception of the peer review process as a tool for learning in social work.

Literature Review

Peer Review Process and Background

Peer review has its roots in ancient Greece as a method of evaluation; it was the physician Ishaq bin Ali al-Rahwl (854–931 CE) of Syria who first described the peer review process as a method to evaluate the care provided by physicians in the context of a patient's recovery (Burnham, 1990). During the 17th century, scientific clubs of scholars debated the origin and validity of theoretical frameworks, establishing processes of announcing, validating, and accrediting scientific discovery. However, the review process was not considered standard practice until the mid-20th century (Fitzpatrick, 2009).

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The practice of peer review emerged in the social science community with the publication of professional journals; it ensured that only valid and reliable evidence was published. Thus, much like scientific scholars, social scientists saw peer review at the heart of good scholarly publishing and a standard practice for all reputable journals.

Peer review is used in social work practice through: systems of policy development; program implementation; intervention or service plans; monitoring; evaluation; and the dissemination of evidence or findings. Social work research also requires peer review in grant funding, internal review boards, research methodologies, data collection and interpretation, and the publications of evidence or findings.

Social work educators have used peer review informally for many years as a way to enhance students' writing skills. The review process involves students in a collaborative learning effort whereby they benefit from commenting on the work of others, and use critical thinking skills to nurture the development of their classmates' writing skills. More recently, with the need for evidence to validate that peer review is related to the efficiency and effectiveness of learning, educators began conducting research on this pedagogical method.

Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) concluded that peer review involves a judgment of work based on standards whereby students assess their own work and that of peers. To paraphrase, peer review is sometimes known as peer response (Gillam, 1990), peer assessment, peer marking, or peer feedback (Topping, 1998). Whatever the name, the process of peer review remains somewhat consistent across disciplines. Namely, grading rubrics or open-ended questions are used to assess the quality of such writing elements as the expression of ideas and content, general organization, and fluency.

Over the last several years, there appears to be an increased use of peer review to mark learning and achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Topping (1998) performed a literature review of 31 studies on peer review conducted from 1980 to 1996. Topping's account of the research is qualitative, descriptive, and based primarily on the interpretation of researchers. The summary findings indicate that peer review is capable of outcomes equal to or better than teacher assessment when objectives, expectations, and the collaborative nature of the process are communicated. It was also found to be reliable and valid in many applications (Topping, 1998).

Falchikov and Goldfinch (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of 48 quantitative peer assessment studies, of which 30 were not included in Topping's review, to investigate student-teacher agreement in marking. Results indicated that global assessments based on clear, concise criteria were essential to peer review. Moreover, multiple ratings were not found to be better than ratings by singletons (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000).

Lemieux (2001) used peer review in a graduate-level social work practice class to revise assignments. High correlations were found among instructor, peer, and self-evaluation scores. Students reported peer review was challenging, but helpful (Lemieux, 2001). A similar finding was reported by Althausser and Darnall (2001) who used peer review to evaluate draft answers to take-home essay questions using a Web-based

conference system. Results indicated the better the peer review, the higher the quality of revised essays.

Reese-Durham (2005) facilitated a peer review process in an Applied Research Education course with 19 students. Students reported the feedback was helpful because they learned that more substantial information was needed in their research paper. Further, the instructor found the quality of papers received was much higher than those submitted by students from previous classes that did not use peer review (Reese-Durham, 2005).

An experimental study of peer review consisting of 168 history students was conducted by Van Den Berg and colleagues (2006) to determine the best combination of design features. It found the optimal size of feedback groups seemed to be three or four, with sufficient time between peer and teacher assessment for students to revise their drafts. Peer review, however, was not found to lead to higher grades as compared to those who did not have peer review, but the majority of students who utilized peer review found their revised papers better than the drafts. This outcome was supported by Price, O'Donovan, and Rust (2007) who were unable to demonstrate any statistically significant differences in grades between 503 students who attended an optional workshop on peer review and 91 students who did not. Students, however, felt the peer review workshop was valuable (Price et al., 2007).

Saito and Fujita (2009) provided strong support for peer review within the context of group presentations. Their study of 83 Japanese first-year college students found overall similarity between peer and instructor assessments, along with some notable differences in item difficulties. Their results also suggest that students appreciated the support offered through the peer review process (Saito & Fujita, 2009).

Perspectives Associated with Peer Review

Reasoned thinking and effective writing are critical competencies of social work practice (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2008). Peer review, as a vehicle to enhance student competency development in these two areas, is underpinned by compatible perspectives that highlight the values and principles of the social work profession. It is the experience-based learning of peer review that integrates these perspectives into a pedagogical approach.

Social constructionism is integral to peer review because it facilitates learning by encouraging people to make sense of their own realities and accept responsibility for their beliefs and values (Gibbons & Gray, 2004). Sharing ideas through social dialogues, engaging in reflection, and considering alternative perspectives are distinguishing features of social constructionism and subsequently, peer review. Indeed, the contention is that students learn through their interactions with others in an environment that encourages the social conditions for experiences and provides the resources to enhance their informed understanding of the world.

Experiential learning, another perspective associated with peer review, links critical thinking to the "iterative process of doing-critiquing-doing-critiquing" (Doll, 1993, p.

174; Gibbons & Gray, 2004). Dewey (1910) and later Freire (1994), both proponents of experiential learning, recognized that students need to engage in an independent, self-directed approach to learning whereby the teacher is a facilitator of knowledge, not the expert. Peer review does this through the processes of writing, reading, reviewing, discussing, and revising in the context of independent study and working relationships. Dialogue and reflection lead students to different points of view and expand their fund of knowledge by exploring various interpretations, giving and providing feedback, and communicating ideas.

The strengths perspective based on the ecological theory, with its focus on dynamic interactions and active participation, contributes to peer review by suggesting that clarity of thought and communication adds power and control to students as they work toward a sense of self as professional (Saleebey, 2006; Tice & Perkins, 1996). Components of the strengths perceptive, collaboration, reciprocity, acknowledging individual realities, and building upon unique characteristics, give voice to students' ideas as they discover their power to influence through thought and word.

Social constructionism, experiential learning, and the strengths perspective suggest that peer review complements the values of social work and offers educators a pedagogical approach that enhances a nurturing classroom environment in which students integrate their learning with that of others. Thus, implied in peer review is the notion that students are empowered to direct changes in their thinking and writing through a dynamic process.

Method

Peer review is widely used in a variety of course subjects and learning activities. However, in order for peer review to be successful for students, their thoughts on the process are needed. The purpose of this study was to examine social work students' perceptions of the peer review process. The peer feedback activity consisted of reviewing a policy-related paper in a social work social policy class. Students were then surveyed at the end of the class on the peer review experience.

Participants

Enrolled in a mid-size United States honors university, the student participants (N = 64) ranged from sophomore to senior undergraduates majoring in social work, sociology, political science, or psychology. Participants were selected from three baccalaureate social policy classes taught over the span of three years in the spring semester (Table 1). Initially, 66 surveys were returned; however, two surveys from different years did not have responses to five or more questions on different scales. Those two surveys were excluded from analysis.

Procedure

The study's method, participant description, and procedures were defined and submitted to the university's Institutional Review Board. Approval to conduct the study was received.

Table 1. Sample for Peer Review (N = 64)

Class	Number of Students	Percent of Sample
1	12	18.8%
2	16	25.0%
3	36	56.3%
Total	64	100.0%

For several reasons, the second course in a two-course social policy sequence was selected for the study. First, the course examined the current American social welfare system by analyzing state and federal policies related to a range of social issues. Thus, the purpose of the course supported a significant writing assignment that required problem recognition, critical thinking, research, and the integration of multiple sources of knowledge. Secondly, because of the course's writing assignment, it was considered "writing intensive" by the university. More specifically, scholarly research, writing frequently in and/or out of class, feedback on writing, and discussions of the work students were doing as writers occurred at various points during the semester. Lastly, the assignment, in the context of course content, encouraged students to reflect upon and understand the importance of conveying thoughts and policy positions to a varied audience. Consequently, writing was seen as a vehicle of knowledge acquisition and distribution.

At the beginning of the spring semester a major writing assignment, consisting of approximately 15 pages, was introduced to the students. The assignment, divided into three distinct components, involved using a framework to analyze a current social policy. The peer review process included: 1) providing students with a 30-minute lecture on American Psychological Association style writing, expectations for peer review, and components for good introduction and conclusion paragraphs; 2) distributing examples of introduction and conclusion paragraphs and asking students to consider how to improve them; 3) dividing students into pairs and exchanging drafts of the assignment components according to a specified timeline; 4) assessing the drafts according to the same standardized form, or rubric, the instructor would use; 5) providing the instructor with the reviewed drafts for review and comments; and, 6) returning the drafts to students by the following class with the peer review and instructor comments. At the end of the course, students were surveyed on their experiences of peer review for course improvement.

Measures

The measurement tool consisted of 14 survey questions previously used in two other studies to assess the peer review experience. A comment area was also provided for written feedback in the study. Authors' permissions were received to use both measures.

Peer Evaluation. Students' perspective on the helpfulness of the peer review experience was measured by a Peer Evaluation (PE) scale (Reese-Durham, 2005). Six

Likert-type response scale questions (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) were used for this study. Examples of items are “This activity was helpful in my revisions for this paper” and “My feedback should be useful for revising the paper.” Information on psychometric properties from the previous study was not available. In this study, Cronbach’s alpha was found to be .90.

Positive Attitude Subscale. Students’ overall attitudes to peer review were assessed by the Positive Attitude Subscale (POS) (Wen & Tsai, 2006). It is an eight-item, self-report questionnaire with a five-point Likert-type response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach’s alpha was found to be .86 in the Wen and Tsai (2006) study and .93 in this study.

Results

Using SPSS 15.0, a Kruskal-Wallis test and frequencies were used to examine peer assessment feedback. There were no variables with 5 percent or more missing values; thus, hot decking was used as a procedure for handling missing data. Hot decking is the process of replacing missing values with a response from a participant who provided similar answers on non-missing items (Andridge & Little, 2010). The Kruskal-Wallis test was chosen to test for differences among groups on the PE and POS measures, since data were not normally distributed. The results of these tests were not statistically significant, indicating no differences among the three groups of students.

Results indicate that overall, students found peer review to be beneficial (Table 2). Specifically, peer assessment was found to be helpful to their learning. They reported peer assessment activities increased the interaction among themselves and their classmates, the highest mean in the survey. Students felt the feedback they received was clear, understandable and constructive. Students felt the feedback they provided to their peers would be useful for revising the student’s paper they reviewed. However, students rated the peer review activity lower for being helpful to revise their own paper. This was interesting, as the mean for students reporting they understood their role as peer reviewer was quite high. Students seemed to think peer review was fair to assess performance.

Seventeen baccalaureate students provided written comments. The majority of the feedback was positive, such as “Peer review worked for me” and “I haven’t done it in a while, and it helped keep me on track.” A student thought the peer review process reduced anxiety about submitting the paper: “I felt better because it was less pressure to have a classmate review the paper first.” The peer collaboration was also enjoyed by students: “I love the peer interaction and feedback. It really helps for the paper.” There were, however, four comments about the lack of participation from their partner in the peer review process. Another student reported they did not find it valuable: “I like the idea of peer assessment, but honestly I didn’t get a lot of useful information.”

Table 2. Survey Responses ($N = 64$)

<i>Scale</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>SD</i>
1 (PE)	Helpful for revisions	3.78	4.0	4.0	1.03
	Constructive feedback received	3.92	4.0	4.0	.93
	Feedback was clear and understandable	3.78	4.0	4.0	.95
	Understood role as peer reviewer	4.11	4.0	5.0	.94
	Able to give constructive feedback	3.92	4.0	4.0	.98
	Feedback given should be useful	4.06	4.0	4.0	.83
2 (POS)	Helpful to my learning	3.89	4.0	5.0	1.05
	Understood more about requirements	3.77	4.0	4.0	1.05
	Improved verbal communication skills	3.78	4.0	4.0	1.02
	Motivated learning	3.38	3.0	3.0	1.15
	Increased interaction between teacher and student	3.30	3.0	3.0	1.16
	Developed a sense of participation	3.81	4.0	4.0	.99
	Increased interaction between classmates and student	4.14	4.0	5.0	1.10
	Fair to use to assess performance	3.71	4.0	4.0	1.13

Discussion

The objective of this study was to collect students' responses to and assessment of the peer review process so as to improve the process for future classes. Results from the study corroborated Wen and Tsai's (2006) findings that peer assessment increases interactions among classmates. Additionally, the outcome that peer review increases verbal skills supports Gillam's (1990) report that peer assessment improves students' ability to communicate. These results demonstrate how peer review contributes to the strengths perspective, as students are engaging with one another and collaborating on a specific educational assignment, helping to develop a professional identity. The findings were also consistent with prior studies' claims that students found peer review helpful to promote effective writing (Lemieux, 2001; Price et al., 2007). This conclusion indicates students considered alternate perspectives through their interactions of others, demonstrating social constructionism.

It is interesting to note that while the respondents thought their feedback would be helpful to others, they did not view the feedback they received to be as useful as what they had provided to their peers. An explanation of this could come from a lack of exposure to experiential learning, whereby students have limited experience giving and

providing feedback to their peers. Furthermore, perhaps this response reflects the first stage in Reynolds' (1985) five-step model of learning, where danger or hesitation is associated with new skill acquisition. With this idea as a backdrop, it would be essential that students receive ongoing written and verbal encouragement throughout the peer review process. Ideally, such supportive comments would increase the confidence of students to experiment with and improve their writing skills.

Feedback on the peer review process provided an opportunity for the course instructor to incorporate different pedagogical strategies to improve the course's writing assignments. The overall goal of the following strategies is to make student writing more infused in the course's design and classroom activities. Lessons learned included:

Consider writing a group effort, not an individual task. Unlike the peer review process associated with the publication of professional articles or the funding review of grants, peer review with students in the context of the classroom necessitates supportive relationships where candor and constructive criticism are received within a framework of confidence and understanding. To nurture the establishment of collegial relationships, the earlier in the course that instructor-assigned or student-selected pairs or groups are formed, the more time there is for meaningful communication and trust to develop. Ideally, a learning environment emerges from those relationships that are less focused on individual achievement and more directed toward group improvement of writing as an interconnected process.

Share copies and sections of the assignment to set a standard. As in the peer review process where good introduction and conclusion paragraphs are reviewed and criteria for excellence is discussed, students should have the opportunity to read and discuss noteworthy examples of written assignments (Gehr, 2005). This is a characteristic of social constructionism. It allows for analysis of various writing styles, self-reflection and a sense of support for judgments (Gibbs & Gambrell, 1996). Further, questions regarding the expectations and criteria associated with the assignment can be addressed before students engage in their writing.

Sequence assignments. Written final assignments often loom over a course in an overwhelming manner. Breaking a major writing assignment into discrete components, allowing for peer review of those components, providing feedback, and requiring synthesis of the components into a comprehensive whole underlines a process of writing comprised of drafts, reflection, revision and integration, a hallmark of experiential learning. This process also encourages students to work on the writing assignment over time in a thoughtful manner (Sterngold, 2004).

Designate in- and out-of-class time for peer review and discussion. Introducing peer review assumes a commitment to writing as a process of thinking, drafting, revising, rethinking, and editing (Vourlekis & Hall, 2007). The allocation of class time to this process signifies its importance and the integral role writing has to the course content. The course syllabus should specify when class time will be devoted to peer review, thus allowing students to think ahead and prepare. Assigning a grade to peer review also highlights the significance of participation.

Design a feedback rubric for peer review. As stated in the peer review process, the drafts of assignments were reviewed according to the same standardized form, or rubric, that the instructor used. Creating a rubric for peer review forces consideration, in an objective fashion, of the major and minor elements of the writing assignment. It also supports the use of the strengths perspective, as students actively engage in the peer review process. A standard format also provides the instructor and students with a guideline for knowing the content and writing expectations and marking improvement in both areas over time.

Highlight the role of the instructor in the peer review process. Peer review broadens the audience to whom student writers are responsible because someone other than the course instructor will review their writing (Reid, 2006). However, it is the instructor who can connect comments on writing skills with a demonstrated understanding of course content. Consequently, the instructor's comments should be prompt and thorough, affording students the opportunity to meet with the instructor as needed.

Connect with university student support services. Students with different writing skill levels and academic experiences enroll in a course. Peer review involves active learning whereby students conduct ongoing analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of presented material (Bronwell & Eison, 1991). The anticipated benefits of active learning include improved attitudes toward the acquisition of new information, enhanced critical thinking, improved writing skills, and increased retention of material (Bronwell & Eison, 1991). Therefore, through the peer review process, students might recognize their academic strengths as well as their needs to seek assistance from a writing center or some sort of tutoring. In this way, collaboration between the class instructor and supportive ancillary services is seen as an important alliance in developing academic capacity, including writing skills.

Issues Relating to Peer Review

While the positive aspects of peer review have been highlighted in this study, it is also important to consider some shortcomings, including: student anxiety, social embarrassment, possible plagiarism, and an unwillingness to provide feedback to peers or accept peer feedback (Topping, 1998). For example, one student from the study reported, "If a person has poor writing skills, they may not want it to be known by their peers."

Peer review may encourage those students having difficulty to meet with the instructor before problems occur and seek outside tutoring in order to improve their writing. A proactive approach is sequencing sections of papers. It can help with this issue because students can be identified early on in the semester if they are experiencing difficulties. Another student in the same class stated, "Some peers do not hold the same level of skills as others." Following Van Den Berg and colleagues' (2006) suggestion of having feedback groups consisting of three or four students may help this problem. Incorporating student feedback in the peer review process is suggested, as well as training students on the application of peer review, giving and receiving feedback, and incorporating feedback into their work (Topping, 1998). Instructors also need to model how to give comments (Fitzgerald, 1989); it is important for social work students to learn

how to give and receive criticism because this will occur throughout their social work career.

Implications for Social Work

This study suggests that peer review is an important process for students for several reasons. First, it exposes them to other writing styles. It allows students to give and receive feedback, a vital skill set to master in the social work field. In addition, it prepares students to work in groups. Further, peer review teaches self-examination (Lemieux, 2001). Students receive comments on their work, and they then choose whether or not to incorporate the feedback in their writing. As future social workers, it is important for students to become familiar with the peer review process since it will occur in their career. Grant proposals, conference proposals and journal manuscripts are all peer reviewed. Further, some agencies incorporate a peer review in the hiring process.

For social work educators, peer review presents an opportunity to shift emphasis from instructor-directed learning to active learning. In the resulting learning environment, course design, time allocation, and class discussions affirm student contributions and skill improvements while providing continuous constructive feedback. Thus, by assuming a more facilitative role, instructors support active learning in which students simultaneously reflect on course content as they improve their writing skills.

Furthermore, there is a direct relationship between peer review and the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards established by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008). Specifically, peer review supports Educational Policy 2.1.3 which discusses critical thinking and the need to demonstrate written communication skills in professional relationships. A rubric designed for the peer review can be used to report student competency in this standard and also benchmark both individual and aggregated grades.

The findings of this study have several implications for future research. Namely, data supports the need for research that evaluates if differences or similarities on receptiveness of peer review exist in relation to students' skill levels and demographic characteristics. The study also raises important issues as to whether peer review is powerful enough to assist students with significant writing challenges. Evaluating students' writing skills before and after receiving peer review would shed insight into this issue. Furthermore, a question for consideration is whether the value of peer review is advantageous in one course, or should the pedagogical approach be applied more broadly across curriculum for maximum benefit. For example, should peer review only be used in policy or research courses, or in all assignments in courses that require journal articles and other scholarly sources? Moreover, examining instructors post-peer review and the changes that occur to the process would be helpful to improve the overall quality of this teaching method.

Study Strengths and Limitations

Strengths of this study include the use of an anonymous survey, decreasing the likelihood of response bias. Additionally, the findings are consistent with those from

several previous studies. Furthermore, this study provided information on peer review from a student's perspective, adding to the literature.

Some limitations to this study include the small sample size and a fluctuating sample size from year to year. Also, conclusions drawn from the study findings and attempts to generalize them must be treated with caution because the data is based on a survey from a small population of students in one university system. Moreover, the results must be understood as student perceptions rather than actual effects on student learning. Finally, peer review was only used in a social policy course, thus limiting the study's findings and its relevance to other courses.

Conclusion

This exploratory study offers ideas for consideration. Through the application of peer review, students become aware of their capabilities in writing, critical thinking, self-reflection, and nonjudgmental inquiry. The instructor needs to be mindful of the interrelationship among these components of learning, and strive to present course content, design assignments, and provide feedback in an integrative manner. By doing so, there is a more complete assessment of skill and knowledge acquisition.

Conceptualizing peer review in the context of social work practice is another point for consideration. Social work practice demands clear, concise writing coupled with critical thinking (CSWE, 2008). The process of review engages students in a change effort that encourages seeking assistance, following a plan of action, and evaluating outcomes. Furthermore, peer review prepares students for their social work career by knowing how to successfully provide and receive feedback, a key component in providing services to others.

While prior studies on peer review have reported positive effects on students' writing skills (Van Den Berg et al., 2006), this study encourages social work educators to further examine the peer review process based on student perceptions and experiences. Not unlike the process of seeking help in other arenas, peer review encourages students to improve their academic performance by examining limitations and strengths in a candid fashion. Social work educators can lead by example: by soliciting feedback from their students to improve upon their pedagogy.

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