PUTTING STUDENTS IN CHARGE OF PEER REVIEW

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Like so many writing teachers, I have always stressed the importance of peer feedback in my rhetoric courses, though I'm usually dissatisfied with the results of peer review exercises. Peer review retains my loyalty, though, because it reenforces a system of values central to the way I think writing should be perceived and taught. At the core of this system rests the idea that communication within any discourse community relies entirely on that community's respect for "negotiation" and "cooperation" (*Rhetorical Traditions* 128; Lindemann 33). Ideally, peer review magnifies the roles of both these factors by making writers and readers more keenly aware of one another's needs, and it cultivates in them a spirit of mutual responsibility. It also generates intimacy when it works the way we envision because it underscores language's most crucial social function—enabling "human beings to overcome the divisions separating them" (Lindemann 49). In whatever form, peer review activities promise to help writers and readers understand their duties while affording them some measure of control over the communication process. They learn *how* to negotiate and *how* to cooperate. Peer interaction makes young writers more able to choose and, thus, more powerful, more confident.

When teachers conduct peer review exercises by asking students to fill out sheets that list essential critieria, or by instructing them to respond "freely" to a piece of writing, however, they violate its democratic chemistry and transmit the same kind of contradictory messages Nancy Sommers warns us about (150-1). Peer feedback lacks the enabling power it can and should command because instructors traditionally fail to relinguish control over the formulation and administration of the peer review instrument to their students.

A number of studies establish the legitimacy of peer review exercises (Hillocks 157-60) and, for the most part, my own experience agrees with them, but not nearly often enough or broadly enough. Each semester I teach beginning college composition a similar pattern develops: some students benefit enormously from peer review; a few more recognize its merits, treat it seriously but gain little from it; the rest, usually a large majority, though, find it tedious, boring, a waste of time. Despite any efforts to construct innovative instruments and to introduce writers to the beauties of collaboration, I fail to motivate my students to engage one another's papers conscientiously, to regard peer comments carefully, or to talk among themselves energetically. If I ask them to respond in whatever way they see fit (either in writing or in conversation, and without applying *necessarily* to set criteria) their feedback is superficial, overly flattering, vague and very brief. If I supply mimeogaphed sheets which force them to address things like focus, structure or illustration, their feedback is mechanical, detached, oversimplified. The "screen" Elbow attributes to this second style of responding seems more like a brick wall (*Writing with Power* 250). Student readers reduce essays to their lowest means too easily; they lose touch with the idea that the document they are reading was written by a person for a person; they overlook an essential distinction I try to teach—that elements like focus and structure are important because they help readers and writers mediate ideas, not because they are key ingredients in every "good"essay. If I try a different approach and combine methods, devising an instrument that consumes both "criterion-based" as well as "reader-based" responses, students still treat the whole activity as a chore (*Writing with Power* 241).

Lately I've begun to recognize that a serious contradiction infects my perception of peer review. The problem lies not with the theory or methods I use, but with the way in which the review session itself is conceived and practiced. When instructors assume the controlling posture, they undermine the cooperative relationshps that constitute a healthy writing community. Success at most community oriented activities, like peer review, emerges only once the community's members exercise control. Instructors must remind themselves that they do not need to appropriate control over *all* classroom ventures simply because tradition awards them so prominent a role in that community. If empowering student writers

comprises even a portion of their goal, there are times when they should entrust them with the tools and step aside.

It is not my aim to advocate a "teacherless writing class," though I do wish to draw on some of Peter Elbow's ideas to make my case (*Writing without Teachers* 76). I am convinced that a group of writers who have compatible concerns can prosper without a teacher, but I also believe that students who enroll in a writing course because their college requires them to (I'm thinking particularly of freshmen) learn from the model set by an instructor who acts as responder and collaborator ("On Students' Rights"). Though by its very nature peer review mandates that the teacher give up his or her administrative position, that teacher still performs a vital role in preparing students to function without leadership in whatever discourse community they find themselves. Young writers grow when we expose them to feedback that enables, when we make them conscious of the difficulties that arise when we respond to writing, when we emphasize the importance of offering honest, caring commentary, when we espouse the value of internal and external dialogue, and when we dismantle notions they might have formed about "Ideal Texts" and professorial sovereignty ("On Students' Rights" 159).

After witnessing a number of marginally successful peer review sessions last semester, I decided it was time to share my expectations and frustrations with my students and to seek their aid. I encouraged them to talk about why responding to classmates' papers is such a distasteful enterprise and asked them if we could work out a solution to the problem together. Could we design a method of reading and then commenting on essays that would be both engaging and valuable? Could we radically revise our approach?

My students' complaints were predictable. They talked about their fear of hurting someone else's feelings with harsh "criticism," about their lack of experience as readers, and about the reductive nature of the feedback fellow students were in the habit of offering. A large number of students charged that essays weren't being read conscientiously; they said peers rarely read with the interest and intensity of a teacher. What's more, in spite of the progress I thought we had made toward regarding all responses to writing as inherently valuable, an equally large number of students claimed they would look beyond peer feedback to comments I would make either on that same draft or a later one.

If my students had expressed only dissatisfaction, I probably would have abandoned peer review for at least the rest of the term. But they didn't. A majority revealed a desire to rely on one another, to be able to place one's own work into a pair of caring hands that aren't the instructor's. They confessed that writing for an audience and for a grade, within a community bent on evaluation, can be intimidating, frustrating, degrading. Having the freedom to count on one's peers for support could prove an bountiful asset. How, then, were we to proceed? How could we remedy the ills and accommodate the desires?

At the root of all complaints I heard are some significant stumbling blocks. First of all, for whatever reasons (cultural, social, institutional) my students, like all freshmen, lacked confidence in themselves as readers and consequently chose to rely on the teacher for feedback and direction. Secondly, their inability to believe in one another, something that did not surface during activities involving the entire class, stifled the growth of intimacy. They enjoyed no sense of mutual responsibility, no spirit of cooperation while commenting on peer papers.

Problems like these were familiar enough; I had encountered them before many times. Evidently my attempts to avoid them, however, succeeded for other dimensions of my course in composition, but not for peer review. Whereas any given section might work as a community when it came to a class discussion of one member's paper, for instance, my intervention sabotaged that same community performance when it came to peer review. I had been marshalling even the most creative forms of feedback activity into a coercive context. How could I expect my students to engage one another confidently when I was orchestrating their relations? How could I expect them to embrace responsibility when I was forcing it upon them? Much like the coach who stops drilling her team and allows it to play the game, I asked my students to take charge of their response sessions and to see if they could find a method that would please and enable them.

In *Writing without Teachers* Peter Elbow says that "when a class works, you can feel people sticking up for themselves; making genuine demands and expectations of others that their time not be wasted, that they learn something" (113). I saw this transpire once students began running our peer review sessions. Rather than have my classes form a single instrument all would use, I asked each class to construct whatever method or methods it might like

to experiment with. The types of instruments and the number of options varied significantly from section to section. One class, for example, developed two approaches. The first supplied a writer with peer as well as instructor feedback on the same draft. Students handed in typed drafts of an essay I assigned. I responded to each on a separate sheet of paper, held on to my responses, and covered up the writer's name on every essay with a paperclip and swatch of heavy paper. I paired students randomly in my mind at the start of the next class and then, while students sat in a circle with their backs turned, I gave each one an essay to read. So if I gave Sarah's paper to John, I also gave John's to Sarah. Students responded to the essay given to them as if they were that writer's instructor. Readers commented dialogically in the margins, ignoring grammar and punctuation, and offered a substantial end comment regarding the paper's effectiveness. At the end of one half hour, students removed the paperclipped swatch, found their mates and engaged in translation, elaboration, qualification.

The second approach this class devised involved small groups but did not provide initial anonymity. The class established groups (a different set for each review session) by asking each student to choose a letter—A through E—from a hat. When a draft was due, every student brought in two xerox copies along with the original. Students drew letters, settled into groups of three, read all the essays produced by that group, and responded dialogically in the margins and at the end of each. During the next class hour they shared comments and reactions, concentrating on the choices available to each writer for revision.

This class section judged both methods, though very different, to be as much fun as they were helpful. The first method circumvents vague, overly flattering commentary because the author's identity is withheld, and yet it still promotes cooperation. Even though a reader does not know whose essay she has, she does know that the author of the essay she is reading also has a copy of her essay before him. The second method this section chose employs a different means to achieve the same end. It is personal but the presence of two readers in addition to the writer along with the luxury of a night to sleep on things fosters integrity and reliability.

Some procedures were even more innovative. Another section asked me to collect typed drafts when they were due, to cover

the names and bring them to class with me. Students formed groups of two for that hour and I gave each group two essays. The pair read the essays, discussed them, and then collaborated to write comments in the margins and at the end, as though two instructors were working on the papers rather than just one. I collected the essays again at the end of class and at the beginning of the next class hour returned them to their rightful owners. No writer knew which pair commented on his or her paper. Students next placed their chairs in a circle. Any student could then ask to be heard. The class expected that writer to read his or her paper aloud twice, to summarize the marginal comments and to read the end comment. The class then responded to the comments made on the essay. They could translate for the writer if she needed it, elaborate and qualify if he desired, or even vote the written responses insufficient and set about replacing them.

The weeks that followed became an adventure for us all and the results were wonderful. After every peer review session, the class evaluated the procedure and the outcome. It discussed modifications and made changes. In some cases it decided to throw an entire method into the scrap heap and move on to one more promising. The first class I mentioned liked both creations so much it decided to alternate them throughout the rest of the semester. The second class (the one with the more elaborate method) fared well from the start. A student named Greg had written a paper concerning Vermeer's *Woman Pouring Milk* as part of an assignment dealing with John Berger's "Ways of Seeing" (see Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Ways of Reading*). The two women who had commented on Greg's piece decided it was not as effective as it might be because it summarized Berger's ideas but did not apply them to the painting. They said it needed more analysis. When the paper came back to Greg, he wasn't sure how he could reshape his essay to fulfill their expectations; he said he thought he *had* analyzed the portrait in a way in which Berger would approve. After he read his essay twice and the comment he received twice to the entire class, they helped him understand the choices available to him. A number of students pointed to where Greg's paper seemed general and alluring but not satisfying. They moved back and forth from the painting to Greg's discussion. They even asked Greg to talk about Berger's theory of "seeing" and writing and asked him to point out how the method he had employed in his own essay was similar. I found this system intriguing because into it

the class built the necessity of a writer facing and working with an audience without anonymity.

Other sessions in other sections proved to be equally fruitful, no matter how different they were. The atmosphere during each struck me as being kinetic, alive, and most of all *fun*. During each I sat in the corner of the room and jotted down as many comments and snippets of dialogue as I could copy: "I didn't know what you were talking about here, so I wrote down in my own words what I thought you meant. Am I right?"; "Don't get me wrong, but your argument seems to run out of gas on this page. Were you tired when you were writing it or were you starting to second guess yourself?"; "I like the overview you give here when you explain Berger's view of the painting, but you never take me beyond that; you never go into detail and I think you need to"; "You tell me you like my essay [evidently in an end comment] but then you say parts of it are confusing. How can that be? Do you like the confusion?" Here is a fragment of dialogue from a group of three discussing one member's essay, which sets out to analyze three slides portraying life in nineteenth century England. The writer is Jeff and his partners are Tigo and Mike.

> Tigo: "My biggest problem is your structure. You're talking about three slides but you're all over the place. Why didn't you just talk about them one at a time?"
> Jeff: "Because I was trying to talk about one particular thing that I see in all three slides, then move on to another aspect they have in common . . . like . . . right here [he points to a place on the essay] where I'm talking about women looking like animals, crawling on all fours through the mines."
> Tigo: "O.K., I can see what you're doing now, but you don't refer exactly to each woman in each slide, so I got lost. You were talking about women looking like animals, but you never show us in the slides."
> Jeff: "Well, if you need me to explain it to you, I should probably change it."
> Mike: "Don't change it, just make sure a reader sees what you're doing."

As I watched each peer review session, I was impressed by the transformation I saw. My students took charge so easily, acted responsibly so naturally. What struck me hardest was the fact that the instruments they designed weren't all that different from ones I myself might have conceived. In fact, they were much more imaginative than any I had put together previously. The point is that I didn't *have to* design their instruments and run their sessions for them; I didn't *have to* spoon-feed them. My students demonstrated quickly that they are capable of conducting peer

review themselves. Once I handed over the controls, sessions which in all likelihood would have failed had I been running them evolved into exciting learning experiences. The substance of students' written and verbal dialogue, moreover, seemed worthy of any conscientious writing instructor, and in some ways it was better because it came from a far less intimidating source.

Comments my students wrote on their course evaluations testify to the wisdom behind putting writers in charge of their own review processes. Chris points out that "the peer review tool started out slowly. Students were wary or intimidated to be critical of other students' papers in class. It became a tedious process at first. . . . Later on the class made amends. We took on a new approach to peer review which I believe helped all of us greatly. The constructive criticism was great; no one was afraid to tell someone what their strengths and weaknesses on a paper were." Margie reveals: "I'll admit, I despised [peer review] at first, mostly because I was so vain towards my writing. I actually felt that I could learn little from by peers. . . . I often ignored their comments. Not only was I wrong about the writing abilities of myself and my peers, but I also realized their excellence was not imperative. Peer review helps elicit questions that need to be answered for the reader by the writer. Peer review makes the writer think more than twice about what she has written." And Jennifer confesses that "peer review was something totally new to me. I have to admit I was more than a little sceptical at first. For example, my first papers that were reviewed by my friends I didn't pay much attention to. I checked out the professor's comments on one of the other drafts and rewrote the paper according to his specifications. Now, to me peer review equals the professor's view. I know that each one of my classmates will take time to read and understand me."

Many instructors perceive peer review as an instrument which develops effective, successful writing, but fail to realize that employing it requires more than just teaching a method or supplying writers with a device for growth. Ultimately with peer review we nurture an attitude that conflates cooperation with self-reliance, dependence with independence; it affirms a code of conduct, an ethic for writers. We promote this attitude by modeling ourselves and our actions and then by stepping out of the way once our students have begun to entertain it seriously. We want to prepare them and then let them play. In this way we locate a fertile midpoint between abandoning our students altogether and dominating them completely.

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