E.M. White (1994) made the wry and truthful observation that "teaching people to write is one of the chronic problems of American education, right next to teaching them to think, a closely related but even more knotty problem" (p.xi). In the past few years I have found myself in the enviable position of trying to do both—teaching my students to write and think by incorporating peer review as a central focus in a required online writing course.

FOUNDATIONS OF ACADEMIC WRITING

The course that taught me how best to use peer review is called Foundations of Academic Writing (FAW). The course was created in response to a need to teach writing effectively and efficiently to large numbers of students. The first time the course was offered, 150 students took it as an elective. This past fall the course enjoyed its maiden voyage as a required class, with 2000 first-year Arts and Social Sciences students enrolled in five standardized and coordinated sections. The logistics of teaching writing to this many people in a course based online create endless unique challenges, but they are not the focus of this essay. Instead, I will examine what I have learned along the way about the utilization of peer review—both my triumphs (a few), and my mistakes (many).

PEER REVIEW—WHY BOTHER?

Peer review has been likened to a form of collaborative learning in that students exchange information and learn from one another through the process of sharing and receiving knowledge. Ideally, this collaborative process results in an improved collective outcome (Falchikov, 2001). In the academic community, our work is frequently evaluated by colleagues; our jobs hinge on their feedback and what we do with it. The use of peer review as part of a university course is therefore a fitting way to expose students to the cooperative nature of scholarly work. As such, peer review is increasingly being used in higher education as a means for students to assess each other's work and provide feedback (van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006). Peer review is used not only for writing assignments, but also for presentations, performances, and portfolio reviews. While the peer review process has many uses, it "seems to be the most valuable in the collaborative writing process" (van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006, p.136). To this end—improving writing and teaching students to think—I set out to make participation in peer review possible for 2000 people.

USING PEER REVIEW IN FAW

Aside from the obvious goal of improving student writing, the primary reason I use peer review in FAW is that it ensures students will have to engage in at least one round of drafting and revising. For each assignment, the students are given a writing assignment that corresponds with a reading and a set of online practice exercises, such as writing a cause-and-effect paragraph. Each student is placed into an online writing group of five, posts his or her draft of the assignment, and provides peer-reviews on the drafts of the other four group members. The marks for this part of the assignment are given both for posting a draft of the assignment, and for the accuracy and quality of the feedback (a simple "Good job!" will not earn any points). Students are then asked to revise their drafts to incorporate the feedback received from their peers and resubmit the final version of the same assignment. This final version is then marked by the TA. Over the course of the term, the instructor(s) do spot checks of these writing assignments to assess student progress and TA marking standards (TAs for FAW are required to have taken the course and received an A or A+).

Using peer review over the past five years has led me to identify four guidelines for implementing peer review in a writing course. While my course is online, I think these four points of interest would hold true for any course that uses peer review:

1. **Give points for doing the draft.** This seems obvious now, but it wasn't to me the first time I incorporated peer review into my course. In a burst of unbridled enthusiasm for the joy of learning, I assumed students would be enamored with the idea of giving and receiving feedback on their writing (I happen to like to read reviewers' comments—doesn't everyone?) and would post the drafts that were critical to the survival of peer review. I believed students would clearly see that the peer review process was for their own good and would enthusiastically participate in the draft phase in order to improve the mark on their final versions. Much to my dismay, I discovered that my enthusiasm was the result of extreme naiveté. After receiving only minimal drafts in the first semester, I changed the course so that the uploading of the draft is worth 50% of the mark for the peer review, while the remaining 50% of the mark comes from the accuracy and quality of the feedback. This means that, even if students give other group members excellent
feedback, they will fail the assignments if they do not provide a draft. It is unfair not to give your group members something to work with, and it is my job to make sure my students play fair. The change in the marking scheme has led to an increase in the number of drafts submitted.

2. Give feedback on feedback. As discussed by VanDeWeghe (2004), "[t]he ability to give appropriate and helpful feedback to other writers is a learned set of strategies and skills that all developing writers must be taught" (p. 95). Giving appropriate and helpful feedback is all part of the problem of teaching students to improve both their thinking and writing skills. The undertaking is not one for the faint of heart or the short of patience; after all, you can't let your fledgling reviewers fly before they can walk. When planning your course, it is important to designate time to teach your students how to do an insightful peer review. Then, whatever time you chose to allot for this purpose, double it; it is a long way from "This sucks, I don't like it," to "You need to consider your audience when writing an expository piece on the death penalty." Be sure to give feedback on the students' peer reviews according to clear criteria. The honor system won't work—the grade must be based on the quality of the peer review feedback. Do not underestimate the distance of the journey or the magnitude of the struggles your students will face in learning to give constructive feedback to peers. They can do it, but it won't come easily to the vast majority of them.

3. Don't argue! As academics, we are accustomed to having experts evaluate our work. Acceptance of publications and receipt of grants, which in turn affect our tenure and promotion, hinges on this process (Marsh & Ball, 1989). Many of us sit on editorial boards of journals and willingly share our expertise by critiquing colleagues' work for content as well as writing style. However, students who are doing peer review need to refrain from criticizing content alone: I cannot tell you the number of times electronic fights broke out because the peer reviewer disagreed with the position that someone took in an essay (argumentative/persuasive essays in particular seem to lend themselves to cyber-fisticuffs). While emotions can run high in an online environment, outright arguing cannot be allowed. Although these incidents do liven up my office hours, tempers flare, feelings are hurt, and the goal of providing constructive feedback is not reached when things get personal. It is important when implementing peer review to address the difference between critiquing content and identifying writing errors.

Admittedly, these are choppy waters to sail into, and students may interpret these instructions as "Don't have an opinion, but give feedback nonetheless." But it can be done if students can be convinced that giving constructive feedback is an unemotional process: the goal is not to change what another student is saying about a particular topic, but perhaps to change the way that student is writing. The recommended changes need to be based not on feelings of agreement or disagreement with the content, but on clearly defined criteria for evaluating writing instead.

4. Do I have to? As part of our lives in academia, we have gained confidence that allows us to reject peer feedback when we disagree with it. But hark back to your graduate student days and recall how it felt when you received feedback on your papers. I would venture a guess that you may not have agreed with all feedback you received, and yet edit you did (I know I did). Over time, we become confident rejecters of bad advice. Most undergraduate students have not yet developed this skill, however, and need practice to learn what to accept and what to reject in the peer review process. Some are better than others at distinguishing between the helpful and the ridiculous. I have encountered two extremes with regard to peer review: the "accept it alls" and the "rejecters of everything." I began to receive emails both from students asking me if they had to make all the changes suggested by their group, and from TAs telling me that students were submitting unrevised final versions, despite quality feedback. To borrow a term from over the sea, I was gobsmacked. What was going on? Imagine my surprise when I found that a study conducted by Weaver (2006) in the UK indicated that "students may need advice on understanding and using feedback before they can engage with it" (p. 379).

It is now part of the FAW instructional process that students be given permission to reject feedback they know to be incorrect or irrelevant. It enhances the learning experience for students to have to know enough to make informed decisions about peer review. Borrowing from Weaver's study, students are encouraged to reject feedback that is "too general or vague, lack[s] guidance, focus[es] on the negative, or [is] unrelated to assessment criteria" (2006, p. 379). On the other hand, to counter the "rejecters of all," the students are informed that rejecting valuable feedback is not sensible; TAs monitor for this, and final versions that do not improve when they could have are marked accordingly.

TO PEER REVIEW, OR NOT TO PEER REVIEW?

Yes, peer review is definitely the answer. Even with 2000 students working online in groups of five, it can be done effectively, albeit not always easily. Some days are worse than others—steel yourself for some mighty battles and prepare to untangle some real messes. In my experience, the key to making peer review an effective pedagogical tool is in preparation, patience, and a willingness to peruse the literature for the
best practices. Using peer review can seem overwhelming, but it can be done even with large or online classes. In fact, I feel that if this class were not online, my ability to use peer review as extensively as I do would be greatly disadvantaged. Thanks to an online platform that creates and tracks writing groups and assignments, I am able to manage a database of peer reviews and scores in a way I could not on paper. Even when I teach courses that are not online based, I still use online tools so my students can participate in peer review. Although it may be more work-intensive in the set up phase, peer review actually allows more writing and feedback to be done in a writing course, without increasing the marking load of the instructor. The students in FAW do eight writing assignments in a 12 week term, and they do them all twice: once as a draft and once as a final version. This means that 32,000 writing assignments are submitted, assuming all students do the work. In a perfect world where all students upload drafts, each student in FAW has the opportunity to provide peer review 32 times, and have the quality of their feedback evaluated by teaching assistants. It requires a lot of work and a lot of practice, and it is a good start down the road toward becoming an effective provider and receiver of writing feedback.

I made many mistakes when I first implemented the peer review process, and those mistakes have led to revisions of my approach and to my four primary insights, which I hope are helpful for implementing peer review in a writing course. Admittedly, using peer review is not a perfect process, especially with a class as large as mine. However, student and TA feedback tells me that the students are learning from this experience. Peer review is scholarship, and it is an important part of the experience of higher education.

Works Cited


