Establishing the Genre of Peer Review to Create New Rhetorical Knowledge

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The concept of peer review in composition studies is often contended by students, supported by instructors, and used by peer tutors across disciplines. Framed with theories of collaborative learning, this multifaceted, multidisciplinary tool can be a strategy for establishing a classroom community, as it “provides a particular kind of social context for conversation, a particular kind of community—a community of status equals: peers” (Bruffee 642). As instructors attempt to decentralize authority, their students gain the opportunity to assess and potentially benefit from peer feedback prior to revising the work. (Bruffee “Peer Review” 167-187, Herrington and Cadman 184). Further, Anne J. Herrington and Deborah Cadman’s study at the University of Massachusetts shows that this exchange of authority results in effective rhetorical engagement from both parties when the “process of active, reciprocal decision-making represents the primary value of review”(184). When critical reviews are written and designed as a rhetorical response to this lively interchange, the result is what academics have coined “peer review.” Yet this process also generates a distinct genre in response to a rhetorical situation. As Amy Devitt explains in Writing Genres, “People construct genre through situation and situation through genre; their relationship is reciprocal and dynamic” (Devitt 21). In light of this defining idea, the aim of this essay is to apply the theoretical and practical implications of using peer review in a classroom not only as a tool for revision and decision making, but also as a genre for academic study. Analyzing a case study assignment from the course “Introduction to College Writing,” I aim to explore the knowledge and rhetorical awareness that could be gained by teaching peer review as a genre equal to that of the traditional academic essay.

A Theoretical Framework

Work from the 1980s, like Bruffee’s “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” shed light on theoretical philosophies for harnessing the power of peer influence (635-52). Similarly, Anne Ruggles Gere’s seminal work on writing groups shows that students have a vested interest in communicating about writing as part of peer response (362-85), but few studies expound evidence about related pedagogical methods that make or break a process that has become commonplace in composition classrooms across the country (Brammer and Rees 71).
Establishing the Genre of Peer Review

Studies like C. Brammer and M. Rees’s “Peer Review from the Student Perspective: Invaluable or Invalid,” draw conclusions about the pitfalls of current methods: “more emphasis on peer review as a global activity may be in order,” they note, suggesting that “Perhaps we should revise and recreate our notion of peer review as an ongoing part of the process, a part that begins with brainstorming and is revisited at various reiterative stages throughout the composing process” (81). Further still, few note the student response or assessed value of peer review, and “there is little consistency in approach and effectiveness” (Paulson, Alexander, Armstrong 304).

Yet in modern academia where assessment is crucial for maintaining a sense of curricular control, instructors should consider how re-visioning affects student comprehension and knowledge transference (White 306-20). After all, writing assignments across disciplines ask students to confront a complex web of editorial choices, from draft to revision, all in response to discipline standards. These assignments make sense, considering that professional writers and scholars are expected to understand concepts of audience, purpose, and stance—all components of traditional rhetoric—while also negotiating these components in light of reviews, critiques, and editorial standards associated with their respective fields. However, peer review should function not only as an artificial model of how professionals approach writing in their disciplines, but as a genre for academic knowledge transference. Just as professional writers understand that there is often more than one effective way to respond to a given rhetorical situation, students should recognize that these choices and editorial decisions exist and affect the outcome of each writing task they complete. Teaching peer review as a genre with a clear rhetorical purpose, my goal extends Devitt’s position that “the goals of teaching genre awareness are for students to understand the intricate connections between contexts and forms, to perceive potential ideological effects of genres, and to discern both constraints and choices that genres make possible” (198). If instructors imagine peer review less as a process-oriented tool and more as a genre that calls on writers to make distinct rhetorical choices, the composition classroom could become a gateway to uncovering and processing how professional writers deal with complex editorial decisions.

Framing peer review as a genre with its own rhetorical components allows students to begin thinking about their writing as professional. When professional writers receive reviews of their work, they are presented with multiple voices, opinions, and often requests asking the author to respond by prioritizing statements of critique they deem most useful for the given purpose and audience. Being able to make these choices requires writers to maintain awareness of their project’s purpose while also assessing their peer reviews through basic rhetorical analysis. The danger in using peer review as a tool to revise what some instructors might stress as more “formal” academic genres, is that the simple act of performing this task establishes a precedent or antecedent genre that students may recall in future peer review tasks. While antecedent genres can aid in developing genre awareness, working with genres as forms can create unwanted beliefs about expectations, habits, and conventions associated with that genre (Devitt). As Devitt explains,

by the time one has learned to perform a genre, one is already inducted into its ideology. If teachers are to help minimize the potential ideological effects of genres, they must help students perceive the ideology while they are encountering the genre. Once they are full participants in the genre, resistance becomes more difficult (some say futile) and choices become less visible (some say invisible). (196)

Considering many students use peer review in high school and arrive at college with preconceived opinions on its conventions and effectiveness, writing instructors must stress the importance of learning how to read and rhetorically analyze reviews to show how the writing of them can construct new knowledge about an assignment. Thus, the sooner students begin viewing peer review as a genre, the more opportunity there is to extend its purpose and teach methods for advanced peer review. This strategy is effective because it allows students to respond to each
writing project with an individualized approach determined by the situation. The goal in teaching peer review as a genre is for students to see its function in professional rhetorical situations that call for critical reading, analysis, and review.

The Assignment

Previously, I've used peer review in a traditional sense with the purpose of developing a piece of writing through the evaluation and description of a work (see figure 1). Noting a key purpose, Bruffee explains that “Writing peer reviews of writing is one way to learn to make effective, responsible judgments” (171). In order to move beyond this declaration, to gain a better sense of how students view peer review as a genre, I have created an assignment that places these student texts at the forefront of discussion: “The Peer Review Redux Essay.”

Figure 1: Model of the peer review process adapted from Kenneth A. Bruffee’s “Peer Review,” A Short Course in Writing (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing) 2009. 169-87.

“The Peer Review Redux” attempts to move beyond Bruffee’s traditional vision for collaboration in peer-to-peer writing communities (see figure 2) by subverting the genre and establishing a different purpose and audience for peer commentary. The term “redux” implies a return to the original texts, in this case the peer review texts. Bruffee’s influence is acknowledged by framing review in a new context with a revised purpose. Where peer review was once meant to move a writer from one draft of an essay to the next, this assignment calls on students to examine the peer reviewed texts as rhetorical evidence of a trend in their own writing process. Considering our classrooms act as think tanks and rhetorical “laboratories” (Sbaratta 202-4, CCCC 23-25), the following documents the practice for re-imagining peer review as a genre for study and not simply a tool, attempting to mimic the instructor’s oft-perceived aim of eradicating written error with the red pen of authority (Sommers 148-86).
Unit 1 Peer Review Redux

This is the final assignment in Unit 1 and will be 15% of your final grade.

The peer reviews comprise an integral part of “Intro to College Writing… The Remix” because in order to write effective essays you need to be able to read and critique essays as well. If you can’t identify how the writing works (what it says and does) your revisions will never make it beyond the original ideas on the page. Being a writer means constantly revisiting words, ideas, and meanings to create a new space for theories to flourish.

For this assignment, you will re-read and critique the peer reviews you completed for Writing Assignments 1-3. As we transition out of the short course unit, it is not required that you write this essay in short course structure. Rather, this is your chance to apply the short course tools to a more creative “mash-up” of your work.

The redux should review, critique, and theorize how you came to terms with the peer review process. You should have a proposition that makes a claim about your peer reviews—but how you support this claim throughout the redux is up to you.

The goal of the redux is not to affirm that you are one stellar peer reviewer, but rather that you can identify your strengths and weaknesses while crafting a theory about how you evolved throughout the process.

Requirements:

1. Proposition that makes a claim about your peer reviews
2. Evidence (quotations) from the peer review process
3. 1000 word max
4. Building on earlier assignments, feel free to use photos/images/electronic design and remixing as part of your redux assignment.

Figure 2: Unit 1 Peer Review Redux Assignment as used in “Intro to College Writing” Fall, 2010. Throughout the unit, students posted all writing assignments to individual e-portfolios that were accessible to the entire class. In addition, students contributed to ongoing conversations via the electronic WebCT message boards. Claims and ideas in individual posts were considered pre-writing, and all brainstorming was available for inspiration and full class viewing.
The Rationale

When championed by instructors and adhered to throughout the term, the traditional peer review process of describing and critiquing a work can create a strong base for rhetorical knowledge, as well as an ability to evaluate personal and peer texts (Bruffee “A Short Course” 169-87). Like most patterned and digested behavior, students complete the work and hopefully step away with a new set of skills and knowledge. While the act of completing short papers and lengthy peer reviews teaches students not only how to read and evaluate an essay, but also how to apply many language conventions in the genre of critique—in my classes relative success requires a “buy-in” by both instructor and students, which can be harder to come by in an intense assignment sequence (see figure 3). For Bruffee’s short course unit, students are drafting and reviewing in quick succession and in my “Introduction to College Writing” class a full cycle takes four weeks. In my experience, unless peer review is emphasized with equal weight given to the writing assignments themselves, the risk is that students view these reviews as secondary to the “real” writing assignments—those traditional academic essays that receive a formal grade at the end of the process. More frustrating perhaps is that while students are capable of gaining the rhetorical judgment necessary to critique their peers’ work, they often do not apply that same knowledge to their own revision processes. Despite receiving at least two reviews on these essays, students remain hesitant to trust peer feedback over instructor feedback, or to attempt grand-scale revisions on a working draft. And in recent studies across the curriculum, the evidence that formal peer review works, when compared against no review or self-review methods, is not always statistically significant for claims in its favor (Covill 217).

Figure 3: Author model of a complete Unit One assignment cycle in “Intro to College Writing” fit to represent exercises from Kenneth Bruffee, “Writing Position Papers,” A Short Course in Writing (Boston: Pearson Custom Publishing) 2009. 41-146.

To tackle and respond to these often problematic ideas, my assignment employs Joseph Harris’s theory in “Workshop and Seminar,” to establish an academic space for working with peer reviews as a genre (see figure 4). Harris explains that “The focus of a workshop is on the individual writer. It’s a space for practical advice. The seminar, though, is more of a metaspace. Its aim is to help the readers of a text understand something new about the craft of writing” (152). Through the lens of the workshop and seminar class models, the Peer Review Redux assignment introduces student writing, in this case peer review, as a primary text in classroom discussion in an effort to foster traditional peer-to-peer feedback in workshops and the transference of genre knowledge in
larger seminar-type discussions. One aim of working with peers review in this way reveals the reasons why the genre is important and how it works in a professional world. Inherently, the exigency involved in peer review fits the workshop and the seminar constructs quite well, with the thinly veiled hope that giving good advice will rub off on the writer.

**Figure 4:** “Workshop and Seminar” for two types of lesson plans using student texts. As a genre of discussion, peer review can be examined in both workshop and seminar. Adapted to represent Joseph Harris, “Workshop and Seminar” (Logan: Utah State UP, 2010) 145-53.

In part, this experimental assignment is a response to my own questions about the effectiveness of peer review as an ungraded or participatory exercise that asks students to work without a grade motivating the results. On one level, formalizing peer review in this way gives the work the same weight of any other graded academic task. The second level of questioning was what, if anything else, students were gaining from the genre of peer review beyond immediate positive or negative reinforcement about a singular work.

**Overall Trends**

On a practical level, I was encouraged by the students' relative success in completing the untraditional requirements for the assignment—notably using peer review texts as evidence in a new essay. This success seemed to provide a sense of genre knowledge and audience awareness. A key observation was that student arguments were seemingly more focused on how peer review helped them with the specific assignment sequence as a whole, not on how writing the reviews changed them as writers. This result could be a product of how students collect and transfer rhetorical knowledge, in small useful chunks, versus how instructors assess it, as larger conceptual ideas. One student noted that peer review was a purposefully vague genre, which forced him to make his own choices in each essay. Another student used classroom discussion as a metaphor for writing essays, stating that peer review and electronic posts were just one more voice in the class conversation.

Regardless of essay topic or position, most students utilized their peers' feedback more than the reviews they wrote in return. This response could have happened for a few reasons. Subverting the genre from its original purpose may have meant that students were now writing for the instructor, and under the impression that a positive portrayal of the process was desired. However, the students may have found the peer texts were easier to work with than further reflection or critique of their own work (something they were frequently forced to comment on throughout the unit). If taken as the latter, one conclusion is that allowing students to utilize informal peer texts for formal can often provide the writer with a newfound authority in the composition classroom. Scott Warnock examines this trend in his classroom as well, mainly through the use of online message boards and forums. Warnock confirms that one result of allowing student texts to become primary sources of evidence is that, “They must juxtapose these comments productively against other evidence. Perhaps even more interesting are authority issues that may emerge during peer review, as students and reviewers must think about the validity of
student evidence” (100). Conversely, if we examine the first possibility—that the students were writing for the instructor—I would reiterate the overall struggle to think critically about the peer reviews’ meaning for their future roles as writers. Overall, the redux essays argued propositions that tended to be obvious and surface-level, instead of posing complex theories for exploration. In future classes, I hope to amend this aspect by emphasizing peer review as a genre from the start, perhaps even introducing genre theory formally the first week, as peer review is paired with the persuasive essay assignments. This juxtaposition of genres would also provide a useful opportunity to discuss the similarities and differences in the conventions of peer review versus the position paper, as responses to two distinct, yet related academic situations.

Thoughts for Future Assignments

Finally, when given the option of using student reviews or instructor feedback on peer reviews as evidence, students continued to quote instructor comments on their reviews—notably when their work was praised, as it seemed to provide a sense of validation for the argument. In some ways the emphasis on positive reinforcement could be attributed to the same authority dependence that a decentralized approach attempts to dissolve. On the other hand, it also shows that students know how to use evidence to support their claims. By expanding on the comments I supported, they are showing that they not only read the comments, but have also developed a notable strength in their writing which will hopefully transfer beyond our class and this assignment. In addition, these results also signify an understanding of instructor comment and critique—another genre of writing that could be studied more in the classroom. These results lead me to wonder if more careful genre analysis of both peer review and instructor critique would also aid students in comprehending the work of the classroom. While the instructor is not a peer, the collaborative composition classroom involves instructor critique and peer review. These responses have similar purposes; both provide written feedback meant to open up an argument and encourage further work. In this way, peer review will continue to play a significant part in the college composition curriculum. What I have found with this assignment is that more could be done to analyze the conventions of the genre and situations that call on writers to engage in this type of scholarly work. More familiarity with peer review as a genre, its conventions and response to various situations will provide students with more rhetorical knowledge overall. Furthermore, this knowledge will aid students in reading and analyzing future rhetorical situations and related genres of critique and review. Finally, with greater genre awareness, young writers can gain more control over the craft of writing and designing texts for various rhetorical purposes, both in and out of the academy. To revise to a professional caliber, students need to understand why peer review is an essential genre to practice and study.

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Works Cited


