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Peer Review Skill Development in a Writing Proficiency Course: Can Peer Review Really Improve Writing Skills?

Raine Dozier  
Western Washington University, raine.dozier@wwu.edu

Kathryn Frazier  
Western Washington University

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Researchers’ Names and Department: Kathryn Frazier and Raine Dozier, Department of Human Services and Rehabilitation

Title: Peer Review Skill Development in a Writing Proficiency Course:
Can Peer Review Really Improve Writing Skills?

Research Question: Does peer review followed by revision measurably improve writing skills in an upper division writing proficiency class?

Method:
This study includes sixteen students in an upper division writing proficiency course, Applied Research Methods, in the Human Services Program. Students have several writing assignments in the course including two short essays, a literature review, and a final research proposal. Because the course is a writing proficiency course, students are expected to write a draft of the literature review, receive feedback, and make revisions before submitting the final paper.

The researchers chose to modify the typical in-class peer review process in order to incorporate methods of peer review that are supported by empirical research. The instructor provided students with direct instruction in order to strengthen peer review skills including one in-class exercise regarding peer review. Students reviewed papers focusing on one of three aspects of a strong essay including grammar, spelling and mechanics, introduction and conclusion, and logic of argument (including topic sentences, content of paragraphs, progression of argument) in in-class practice sessions followed by group discussion. In addition, students received in-class lessons and practice sessions regarding targeted writing skills including sentence structure and mechanics, introductions and conclusions, APA citation, and summarizing and evaluating evidence.

In addition to in-class exercises, students were expected to review two students’ literature reviews using a combination of peer review strategies. Students received a rubric giving guidelines for their review and were also encouraged to directly comment on the writer’s draft. In addition, before the review process, students told the reviewers what particular feedback they were seeking. Reviewers were also asked to write a ½ page summary of their feedback, outlining the most important strengths and weaknesses of the paper. The group then met in class where the reviewers gave a verbal overview of their feedback to the writers. The goal of these interventions was to assess whether a measured attempt to instill peer review skills coupled with greater opportunities to both observe and practice the peer review process might strengthen the outcomes of peer review.

Two forms of data were gathered for this project. First, students were given a survey about their writing experiences and attitudes at the beginning and end of the quarter. Second, the draft and final copy of the literature review were examined in the context of the comments made by peer reviewers on the rubric and throughout the draft. Our guiding questions in this evaluation were: “To what extent did the authors revise their drafts?” “How many of the peer review comments were taken into account in their revision?” and “Did their writing measurably improve between drafts?” In order to answer these questions, we made checklists based on peer feedback on the draft version, then compared the feedback with the final version. Additionally, we kept track of specific written comments to see how, or if, the author incorporated the suggestions into their final paper.

Key Findings:
Student Perceptions
Students completed a survey at the beginning and end of the quarter in order to gauge their opinions about their writing skills and experiences. One section of the survey asked students what strategies they believed were useful in improving their writing. The great majority of students believed that peer comments were useful in improving their writing. However, when limiting the analysis to strategies that students identified as “very useful,” giving and receiving peer comments were rated the lowest. Not surprisingly, instructor
comments were seen as most useful in improving writing skills. A pre- and post-test analysis finds little
difference in student perception by the end of the quarter.

Students were also asked a number of questions about writing and four of the questions gauge students’
comfort with writing and confidence in their skills. Generally, students believe that they have strong writing
skills and understand how to write a research paper. Students also feel comfortable giving peer feedback and
have confidence that they know good writing when they see it. It is notable that at the beginning of the quarter,
very few students strongly agreed with these assessments of their skills and confidence, but by the end of the
quarter, students more strongly agreed with these indicators. Not surprisingly, they were much more confident
in their ability to write a research paper and they also were more likely to strongly agree that they have strong
writing skills by the end of the quarter.

The survey included a section where students could identify their writing weaknesses. The statement
was open-ended and worded “I believe my biggest weakness as a writer is:” Although students reported greater
confidence in their writing abilities in the survey, they also displayed a better understanding of their writing
weaknesses in their open-ended responses. In the initial survey, many students reported their writing
weaknesses in vague terms such as, “editing,” “miss spelling,” “grammar,” and “being able to write a strong
paper.” By the end of the quarter, although some students still described their weaknesses in vague terms, others
seemed to have a clearer idea of the conventions of writing that they most needed to work on. Comments
included “making sure the topic sentence of each paragraph connects with the information in the paragraph,”
“losing focus towards the end of the paper,” “expressing creativity while also remaining on topic,” and “I tend
to add extra words to sentences.” Student self-assessment indicates that students’ writing abilities grew by the
end of the quarter—they had greater confidence in their abilities and more strongly agreed that they were good
writers. In addition, students seemed to have a clearer idea about their weaknesses and, tangentially, specific
conventions of writing. Unfortunately, although students generally felt more confident in their abilities by the
end of the course, this confidence did not translate into measurably better writing.

Writing Improvement

At the end of the quarter, fourteen rough and final drafts were available for analysis. There was a range
of revision efforts with some students making extensive revisions while others made very few. Among students
with substantial revisions, many changes were not directly related to peer feedback. Overall, peer review did not
seem to improve final drafts, mainly due to the writers’ lack of incorporating suggested revisions.

Among the papers, only two of the fourteen authors incorporated most of the peer feedback into their
final draft. In three cases, the students made little to no changes in their final assignment, and they used none of
the suggestions given by their peers. In the remaining papers, students made substantial changes to their final
draft but often chose not to use suggestions made by the reviewers. Sections in the final draft often had similar
issues that were identified by the peer reviewers in the earlier draft. Students who incorporated some of the
peer comments chose to tackle bigger areas such as revising introductions, conclusions, or reorganizing.
Interestingly, these students often neglected to make simpler changes to spelling, grammar, citation errors and
sentence structure even when the reviewer circled the misspelled word or corrected the error in their rough
drafts. Perhaps other considerations played a larger role in the revision process for these students. For example,
the students were given feedback by the professor, as well as their classmates, and may have ignored peer
feedback in favor of suggestions by the professor.

Implications for Teaching and Learning:

Although the majority of students reported that giving and receiving peer comments helps improve their
writing, most students incorporated some or few of their peers’ comments. In fact, the majority of students did
not significantly revise their papers between drafts. Over the last several decades students have reduced their
study time, studying 11-13 hours per week on average (Babcock and Marks 2009) while one third of students
study six hours or less per week (Nonis and Hudson 2006). Students are increasingly faced with a multitude of
electronic distractions including television, video games, and the internet, spending 4.5 hours per day, on
average, on the internet and watching television (Mokhtari, Reichard, and Gardner 2009). This may make
focusing on revision increasingly difficult. It might be fruitful for instructors to not only provide directed
instruction in peer feedback, but also in how to revise a paper using comments. For instance, instructors could
provide instruction and rubrics describing steps in revision (e.g., making spelling and grammar corrections first, then tackling organization, followed by paragraph structure). They could also cover topics such as developing a revision plan from multiple comments and assessing the level of change needed and estimating the time it will take.

Implications for Further Study:

Our study has several limitations including a small sample size and a relatively brief observation period (ten weeks). The effect of peer review on writing improvement cannot be examined if there is no measurable improvement in writing. Previous research that finds that peer review improves writing skills is limited to beginning English language learners (ELL); even intermediate ELL students did not measurably improve their writing over a writing course with or without peer review (Lundstrom and Baker 2009). Understandably, it is more difficult to measure progress among more advanced writers. Ideally, students could be observed over a longer period of time, perhaps a year, and across classes that incorporate both writing and peer review. In addition, a future project could examine how students decide to use or ignore peers’ feedback, particularly global comments on topics such as structure and transitions. However, because students did not incorporate even the most elementary suggestions such as spelling and APA citation corrections, then it might be more fruitful to investigate how much time students put into their revisions and whether their definition of “revision” correlates with the actual amount of time required for adequate revision of an academic paper.

References


