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# Usability of Peer Review Workshops

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**WRITING RESEARCH FELLOWSHIPS**  
**Closing Write-up 2009-2010**

**Researchers' Names and Department:** Margi Fox/ English Department & Jennifer Jacobs/ Student

**Title:** Usability of Peer Review Workshops

**Research Question:**

What happens in a 300-level technical writing class when various peer-review/editing approaches are used?

We were interested in examining and enhancing the effectiveness of peer review/editing workshops in English 302, Introduction to Professional and Technical Writing. We explored several aspects:

- Factors impacting student confidence in their responses to peers' writing
- Influences of types of workshops, size of groups, type of responses assigned, etc.

**Method:**

During winter quarter 2010, we gave three questionnaires exploring the efficacy of different styles of peer review workshops. A total of forty students from two English 302 classes participated. Workshop types included "*speed dating*" (quick scan, verbal responses), *structured worksheets*, and *group responses* (memo format).

**Key Findings:**

- In all three workshops, approximately **70% of students read all written comments** from peer reviewers and **another 15% read most comments**.
- Nearly **71% used many or all of the comments** in revisions (2% didn't use any).
- When they had the choice of following a structured worksheet or using a free-form approach to peer review, **83% opted for the worksheet**.
- More than **78% found it easier to write a group response** to a draft than they did offering an individual critique.

**Students preferred structured worksheets and group memos for several reasons (quotes taken from student questionnaires):**

*Fear of giving offense*

"It's always hard to tell how sincere people are when commenting to your face. Some people only give positive feedback. It was [also] easier to comment when I can write it out. I wasn't afraid to say the wrong thing."

"[In group responses] it doesn't feel like you are singling a person out for something wrong."

*Lack of confidence in the ability and knowledge to give and receive effective critique*

"[Worksheets] guided what I should have been looking for."

*Easier to carry out the assigned task*

"[The worksheet] covered all the important points so it was easy to be thorough."

“It (group response) was easier...we got to bounce ideas about how to fix things...so we gave better feedback.

### **Implications for Teaching and Learning:**

- Students would benefit from formal instruction on peer editing.
- Instructors might find it helpful to address the dynamic of peer interactions, including student’s fear of giving offense. Approaches for alleviating this concern include worksheets and group response
- Having a structured format for peer editing could help students in the following ways:
  - Directing their attention to key elements in an assignment
  - Helping them understand the professor’s expectations
  - Assisting in easing fears about offending others
  - Encouraging students to give more detailed responses
- Co-inquiry about classroom processes brings dynamic and new perspectives to writing research.

### **Implications for Further Study:**

As we’ve explored the ways that students experience different types of peer review workshops, we’ve learned that students consistently read and use responses from their peers. The next step would deal with assessing the workshops’ effectiveness in improving student writing, including addressing the following questions:

- How much does the review process help students better develop ideas and analysis, increase clarity, and produce more organized revisions?
- What training would increase the effectiveness of the workshops?
- Which workshop structures would help create improved results in final revisions?