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Resisting the Deficit Model: Embedding Writing Center Tutors During Peer Review in Writing-Intensive Courses

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For many students, peer review can be muddled or frustrating. They can feel uncomfortable with the process if they do not feel confident with their own writing, and many believe poor past performances disqualify them from offering constructive feedback. Brammer and Rees (2007) share that they “frequently hear students complain bitterly that peer review is a waste of time or blame their peers for not catching all the mistakes” (p. 71). This perspective illustrates the confusion about what students feel they should do as evaluators. For example, many students might read for surface-level concerns, such as comma splices or typos, instead of larger content areas, such as detail and organization. Emphasizing these higher-level concepts can contribute to writer confidence, especially when the commentary is positive and builds on what the writer is doing well (Sommers, 2012). Because writing is both personal and subjective, this positive approach is central to creating safe and encouraging spaces for peer reviewers to have “constructive conversations” about writing (Bruffee, 1995).

Focusing on the positive also works to decrease the power of the deficit model of education, which tends to highlight what students cannot do

instead of what they can do (Brannon et al., 2008). Because writing center tutors are trained in sharing feedback in a kind and helpful manner, they are positioned to be excellent models for students who are inexperienced with or have been damaged by feedback. Learning how to participate in effective peer review can remove the emotional baggage attached to writing and create a respectful community of writers in the classroom. In this teaching tip, we explain how to embed writing center tutors in writing-intensive courses to improve peer review practices.

Context

This practice could be implemented in any classroom situation in which peer review is used. This specific approach was designed for any student in college or university writing-intensive courses, regardless of discipline, age, or college experience.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

- Students will observe and then implement positive and constructive feedback on peer texts.
- Students will engage with writing center tutors to build confidence in both their own writing and their critical reading of peer texts.

Course Format

This activity is most suited for face-to-face courses, but it could be adapted to hybrid environments.

Teacher Preparation

The writing instructor should prepare by doing the following:

- Meet with the writing center director to establish a relationship and determine whether schedules and staffing will permit in-class visits from writing center staff.
- Establish a shared expectation with the director about positive feedback and avoiding the deficit model.

- Set a schedule to select the days and times for in-class activities.
- Invite the writing center to the classroom to introduce their services to the students in a short presentation.
- Form student writing groups (three to five students) at the start of the term in the writing course.
- Allocate time for the students to bond and build trust in the writing groups.
- Consider how to collect feedback from students on the peer review process, and allocate time to talk about the students' past experiences with peer review.

Estimated Time

During class time, this activity will take approximately 45–50 minutes and can be repeated multiple times throughout the term.

Procedure

1. On peer review day, the writing center tutors attend class. The tutors introduce themselves to class, and then each tutor selects and joins a writing group.
2. The writing instructor identifies points of concern that should be talked about during the peer review, such as crafting a thesis statement or concluding sections. Instructors should then step back and turn the review process over to the groups and writing center tutors.
3. Each student in the writing class reads one of the group members' papers (not their own) out loud. The other group members take notes on their reactions, responses, and thoughts about the paper.
4. The writing center tutor provides the first response of the group and talks about what is working well in the paper, such as clarity of ideas or descriptive language, and why each element works well.
5. The writing center tutor then asks other students to give feedback on the paper, encouraging them to use language like “as a reader,” which can help writers feel less attacked and diminishes the deficit model

of thinking. For example, saying “your paper is confusing” can come across as an attack, but saying “as a reader, I was confused in several places in the paper” can sound less derogatory. The tutor can gently step in to redirect commentary if the group members veer away from the points of concern, and tutors can promote deeper discussion beyond surface-level comments that are not well explained (e.g., “It is good,” “I liked it”).

6. After the discussion finishes on the first paper, the next paper is read out loud until all papers have been reviewed.
7. After all papers have been reviewed, bring the class back together as a unit and have an open-ended discussion about the peer review experience. For example, students might talk about how the focus on positivity impacted their views about peer review and sharing their work in progress.

Caveats and Alternatives

- Ideally, four to five writing center tutors work best for this activity since the most benefit happens when each group has a dedicated tutor that does not have to move between groups. However, if writing center staff is limited, a tutor can visit with different groups, spending about 15–20 minutes with each group to model how to respond to their peers’ papers with one of the essays instead of with each one in a group.
- If this activity is repeated multiple times during a semester, the writing tutor may not need to be the first responder after the initial visit since the tutor will have already modeled positive feedback.
- This activity works best for larger writing elements, such as focus, organization, detail, and content. It does not work well for editing concerns, such as comma rules.
- This activity does require the writing center in question to be well staffed, trained, and funded.

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