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Teaching Students How to Give and Receive Peer Review Feedback

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DePeter (2020) makes a striking comparison of peer review in first-year writing contexts to *The Descent* (Marshall, 2005), a film wherein the events devolve into chaos and isolation. Peer review, DePeter writes, “can sometimes leave all parties lost and helpless: we teachers bemoan the ragged and inconsistent quality of some peer comments, and you [students], who often complain only to us when your peers do a slack job writing comments on your work” (p. 18). Indeed, peer review can be fraught both for students and instructors, especially when left too open with vague to no instructions provided. In Ahmed’s (2021) study, there was a mismatch between student and teacher foci in review feedback, with students homing in on local spelling, grammar, and mechanics issues, while teachers took more regional and global views of the writing, such as theses, organization, and coherence. Importantly, as Ahmed (2021) found, instructors also report students having a “lack of confidence, low appreciation for peer feedback, and reluctance to provide critical comments” (p. 1). Without robust scaffolding, then, students can flounder in both giving and receiving feedback. As writing instructors, we hold a unique position to teach students not only how to write, but how to comment constructively and supportively on their peers’ writing, a transferable skill they can carry with them throughout the rest of their academic, professional, and personal lives.

Context

I use this activity in first-year writing courses (both 100 and 101 level), but it can be adapted to any level and context that involves peer review.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

In this activity, students will do the following:

- Learn a framework for articulating what kind of feedback they most want on their first drafts.
- Practice giving “sweet spot” peer review feedback, where constructive and supportive comments intersect.
- Reflect on both giving and receiving peer feedback, and set further goals for revision based on peer feedback.

Course Format

This activity was designed for in-person learning, but it can be adapted to an online or hybrid environment (see “Caveats and Alternatives” below).

Teacher Preparation

For this activity, set aside time to read DePeter (2020) and Elbow and Belanoff (2000), the same readings assigned to students.

Estimated Time

This activity will take 60–90 minutes to complete. It can fit into one longer class session or two shorter sessions.

Procedure

Schedule this activity to coincide with the due date for their rough draft of their first major course assignment. For homework, students are assigned Elbow and Belanoff’s (2000) “Summary of Kinds of Responses” and DePeter’s (2020) “How to Write Meaningful Peer Response Praise.” While students are not asked to write a homework post on these readings (since their drafts are due), they are at this point aware that completing

the course readings is crucial to fully participating in each class session. In addition, the readings are referenced frequently in the procedure below:

1. Start with a 5-minute focused freewrite: “How do you feel about the draft you turned in today? What sort of feedback (drawing on Elbow & Belanoff, 2000) would you find most useful today?” Encourage students to look back at the Elbow & Belanoff reading to reference the number and type of feedback they would like. After this warm-up, ask students to draft a “cover letter” for their rough draft that answers two questions:
 - a. On which two to three “kinds of responses” from Elbow & Belanoff would you like your peer reviewer to focus their feedback? (Write the number and name.)
 - b. Where in your paper do you want your peer reviewer to focus the most attention on?

Students post their cover letter as a reply to their discussion board post with their rough draft so their peer reviewer will be able to see it before looking at their draft.

2. Next, drawing on the DePeter (2020) reading, discuss what I call the “sweet spot” between constructive and supportive feedback. This sweet spot, as DePeter mentions, is where praise is both “specific and sincere” (p. 47). Give an example of feedback that is constructive but not supportive, and vice versa, noting how each could be adjusted to hit the sweet spot. For example, “Great job!” is supportive but not constructive, while “Great job writing a clear thesis” hits the sweet spot by being supportive but also relating back to the writer *what specifically* was excellent about that part of their essay (i.e., the clarity of the thesis).
3. Break students into pairs, and give them the bulk of the remaining class time (30–40 minutes) to dive deep into each other’s papers. Offer the option to work outside of the classroom if spaces are available.
4. After students are done with the peer review, share a Google Form link with them to complete a peer review feedback survey (see

Appendix) that promotes reflective thinking on the process. The survey asks reviewers how their feedback aligned with what their partner requested and whether they felt *they* hit the sweet spot in the feedback they provided. The survey asks writers how their partner's feedback aligned with what they requested and whether they felt *their partner* hit the sweet spot in the feedback they received. Keeping all other comments and reflections in the form confidential, share with the class when 100% of them note that the feedback they *received* hit the sweet spot. I see visible relief on some students' faces (especially if they have mentioned in their surveys that they are unsure whether they provided sweet-spot feedback) when I share that all students in the class found the feedback they received both supportive and constructive. This information, in turn, builds the students' confidence and capabilities in continuing to give this sort of feedback.

5. Finally, offer a closing focused freewrite prompt that asks students to synthesize the feedback received, decide on their top two revision priorities, and set goals to address these priorities before the final assignment is due. This activity is typically followed up with semistructured revision time during the next class session. This sequence allows students to immediately take their feedback and transform it into revision goals, which they are then given space to act upon during class time, when the teacher is present for questions and support.

Caveats and Alternatives

- This activity can also be completed in hybrid or online settings. When doing the activity online, it is crucial to set clear expectations for online norms and behaviors (like having cameras on in breakout rooms) for the activity to be successful.
- When students do not see the value of their own feedback and think that only the instructor's feedback "counts," explain that anyone in the class can act as a general reader for the assignment and serve as a mirror, sharing observations back to the writer.

- Some students also struggle with giving feedback on incomplete drafts or on drafts that are more in the form of a rough outline. I encourage these peer reviewers to look past the incompleteness of the draft and hone in on the areas and aspects of feedback the writer has requested around bigger-picture issues: Does the thesis make sense? Is the organization clear? Is the proposed focus appropriately narrow for the course assignment? What can you reflect back to your partner that you notice about their work in progress beyond its incompleteness that would give them constructive steps to move forward?

References

- Ahmed, R. (2021). Peer review in academic writing: Different perspectives from instructors and students. *TESOL Journal*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.1002/tesj.537>
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- Marshall, N. (2005). *The Descent* [Film]. Celador Films; Northmen Productions; Pathé Distribution.

Appendix

Peer Review Feedback Survey

1. General
 - a. What is your name?
 - b. Who was your peer review partner? (If in a group of three, list both partners.)
2. Feedback you gave
 - a. What did you focus your feedback on? (e.g., word choice, organization, reader response, etc.)
 - b. Do you think the feedback you gave hit the “sweet spot” of being both supportive and constructive? (yes/no)
 - c. How did you share your feedback? (e.g., commenting on a document, writing suggestions on a document, making separate notes and sharing them aloud, etc.)
 - d. Please upload an artifact that clearly shows your feedback (e.g., a .Docx or .PDF of a document with your feedback clearly on it, a screenshot file of your feedback on a document, a .JPG photo of notes you took or feedback you gave written by hand, etc.; file upload)
3. Feedback you received
 - a. What did your peer review partner focus on in the feedback they gave you?
 - b. Did their feedback respond directly to what you wrote in your cover letter (i.e., the kinds of response to give and where to focus that feedback)?
 - c. Did the feedback you received hit the “sweet spot” of being both supportive and constructive? (yes/no)
 - d. Is there anything else you would like for me to know about your peer review experience today?