

Whither “Peer Review”? Terminology Matters for the Writing Classroom

> Sonya L. Armstrong and Eric J. Paulson
New Voices

This essay aims to explore the widely varying terminology associated with a typical classroom activity, peer review.

In two-year college writing classrooms and beyond, peer review¹ is one of the most widely used tools for helping students improve their writing. Despite its widespread usage, however, it is one of the most diffuse, inconsistent, and ambiguous practices associated with writing instruction. What instructors typically refer to as “peer review” usually entails asking students to read and comment on their peers’ papers. That is about as common a description of the activity as is possible, though. In fact, what instructors have students do during peer review varies considerably along several organizational and purpose spectra: pairs or small groups; structured or unstructured sessions; worksheet or discussion-based focus; emphasis on editing for surface-level errors or emphasis on larger, more holistic matters; and so forth. With so much variation in organization and approach, it is clear that no community-wide, common understanding of what peer review is—or what it should accomplish—currently exists.

This is not a new concern, though. Anne Ruggles Gere acknowledges the widespread ambiguity of peer review and peer review-like practices in her 1987 book *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Gere notes that most writing instructors assume that peer review-like activities were born in the 1960s out of the work of scholars like Peter Elbow, Ken Macrorie, and Donald Murray; instead, Gere delineates the unexpectedly long history (a history that stretches back, far beyond the 1960s) of such student-centered learning practices. Even twenty years after Gere’s recounting of it, the history of peer review often remains unquestioned and unspecified, as do many other aspects associated with such activities (or, as Gere calls them, “writing groups”), including terminology. Gere introduces her book by acknowledging the numerous terms used to describe this activity: “the phenomenon has nearly as many names as people who employ it. The name, of course, matters less than what it describes, which is responding to one another’s work” (1). Like Gere, we agree that the lack of a common understanding of peer-review practices is problematic for the field; however, unlike Gere, we contend that

the terminology used to describe those practices is, in fact, of crucial importance. Especially in a situation where the activity being described varies so widely, precise terminology matters. In this essay, we argue that the terminology used ought to make explicit the underlying assumptions and goals for the particular activity; the problem, as we see it, is that because peer review has been adopted in so many different contexts, and for so many different purposes, the associated terminology has become stale from overgeneralization and unreflective acceptance.

Not surprisingly, instructors’ intentions for using peer review have suffered a similar drought of reflection and analysis. Unfortunately, very little theoretical guidance exists for why students should be asked to participate in peer review, so despite the abundance of methodological and practical scholarship available, it often comes down to a matter of personal preference. As Gere suggests in her introductory section, educators need to move “from exigency to exegesis, from responding to the needs of the moment to thinking about what that response means” (2). In addition, the field’s thinking about peer review and what it means must include serious consideration of the language used to describe such activities.

In the case of peer review, at least five different terms are prevalent in both the literature and in practice: peer review, peer response, peer editing, peer evaluation, and peer critique. Because these terms are often neither defined nor distinguished from one another in the literature, it appears that they are often randomly assigned and considered synonymous and interchangeable, which raises the question: what exactly is meant by “peer review”? Do all of these terms really mean the same thing, or are there differences inherent in each? What are the goals of such activities? More importantly, do the terms used in writing classes make these goals clear to students?

Precise Terminology/Precise Rationale

With regard to peer review, it is clear that much variation exists—in the scholarship, in practice, in textbooks, and in instructors’ and students’ perceptions of the activity. For this reason, a precise terminology is needed for discussing, theorizing, researching, and implementing peer review. Likewise, we also need to consider why we want our students to engage in peer review in the first place. Are practical considerations, for example, one motivation? Many articles, like David James’s “Peer Teaching in the Writing Classroom,” Irvin Peckham’s “Peer Evaluation,” and Joan Canwell’s “In the Ointments, A Few Flies,” suggest the allure of time—class time freed from lecturing and out-of-class time freed from excess grading—as part of their endorsement of peer review. Assuming instructors’ goals for peer review do stretch beyond the merely practical, do they want students to learn to be strong editors? Or, as Anne Herrington and Deborah Cadman argue in “Peer Review and Revising in an Anthropology Course: Lessons for Learning,” is there a different goal: “the primary concern when initiating peer review in a class is not to teach students how to critique written drafts—that’s secondary; it is first to create a classroom environment where we give students the gift of having some responsibility-

ity—some authority for their own learning” (197)? In other words, are there larger learning goals underlying such activities?

When instructors ask students to perform peer review, they must consider exactly what they are asking students to do in order to develop a peer-review activity that fits instructors’ specific goals for students. Then, and only then, can instructors provide a language for such an activity that allows students to see these goals, make the connections, and benefit from peer review.

Reflection, Analysis, and Recommendations

In order to initiate a discussion meant to flesh out the meanings, goals, intentions, and assumptions specific to the most commonly used peer-review terms, what follows is a brief synthesis of the available literature on peer review. This essay presents exemplars from an extensive review of the scholarship that includes a wide range of theoretical essays, research studies, and practical texts that endorse a particular peer-review method or approach. Unfortunately, because so much of the scholarship on peer review allows for using multiple terms synonymously and interchangeably, it is impossible to report any universal definitions of the various terms associated with peer review; however, this overview provides at least a few logical indications of how the terminology might be reconsidered to match educators’ goals to the various peer review–like activities. What follows are short discussions of the five most commonly used terms—based on our review of the literature, as well as our own practical experiences—including an analysis of each term and a suggested activity based on our own classroom successes.

Peer Review

ANALYSIS

“Peer review,” which seems to be the most often used and generic term, is frequently invoked to indicate a larger concern with holistic and rhetorical issues, as opposed to emphasizing surface-level issues. For example, in Herrington and Cadman’s article on peer review in an anthropology course, one of the characteristics of the peer-review exchanges the authors observed shows the range of concerns: “In peer-review exchanges, students focus not only on matters of organization and style, but also on substantive matters of interpretation and methods of inquiry central to learning in a given discipline” (185). The activity described in their article consists of “practicing anthropology as the ones in charge and trying to present themselves as anthropologists to other anthropologists” (Herrington and Cadman 189). Such an activity certainly suggests much larger goals than mere review of a peer’s writing, and lends itself further to goals related to review of a peer’s discipline-appropriate thinking.

Similarly, Fiona Paton’s chapter in *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*, which provides a thorough overview of a particular approach to peer review, suggests that instructors “emphasize the difference between revising, editing, and proofreading, and focus the students on substantive revision issues such as focus,

audience, development, and coherence” (293). The same implication can be seen in Cassie Mendonca and Karen Johnson’s “Peer Review Negotiations: Revision Activities in ESL Writing Instruction.” Here, Mendonca and Johnson note in their literature review that students need explicit instruction in order to focus their attention on the larger issues of meaning instead of proofreading concerns to which they would otherwise be attracted (747). These examples indicate that peer review is often considered an activity that is more focused on holistic concerns, rhetorical issues, and issues of meaning and audience appropriateness.

PEER REVIEW IN THE CLASSROOM

While the specific structure and organization of peer review will vary widely, given the description above, it seems appropriate that peer-review sessions focus mostly on big-picture issues like a writer’s organization, support, and argument. Also, because proofreading is not a primary goal of peer review, classroom paper-swapping interactions where students “correct” each other’s papers would seem to limit the effectiveness of the activity’s underlying purposes and goals. Instead, out-of-class or electronic activities might encourage more holistic (and more thoughtful) feedback. One example that has been effective in the first author’s writing classes is to ask students to come up with three specific questions or issues that they want their peer readers to address as they read. Students post their papers and their three questions on a course website or discussion board. Once all papers have been posted, each student should choose another writer’s paper, read it, and then respond to that writer’s three questions. Finally, each student should also choose one other writer’s paper—one that has already been responded to—and read and respond to the posted comments. In the end, each paper should have two different sets of responses. This approach not only encourages holistic commentary—because students are more likely to ask others to comment on structure and flow than comma splices and split infinitives—but also invites students to take a more active role in the peer-review process by directing readers with their own questions.

Peer Response

ANALYSIS

Another common term, “peer response,” is often used when students are asked to offer primarily audience-based (or reader response) feedback. For example, in “What I Wish I Had Known about Peer-Response Groups but Didn’t,” Ronald Barron comments on the importance of a clear understanding of the purpose of the activity: “Members of effective response groups treat the papers they are examining as ‘works in progress’ and recognize that their goal is to serve as sympathetic readers suggesting methods for writers to use in improving their papers” (24). This emphasis on matters of audience reception is also evident in Muriel Harris’s article, “Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-response Groups,” as she separates peer response from the kind of editorial or proofreading work that is often involved in writing center tutorial sessions.

Perhaps the most significant distinction between peer response and peer review is that the former tends to be a more audience-focused session that is typically structured to involve discussion-driven feedback. The kinds of peer discussions going on during peer-response sessions are the focus of several important articles: Sarah Warshauer Freedman's "Outside-In and Inside-Out: Peer Response Groups in Two Ninth-Grade Classes," Beth L. Hewett's "Characteristics of Interactive Oral and Computer-Mediated Peer Group Talk and Its Influence on Revision," M. Francine Danis's "Weaving the Web of Meaning: Interaction Patterns in Peer-Response Groups," and Karen Spear's chapter on listening in *Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes*.

In general, a common theoretical background—a Vygotskian social constructionist view of learning—supports the kinds of peer discussions studied in these articles; however, as the authors clarify, the structure, format, and emphasis of the activity influence the quality and type of students' discussions. For example, Freedman notes differences that she terms "sheet-based talk" and "non-sheet based talk," with the former relating to discussion "directly prompted by the teacher-constructed [work]sheets" and the latter relating to discussion that was "spontaneous and independent of the sheets" (87). Similarly, Hewett comments on a qualitative difference in the kind of feedback students offer depending on whether their feedback was verbal or computer-mediated; Hewett notes that verbal feedback tends to be more global, whereas computer-mediated feedback tends to be more concrete.

PEER RESPONSE IN THE CLASSROOM

One approach to peer response that is consistent with this description of audience-oriented feedback is the POP technique, which has been described by Gloria Neubert and Sally McNeil, and which the first author has used in developmental writing and reading courses. Such an approach begins the session with *praise*, asking readers to respond to questions like "what's good about this?" and "why is it good?" Next, readers are asked to *question* the essay to steer the writer toward needed clarification or explanation. Finally, the session closes with *polish*, asking for ways the writer might improve the essay. Because the POP approach is focused and specific, it is easily adaptable as a worksheet, an electronic activity, or a completely discussion-based approach (which seems to be the preferred peer-response approach).

Peer Editing

ANALYSIS

"Peer editing," as the name would suggest, tends to emphasize surface-level concerns. Peer editing is almost always associated with checklist-style, worksheet-based sessions. Like peer review, peer editing seems to have been adopted as a rather generic term, even though the assumptions and goals for such an activity are loaded directly into the terminology: editing, as differentiated from revising by nearly every composition theoretic or handbook, means proofreading or fixing mechanical, grammatical, and word-level problems. For example, Sharon Planko and Abraham

Radzik, in their article, "The Student Editing Method," use "peer editing" as the term to describe an activity that involves examining both surface-level and larger issues; however, the authors' explanation seems singularly focused on editing concerns: "we attempted to teach students how to examine a paper for sentence structure, grammar and usage, punctuation, spelling, style, structure, etc." (222). What they determine is that students need in-depth editing instruction in order to be successful: "Our students had very poor sentence skills, grammar and usage skills, punctuation skills, etc. Therefore, it would take at least a semester, if not more, to improve these skills to the point where they could give each other accurate feedback. Most students could not even detect errors in other students' writing" (Planko and Radzik 223-24). This sounds strikingly familiar, given Mendonca and Johnson's suggestion that students need explicit discussion in order to be successful at peer review and at providing feedback on larger, more holistic issues. Given all the various terms and associated peer-group activities students have been exposed to, it should come as no surprise that students will need not only precise terminology, but also explicit classroom discussions in order to fully grasp instructors' goals for having them read and respond to (or edit, or review, or evaluate, or critique) their peers' writings.

PEER EDITING IN THE CLASSROOM

Often, peer editing takes the form of checklist-style worksheets that include questions like "Does the writer include a title?" and "Does the writer use MLA format and style?" One activity that has worked in our classrooms to break this overused model is to add secondary questions to each: "Does the writer include a title? Is it catchy? Does it give you an indication of what the paper will be about? Can you offer some suggestions for making it clearer as an indicator of the paper's argument?" These follow-up questions not only encourage more critical thinking and engagement on the part of the editor, but also help lead uncertain editors (which most students will admit to being) to give more reflective and thorough feedback. Finally, in both developmental and introductory writing classes, we have found peer editing to be most effective when provided as an additional activity—a presubmission once-over for writers—that follows some other peer-review activity.

Peer Evaluation

ANALYSIS

Another commonly used term, "peer evaluation," generally involves students rating/grading/judging their peers' papers instead of simply responding. In "A Method of Peer-Evaluation of Student Writing," for example, John C. Bean asks students to assign a number grade to their peers' papers; he then assigns his own scores and compares student scores to his own. James H. Bissland uses a similar activity with his journalism students, as described in "Peer Evaluation Method Promotes Sharper Writing," as do David R. James in "Peer Teaching in the Writing Classroom," Michael Kuhne and Gill Creel in "Student Evaluation and an Introduction to Academic

Discourse,” and Richard Johnson in “The Next Frontier of the Student-Centered Classroom: Teaching Students to Recognize Quality Writing Through the Use of Peer Evaluation.” For Johnson, peer evaluation is an activity that requires students to assign a quality label (“on target,” “needs work,” or “exceeds expectations”) to a peer’s writing. Peer evaluation, then, seems to be most appropriately applied to activities in which students are scoring, rating, or even grading their peers’ papers.

PEER EVALUATION IN THE CLASSROOM

The possibilities for peer evaluation are numerous, though in general this approach tends to lend itself to Likert-type scales or simple yes/no responses. Based on the second author’s use of peer evaluation in the classroom, we suggest that one way to avoid the exclusive use of these kinds of responses is to have evaluators write a narrative of their evaluation decisions, including how they evaluated the paper and why they assigned the scores they did. Including the quality of students’ peer evaluation as part of their own overall grade for their own paper can engender a vested interest in providing a thorough level of feedback for their classmates. This also has the effect of helping students thoroughly understand all aspects of the writing assignment, which can provide an important metacognitive aspect to the assignment and writing process. Thus, one goal of peer evaluation is for students to view their own papers, and their classmates’ papers, from an alternative perspective—namely, that of an evaluator or assessor, such as their instructor.

Peer Critique/Peer Criticism

ANALYSIS

Finally, “peer critique” and its sibling “peer criticism” appear to be very similar in meaning to peer review. For instance, Thom Hawkins, in “Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing,” likens peer criticism to a study group, and instructs students to “write some general observations about the *whole* essay. Your larger view of the paper will be more helpful to the author than the misspelling or punctuation errors you’ve noted” (642). Also, in “The Value of Written Peer Criticism,” Mara Holt encourages a higher-level focus for student critiques that involve “engagement with substantive issues in the paper. This can take the critic beyond the micropolitics of the classroom into a discussion of broader social concerns” (389). Once again, with the emphasis on the paper’s ideas as a whole, this is strikingly similar to what has already been described as peer review; however, we are including this term in our discussion in order to illustrate how the term chosen can indeed affect the activity.

One possible way to distinguish peer review from peer criticism/critique is in the connotations of the word “criticism.” For students in Mary Mortimore Dossin’s teacher education class, as described in “Among Friends,” peer critique is usually a very negative experience often involving “picking apart [the student’s] paper for any mistakes” (206). Perhaps that is an inherent assumption for students: that peer critique means to pick apart or become “error hunters” (Dossin 207). Dossin’s

position is that such an activity is most effective when it takes on “the attitude of friends—I know you can do better, and I’ll help you do it” (207). In fact, Dossin comments that “what really makes the difference in peer critiquing is whether students are encouraged to be error hunters” (207). Likely, this message comes straight from the instruction; however, it is just as likely that the term used to describe the activity triggers students’ assumptions of their roles as critics and “error hunters,” not reviewers, evaluators, responders, or even collaborators (Dossin 207).

PEER CRITIQUE IN THE CLASSROOM

Because the term “peer critique” carries with it connotations of an activity that focuses mostly on shortcomings, careful reflection on Dossin’s experiences might encourage the choice of a different term. Especially for peer review–like activities in introductory-level or developmental writing courses where student writers (and editors) may already lack confidence in their writing abilities, the term may inadvertently invite negative feedback that is counterproductive for developing writers. Indeed, with Hawkins’s and Holt’s examples above, the term seems similar enough to peer review that the risk for including this term in the classroom may easily be avoided by simply choosing the latter term, which may invite more constructive—and friendly—peer reviewing.

Conclusion

This analysis of the most commonly used terms is merely a starting point for discussions of what peer review—in all its various forms—is, why it is used, and what terms ought to be assigned to it in order to fully articulate instructors’ intentions for such activities. Reflection on the use of these terms in the existing literature should provide some evidence that each of these terms could be used to describe a very different activity with different goals, outcomes, and emphases. In fact, such reflection may be an impetus for further scholarship on this topic: one noteworthy finding of our literature review for this essay is that while considerable theorizing, researching, and reflecting on peer review is available, much of this is now somewhat dated. Because peer review–like activities are so widespread, updated research is needed in order to validate its continued classroom use. For example, how do students understand these activities? Do particular activities benefit students’ writing or thinking more than others? In which classroom contexts is a particular activity most appropriate, and why?

With further consideration of peer review’s goals, assumptions, and purposes, instructors will be better able to clarify these activities for themselves, their students, and those in other fields. Part of this continued reflection on peer review should focus on the need for precise language. Charles Sanders Peirce, in “The Ethics of Terminology,” speaks to the reasons behind the need for such precision: “Those reasons would embrace, in the first place, the consideration that the wool and warp of all thought and all research is symbols; so that it is wrong to say that a

good language is *important* to good thought, merely; for it is of the essence of it" (129). Furthermore, in a field such as ours—one that is so focused on language—we must be more attentive to the terms we use. A careful consideration of the language we choose to use is essential, especially with regard to the message it sends to our students. After all, if we cannot clarify our terminology and say what we mean, how can we expect our students to do the same in their writing? ▣

Note

1. To avoid undue confusion, in this essay, the term "peer review" will be used as a generic label for all such activities involving students reading other students' papers. As can be seen in the latter section of this essay, though, "peer review" is anything but a generic term.

Works Cited

- Barron, Ronald. "What I Wish I Had Known about Peer-Response Groups but Didn't." *English Journal* 80.5 (1991): 24–34.
- Bean, John C. "A Method of Peer-Evaluation of Student Writing." *College Composition and Communication* 30.3 (1979): 301–2.
- Bisland, James H. "Peer Evaluation Method Promotes Sharper Writing." *Journalism Educator* 34 (1980): 17–19.
- Canwell, Joan. "In the Ointments, A Few Files." *English Journal* 72.4 (1983): 55–56.
- Danis, M. Francine. "Weaving the Web of Meaning: Interaction Patterns in Peer-Response Groups." *ERIC Document*. (1982).
- Dossin, Mary Mortimore. "Among Friends: Effective Peer Critiquing." *The Clearing House* 76.4 (2003): 206–7.
- Freedman, Sarah Warshauer. "Outside-In and Inside-Out: Peer Response Groups in Two Ninth-Grade Classes." *Research in the Teaching of English* 26.1 (1992): 71–107.
- Getz, Anne Ruggles. *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1987.
- Harris, Muriel. "Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-response Groups." *College Composition and Communication* 43.3 (1992): 369–83.
- Hawkins, Thom. "Group Inquiry Techniques for Teaching Writing." *College English* 37.7 (1976): 637–46.
- Herrington, Anne J., and Deborah Cadman. "Peer Review and Revising in an Anthropology Course: Lessons for Learning." *College Composition and Communication* 42.2 (1991): 184–99.

Hewett, Beth L. "Characteristics of Interactive Oral and Computer-Mediated Peer Group Talk and Its Influence on Revision." *Computers and Composition* 17 (2000): 265–88.

Holt, Mara. "The Value of Written Peer Criticism." *College Composition and Communication* 43.3 (1992): 384–92.

James, David R. "Peer Teaching in the Writing Classroom." *English Journal* 70.7 (1981): 48–50.

Johnson, Richard. "The Next Frontier of the Student-Centered Classroom: Teaching Students to Recognize Quality Writing Through the Use of Peer Evaluation." *ERIC Document* (2001).

Kuhne, Michael, and Gill Creel. "Student Evaluation and an Introduction to Academic Discourse: 'I didn't like it, and I don't know how to improve it, because it works.'" *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 33.3 (2006): 279–94.

Mendonca, Cassie O., and Karen E. Johnson. "Peer Review Negotiations: Revision Activities in ESL Writing Instruction." *TESOL Quarterly* 29 (1994): 745–69.

Neubert, Gloria A., and Sally J. McNeilis. "Peer Response: Teaching Specific Revision Suggestions." *English Journal* 79.5 (1990): 52–56.

Paton, Fiona. "Approaches to Productive Peer Review." *Strategies for Teaching First-Year Composition*. Ed. Duan Roen, et al. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 2002. 290–301.

Peckham, Irvin. "Peer Evaluation: Close Up." *English Journal* 67.7 (1978): 61–63.

Peirce, Charles Sanders. "The Ethics of Terminology." *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Vol. II. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1932.

Pianko, Sharon, and Abraham Radzik. "The Student Editing Method." *Theory into Practice* 19.3 (1980): 220–24.

Spear, Karen. "Listening: The Foundation for Sharing." *Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1988. 116–30.

Sonya L. Armstrong is assistant professor of postsecondary literacy at Northern Illinois University, where she is also director of the College Learning Enhancement Program. Prior to her current position in teacher education, she taught at community colleges for seven years. **Eric J. Paulson** is associate professor of literacy education at the University of Cincinnati, where he is also director of graduate studies for teacher education. Prior to his current position in teacher education, he taught developmental reading and writing at community colleges for nine years.