Chapter X

How’s My Writing?
Using Online Peer Feedback to Improve Performance in the Composition Classroom

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Abstract

This chapter presents a case study of how online peer feedback was used as a formative learning and assessment activity in a required, university-level composition course. The authors argue that such activities, if designed effectively, contribute significantly toward a student’s sense of audience, authority, and empowerment as a productive member of a larger discourse community. In the study, students were divided into small workgroups and shared their work by posting it on the class discussion board. They were asked to provide feedback on specific parts of their classmates’ work. Issues such as preparing students to provide peer feedback, quality and usefulness of the peer assessment, and student attitudes toward the peer assessment process are addressed.

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Composition courses are intended to teach students critical thinking and writing skills. No matter what the subject matter or focus used as a means of exploring writing-related concepts, the intent is always to help students be better able to write clearly, effectively, and persuasively. Peer assessment in the composition classroom can be an effective activity toward accomplishing these goals for a variety of reasons. From a learning standpoint, students have the opportunity to improve their writing skills through seeing each other’s work, practicing their critique skills, and receiving feedback from classmates. Additionally, from an administrative standpoint, peer assessment can help an overloaded instructor increase the amount of feedback that students receive without increasing the instructor’s workload and ideally increase the speed with which every student in the class can receive feedback.

Perhaps most importantly, however, peer assessment impresses upon students a sense of audience, of a community where ideas are created and shaped within a specific context and affected by the writer’s understanding of her or his readers’ knowledge, concerns, and response strategies. One of the most pressing tasks in a composition class is to give students a sense of responsibility for their ideas and of empowerment within a discourse community and the ways that power, authority, and responsibility play out within the classroom environment—both in terms of how students respond to their audience, both instructor and fellow students, and of how students are able eventually to assert their own authority with confidence—are deeply influenced by the ways that peer-assessment activities are structured and by the roles that instructors and students play within those activities.

This sense of community—of ideas shaped within a particular context that is developed by its members and influenced by the particular ways writers and readers respond to each other—is, we suggest, among the most important lessons that students can learn in the composition classroom, both for understanding how writing and communication are created in the first place but also to instill a sense of ownership and investment in one’s own ideas and of responsibility and interest in others’ ideas. Peer feedback is also important in removing the typical, and to some degree debilitating, belief among some students that feedback is the sole responsibility of the instructor and instead can show that effective student critique can be helpful toward reading actively and, thus, productive collaboration in building writing communities in the classroom and beyond.

In a traditional classroom-based course, writing instructors may encourage peer critique by having students exchange physical copies of their writing, read them, and discuss them in small groups. These activities are generally considered good
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