11 Responding to Writing: Peer Critiques, Teacher-Student Conferences, and Essay Evaluation

Peter Schiff
Northern Kentucky University

Clarity often turns to confusion somewhere between students' expressive writing and the "finished" assignments teachers grade. Students are able to explain themselves to themselves—but not to us. This isn't surprising. By asking students to move directly from journal entries to psychological case studies, chemistry lab reports, or theater reviews, we are requiring inexperienced writers to submit their work for expert evaluation without a chance to test out ideas on less threatening audiences.

Students need opportunities to share early drafts with classmates and to receive teacher feedback before they submit papers for a grade. Peer critiquing and teacher-student conferencing give our students these chances to move gradually from notes and journal entries, through drafts, to final form. These aides to revision can decrease the fear of failure that can lead to "writer's block." By providing students with novice and expert opinion, critiquing and conferencing, we let inexperienced writers know whether they are communicating effectively with audiences of varying sophistication.

This chapter offers detailed suggestions for integrating peer critiquing and conferencing into writing assignments in the content areas. It also suggests how to make evaluative comments on student papers so that pupils can improve on subsequent assignments.

Peer Critiques

Teaching students to help each other make improvements from draft to draft is time well invested. When good student writers exchange papers, they can suggest revisions—a shortened sentence or a more vivid word—that add polish to an already strong paper. When good writers comment on the work of less skilled classmates, they can offer ways of turning illogical, confusing ideas into well-organized prose.

And when inexperienced writers respond to the work of skilled peers, they have the opportunity to read and imitate examples of well-written case studies, lab reports, reviews, or any of the many other formats associated with particular disciplines.

Teachers also benefit. Higher quality finished assignments resulting from students reading and commenting on one another's paper save time on grading. There are simply fewer punctuation errors, confusing sentences, or inappropriate vocabulary to slow down an instructor's reading.

The sharing of drafts can occur during class time or between classes with students taking each other's work-in-progress home. Critiques can involve a straight swap of papers between students, or pass-arounds among small groups of four or five pupils. An instructor may serve as a facilitator of the critiquing process, making certain students understand what they should be doing. Or, if brave, the teacher may plunge into the critiquing activity, subjecting his or her own draft to the comments of students.

Whether critiquing occurs in or out of class, between two students or among more, and with or without a participating instructor, there are two closely related ways in which a teacher can help pupils get the most out of reading one another's drafts. One way is to show students how to respond to the intellectual processes demonstrated in a first draft. For instance:

> the synthesis of data necessary for arriving at an hypothesis in the chemistry lab report
>
> the selection of details important in drawing a clinical conclusion in the psychology case study
>
> the discovery of successful or flawed relationships among playwright, director, actors, and technical specialists crucial to a drama critic's opinion

A second way is to direct pupils' responses to the syntax, wording, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and manuscript conventions through which the writer's understanding of a subject is conveyed.

To guide students in their roles as critics, teachers might provide pupils with two aids: (1) a sheet of paper on which are written questions pertinent to the intellectual processes necessary for completing the assignment, and (2) a sheet asking critics to respond to the written product itself. Instructors need to adapt the first sheet to their particular course's needs. For example, a history teacher wishing students to write a biography might hand out sequenced critique sheets (Figures 1 and 2) to be used a week apart.

Historical Biography Critique Sheet—Intellectual Processing

Author: Critic:

1. In one sentence, write out the main point the author makes about the biographical subject.
2. What details allow the author to reach a conclusion (simply jot down one or two words to identify pertinent details)?
3. What additional information might be helpful in substantiating the author's findings.
4. As a student of history reading this report, what is your reaction to the author's tone (for example: "too personal," "too detached," "effective blend of personal and objective")?

Figure 1.

Historical Biography Critique Sheet—Writing

Author: Critic:

1. What part of the paper seems to you the best written? Specify the lines and tell why you feel they are effective.
2. What part of the paper seems to you the weakest? Specify the lines and tell why you feel they are ineffective.
3. Which sentences are vague?
4. Which transitions bring you up short or leave you searching for connections between sentences?
5. Which words or phrases are vague and/or overused?
6. Which sentences have grammatical structures you find confusing or inaccurate?
7. What spelling and punctuation errors have you noticed?

Figure 2.

Critique sheets for other disciplines would present different directions. Instead of asking pupils to "write out the main point the author wishes to make about the biographical subject," the sheet might ask:

> In one sentence, write out the author's finding based on completion of the assigned experiment. (chemistry laboratory report)
>
> In one sentence, write out the author's opinion of the production. (theater review)
>
> In one sentence, write out the major recommendation that the author makes to the client company. (business administration consulting report)

Similarly, other questions could be adjusted to meet the requirements of different disciplines.

When students critique carefully and then revise carefully, the results can be impressive. For example, a student brought to class this health education essay draft on the dangers of smoking:

Puffin' Away

"Warning: the Surgeon General has determined that cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health." How many times has a cigarette smoker read this admonishment as he pulled another cigarette from his pack—and yet he ignors it. I myself choose to close my eyes to the continual stream of government warnings against smoking.

Why does an individual start such a habit? It's hard to say why people smoke, but I would acknowledge that I gan smoking because of peer pressure. The research done by the Federal Government alone shows that smoking contributes to caner particular of the lung but also of the tounge, throat, mouth & other parts of the body used in smoking. Also, Emphyzima another lung deasease can also be caused by the use of cigarettes. Smokers are usually more suseptiable to respitory infections and these are a longer time to cure especially than a non-smokers (especially if they continue to smoke during their illness.)

Smoking also contributes to bad breath and stained teeth. A non-smoker can immediately identify a smoker by the unpleasant oder comeing from the smokers cloths & hair. But up until a few years ago the non-smoker had no choice but to tolerate a smoky resitirant or bar or plane but things are changing and now such places where people congreate have disignated areas for people wishing to use tobacco.

A classmate reading this draft suggested that the writer (1) offer "some other possibilities for starting to smoke," (2) correct numerous spelling, punctuation, and proofreading errors, and (3) retain and expand upon such specific wording as "congregate," because "it sounds much better than 'a place where people gather.'" After receiving these suggestions and asking the critiquer for ways to implement the recommended changes, the writer prepared this revised draft.

Puffin' Away

"Warning: The Surgeon General has determined that cigarette smoking is dangerous to your health."

How many times has a cigarette smoker read this warning as he pulled another cigarette from his pack? And yet he ignores it. I, as a smoker, choose to close my eyes and ears to the continual stream of government cautions against smoking.

How does an individual get caught in this expensive, annoying, unhealthy habit? It's hard to say why other people smoke, but I would acknowledge that I began smoking (and I wish I hadn't) because of peer pressure.

> The research done by the Federal Government alone shows that smoking contributes to cancer, particularly of the lung, but also of tongue, throat, mouth, and other parts of the body used in smoking. Emphysema, another lung disease, can also be caused by the use of cigarettes. Smokers are usually more susceptible to respiratory infections and take a longer time to cure than nonsmokers (especially if they continue to smoke during their illness). Smoking also contributes to bad breath and stained teeth. A nonsmoker can immediately identify a smoker by the unpleasant odor coming from the smoker's clothes and hair.
>
> Up until a few years ago, the nonsmoker had no choice but to tolerate a smoke-filled restaurant, bar, or plane, but things are changing. Now most places where people congregate have designated areas for people wishing to smoke and for people who do not smoke.

The changes in the above essay were essentially mechanical. Critiques can lead to more substantive changes, as in the essay of an engineering student who described the Pontiac (Michigan) Silverdome. In a first draft, the writer ended the essay with this paragraph:

> Once inside, you are drawn like a magnet to look at the playing field. At first glance, this view can be quite breathtaking, a perfect gridiron, green outlined in white, appears. The end zones are silver and blue to match the Lions' uniforms. Then your eyes see the real sight: eighty thousand seats that circle the field and rise up and up to the top of the dome, which is over two hundred feet above the playing surface.

A critiquing classmate, after reading the entire essay, noted that the ending seemed rather abrupt. The next draft of this paper revealed that its author had taken the critiquer's comment seriously enough to add this concluding paragraph:

> Beauty and efficiency can be combined in a building. The Pontiac Silverdome proves this by providing a comfortable place to watch many types of events. It's certain to take your breath away the first time you see it.

Neither the revised "Puffin' Away," nor the expanded "Silverdome" are outstanding essays. Nevertheless, both student authors improved upon first drafts by sharing work-in-progress with classmates. By reading one another's drafts, by writing suggestions on the critiquing sheets, and by discussing means to implement those suggestions, student writers subtly improved their communication. Such efforts were possible only because these exercises took place without the immediate threat of a grade. With this pressure temporarily removed, inexperienced writers were able to "fail" on first drafts, so that they might succeed on subsequent ones.

Teacher-Student Conferences

As helpful as they are for decreasing writers' anxieties and improving their writing, peer critiques can only offer students nonexpert opinion. If a school has a writing center, students can receive additional, nonthreatening insight into work-in-progress. But what can inexperienced writers do when such tutorial services are not available? At some point student writing needs expert intervention. Seeking out additional critiques from roommates or friends, sharing a draft with one's former English teacher, or reading it to one's own family can serve as intermediate steps between an initial peer critique and the teacher-student conference. It is the teacher-student conference, however, that can offer pupils expert response to work-in-progress.

Such conferences need not be twenty or thirty minute sessions in an instructor's office. This information should be of comfort to teachers whose classes have large enrollments. As Charles Duke points out, consultations with students about their writing can take place in a variety of unlikely settings—hallways, cafeterias, libraries, and student lounges.[1] Furthermore, when such consultations focus on specific aspects of a particular piece of writing, they need last only a few minutes. For example, an instructor might offer to spend one office hour in the school library in order to direct students to specialized sources of data and to offer immediate feedback to student drafts. In this way, a library consultation of one or two minutes per student can let the instructor know if the class, as a whole, is on the right track on a research paper. Such a "mini-conference" can be of particular help to students whose topics are too broad, who are having difficulty finding sources, or who are experiencing problems organizing data.

Just as important as realizing that conferences can be short and take place at various locations is the understanding that not every student needs a conference. If a teacher uses consultation time efficiently, students who need it can be identified for intensive conference attention. In planning effective, efficient conferences, teachers have found a number of approaches particularly helpful. What these conference methods have in common is that they use consultation time to make students do the work that will improve their writing on a particular paper. In this way, teachers can approach the conference with a clear conscience. The student, in every instance, writes the paper. The teacher does what business and professional consultants ideally do—clarify problems, suggest solutions, and evaluate results.

Each of the following conference approaches offers ways in which subject area teachers can become "writing consultants" to their students.

Student questions conference. One conferencing opportunity that students well along in their writing often find useful is the chance to ask the evaluating teacher questions about the merits and flaws of work-in-progress. For example, a history student might bring a list of questions along with a draft of a paper on causes of World War I to a conference. The instructor then has a chance to read the draft. Following this, the student asks questions bearing upon the intellectual processes required by the assignment. For example:

> Have I overplayed the role of Archduke Ferdinand's assassination in bringing about hostilities?
>
> Does starting my paper with events occurring during the Franco-Prussian War of 1871 make it too far removed from the topic which, after all, focuses on 1914?
>
> Are my paragraphs on the bloodline relationships among Queen Victoria, Kaiser Wilhelm, and Czar Alexander actually off-the-subject padding?

The asking and answering of such questions have two benefits. They show how deeply a student has considered complex subject matter. They also enable the pupil to receive straightforward advice on final revisions of a paper.

Paired/small group conference. One way for a teacher with classes having high enrollments to provide more students with closer attention to their writing is to hold conferences with two, three, or four pupils at a time. This sort of seminar-conference can serve as a forum for discussing an assignment as well as students' progress towards its completion.

In such a small-group consultation, several anthropology students might get together with their teacher to read drafts of essays on a Northwest American Indian society in which people vied with one another to see who could give away the most material wealth. After such a reading, students and teacher would attempt to state each essay's main idea in a single sentence. Such an effort might result in these three statements about shared drafts:

> The potlatch system, in which Northwest American Indians gained prestige by giving away personal property, provides a striking contrast with the modern-day North American's penchant for obtaining status by acquiring wealth.
>
> Because the Northwest American Indians needed so desperately to give wealth away, they became caught up in a competitive,

> almost megalomanic struggle to demonstrate self-worth by dispossessing themselves of all worldly goods.
>
> A typical meeting of potlatchers involved the giving away of jewelry, blankets, homes, and slaves, followed by a feast during which the host berated his guests as stingy ingrates who would never be able to outgive him.

In addition to finding out whether their essays communicate major points to several readers, recipients of the paired/small-group conference gain insight into several ways of thinking about a single subject. The anthropology students employed three distinct intellectual processes to arrive at their views on Northwest Indian culture: comparison-contrast of differing societies; deductive reasoning to establish the conspicuous-giving syndrome; chronological ordering to describe an important rite in an unfamiliar culture.

Editorial conference. It is appropriate to hold a student conference to prepare or edit the piece of writing that will be submitted for evaluation. The editorial conference is, as its name suggests, a chance for the instructor to comment on the way in which a student writer expresses ideas: the music teacher's advice that a student shift from passive to active voice in order to convey the power of a concert pianist's recital performance; the law enforcement instructor's recommendation that a pupil remove the first person singular that was appropriate in a journal entry but no longer so in a criminology report; the physical education teacher's correction of the misspelling of "apparatus" in a major's study of the physics of gymnastics. These changes do not alter the essence of the writer's intellectual processing as communicated through writing. Editorial changes, however, do insure that readers will not be sidetracked from considering the writer's thoughts by such surface distractions as misspellings, incorrect punctuation, or inappropriate pronoun reference.

The editorial conference has been the traditional approach used by writing teachers for many years. Its benefit (an improved "finished" product) has often been accompanied by an undesirable side effect. This is the distancing of the teacher from the student through premature evaluation of a piece of writing, an alienation that Mary Hiatt refers to as keeping a pupil "at bay."[2] It is usually better to join with the conferee to make sense of unfamiliar information. Still, when used selectively at the point just before final typing, the editorial conference can provide the polish that showcases a student's clear main idea, detailed development, and authoritative voice.

Colleague conference. This technique adapts the principle of trusted expert as critiquer to assignments in various subject areas. The

colleague conference requires teachers of the same subject to swap office hours in order to discuss written assignments with one another's pupils. In this way, students can have the benefits of a one-to-one conference with an expert who will not be evaluating a written product.

Inclass conference. Courses where students occasionally work on their own during class time provide a setting for efficient conferencing. While biology pupils perform dissections, an instructor can call a student aside for one or two minutes of focused discussion about a draft of a lab report. While business management students wait their turn to use computer terminals, their teacher can check and comment on feasibility studies that may be due a week later. In introductory literature courses, too, the inclass conference is a way to make maximum use of consulting time. For example, for a short paper on Edgar Allen Poe, students can be asked to respond to one of Poe's stories through an inclass journal write. As the class writes, the teacher can ask individual students to state in one sentence the main idea of their Poe papers. When students' ideas are off-target, the instructor can urge pupils to revise their main idea sentences, focusing them on such topics as Poe's unusual wording, weird settings, or sense of the macabre. Such quick question-response sessions offer a double benefit: immediate teacher access to every student in a class and teacher-pupil dialogue in a setting where both are likely to be thinking actively about the subject.

Rewrite conference. There are times when a student may question the reaction of a peer critiquer. The rewrite conference allows the writer to bring draft and critique sheets to the instructor. The teacher reads the drafts and the peer critiquer's reactions. If the teacher agrees with the critiquer's views, the student can begin a revision even though unsure of the critique's validity. Then, student and teacher can explore together the relative merits of two versions of a draft. When the teacher agrees with the student writer that a bit of critiquing advice may not be the soundest possible, teacher and student can discuss more appropriate revision strategies. During the conference, the student can actually begin the agreed-upon revision to see if it "tests out." This rewrite conference provides students with helpful feedback at a stage in the assignment when they may be ready to attempt a final draft. Such a conference also offers the instructor a chance to spot-check peer critiquing suggestions to discover if students are actually providing help to one another in improving the quality of revisions.

Talk-writing conference. Students bring class notes to the conference. Then, speaking into a tape recorder, they do an "oral" draft of their writing assignment. During playback, students concentrate on the audience they wish to reach and the information they wish to convey. A second playback, during which pupils stop and start the machine,

gives them a chance to transcribe, revising as they go along. This sequence, from talking to listening to transcribing to revising, provides writers with a compressed version of the writing process—one during which the teacher can observe and comment on students' writing behavior. Talk-write conferences can be especially useful early on in any subject assignment in which a pupil is having difficulty "getting started."

Journal-writing conference. The face-to-face contact of the conference makes it ideal for the teacher-student talk about a particular subject and related writing assignments. For example, a government instructor who requires students to keep journals might become engaged in a conversation with a student who is writing a paper on the government of Israel. At a point when the conversation seems to be breaking down or rambling, the teacher can ask the student to use the journal to express misgivings about the assignment.("I just don't see similarities between Israel's and other nations' forms of government.") This journal write can serve to focus both student and teacher attention on a particular problem demanding solution.

It is then the teacher's turn to respond—to clarify the assignment. ("What I hope to see in students' essays is evidence they've made analogies between the countries whose governments they are describing and the British parliamentary or American congressional systems.") With this clarification the student can begin to organize an essay that compares, for example, Israeli and British executive, judicial, and legislative processes.

As with the talk-write conference, this journal writing session is effective in getting pupils started on an assignment. In addition, in-conference journal writing can prevent the sorts of misunderstandings on assignment directions and expectations that often lead to bitterness when a paper receives a poor grade.

Model analysis conference. On writing assignments where the format of the finished product is very important, a problem-solving approach to analyzing models of such formats (laboratory reports, technical specifications, or newspaper articles) can offer stimulating practice in organizing information. For example, a teacher of journalism can present a student with five or six randomly ordered strips of paper on each of which is a paragraph from a newspaper article. By asking the student to rearrange the strips in the order "most appropriate" for a feature story, the instructor creates a puzzle. The process of solving this puzzle leads to a discussion on the importance of arranging information from most to least important. Such an activity can be modified for teaching of other writing formats, such as technical process directions (chronological arrangement of steps leading to com-

pletion of the process) or laboratory reports (inductive arrangement up to the statement of an hypothesis).

Watching-the-teacher-write conference. When a student is confused about a particular portion of the composing process, it can be both relieving and exciting to watch the teacher struggle with a similar problem. With a real letter, convention paper, or class assignment to write, the teacher gets to prove conclusively that very few people can draft perfect prose at one sitting. To see the teacher gnash teeth over opening sentences that won't appear, to watch the instructor's pen cross out words that "just won't do," to observe the professor's cutting and stapling of drafts in order to arrive at more effective idea arrangement, and to hear the scholar's unprintable shriek as a proofreading session reveals scores of typos goes far toward helping pupils realize that they, too, can compose.

What the preceding conferencing approaches share is their users' desires to help pupils move toward the point of offering their work for evaluative response. Feasible for teachers of all subject specialties employing writing as a thought tool, the conference used constructively by the conferee can make the evaluator's task simpler.

Essay Evaluation

Just what is the evaluator's task after students have written in their journals and taken interpretive notes, used such expressive writing to inspire drafts of content area assignments, subjected those assignments to peer critiquing, brought revised drafts to teacher-student conferences, and submitted "finished products" for grading? Lee Odell offers insight into the instructor's responsibility at this point. Odell cites research evidence that: "(1) Composition teachers can help students increase their conscious use of certain intellectual (cognitive and affective) processes. (2) Instruction in the use of these processes can result in writing that seems more mature, more carefully thought out, more persuasive."[3] Subject area teachers can adapt these findings to serve a dual purpose, helping students improve intellectual functioning and evaluating those students' written work at the same time. The medium for instructing and grading is the written evaluative comment. Such a comment at the end of a handed-in piece of writing need answer only one question: "To what extent has the writer demonstrated the ability to function intellectually in the manner required of scholars and practitioners in a particular discipline?"

In many cases a brief response from the instructor that sticks to answering the evaluative question allows a teacher to move toward

what Odell feels is "one important goal of measurement and evaluation: making statements that describe accurately and usefully students' present writing and that have clear implications for students' subsequent writing."[4] For instance, an anthropology teacher might respond to the aforementioned students of Northwest American Indian culture in these different ways:

> Your comparison of Northwest Indian and Anglo-American use of property to gain prestige reveals you have discovered one of the values of anthropological study—the better understanding of our own culture. By contrasting the potlatch ceremony with modern wedding extravaganzas, you have shown the ability to organize unfamiliar data and to state crucial similarities between Anglo-American and native American societies. Your grade on this essay is 'A.'
>
> Your exploration of the psychic strains placed upon the potlatcher made for intriguing reading. You do show the vicious cycle in which the need to give without receiving placed the Northwest Indian. Because anthropology is a complex study of human historical, physical, geographical and communal characteristics, a wider view of your subject than solely the psychological is a worthy aim for your next assignment. Your grade on this essay is 'B.'
>
> Your narrative of the potlatch meeting reminded me of an enjoyable television documentary. The sights, sounds, and smells were all detailed in your paper—just as they are on such documentaries. However, what is missing from many documentaries was also missing from your essay. You can remedy this by adding the human pressures behind a cultural rite to your next effort. In the case of potlatchers, such discussion of these pressures would have answered these questions: Why must the potlatchers give, give, give? What are the cultural consequences of the constant need to accrue wealth far in excess of a society's needs? Your grade for this essay is 'C.'

None of these comments takes more than a few minutes to compose. Each sticks to the quality of thought evidenced by the writer. Each offers a suggestion for subsequent assignments.

For teachers of courses other than composition who have paid careful attention to the composing process, comments in a paper's margins are unnecessary. Complex rating systems are unnecessary. Only the brief, pointed comment at the end of a paper is needed—since the instructor knows that a student has had the opportunity to take

data from class lectures, discussions, and readings, has attempted to understand that data through expressive writing, and has formed those understandings into a piece of writing shaped by peer critiques and teacher-student conferences.

When students do accept these chances to revise and edit before evaluation, they fulfill the promise of writing-across-the-curriculum programs that embrace the entire composing process. Such students use writing to think anthropology. They use it to think technology. They use it to think history. They use it to think.

Notes

1. "The Student-Centered Writing Conference and the Writing Process," *English Journal* 64 (December 1975): 44–47.

2. "Students at Bay: The Myth of the Conference," *College Composition and Communication* 26 (February 1975): 38.

3. "Measuring Changes in Intellectual Processes as One Dimension of Growth in Writing," in *Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging*, ed. Charles R. Cooper and Lee Odell (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1977), p. 107.

4. Odell, p. 132.