

CHAPTER 4.

INTERROGATING PEER REVIEW AS “PROXY:” REFRAMING PEER RESPONSE WITHIN CONNECTIVE PRACTICE

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Although among the most common pedagogical methods employed in U.S. writing classes, peer review is a classroom practice about which composition scholars and researchers have devoted relatively little attention in recent years. Elizabeth Flynn, for example, reports only fifteen articles on peer review in *College Composition and Communication* and six in *College English* between 1970 and the early 1990s, supporting her claim that “research on the topic arising out [of] mainstream composition studies, for the most part, tapered off in the early 1990s and was replaced, within composition studies, by research focusing on peer review using technology” (“Re-viewing,” np). A survey of research on peer review after 2011 affirms Flynn’s claims—both her observation about the relatively little attention paid to peer review in scholarly journals and books in composition studies and the direction of that published scholarship, which continues to focus on ELL writers, technologies for peer review, or a combination of the two. (There are, of course, exceptions since 2011, including work in composition studies by Bedore and O’Sullivan and Corbett et al.) As was the case in 2011 when Flynn composed her survey, much of the scholarship on peer review between 2011 and 2017 appears in educational journals, ELL and ESL journals, international journals, and journals devoted to disciplinary writing pedagogies. In *College Composition and Communication* between 2011-2017, for example, only two articles take up peer review (Weiser; Selfe and Hawisher), and both take up *scholarly* peer review, not student peer review. The most relevant dissertations, such as Kristen J. Nielsen’s 2011 *Peer Evaluation and Self Assessment: A Comparative Study of the Effectiveness of Two Complex Methods of Writing Instruction in Six Sections of Composition*, come out of other disciplines. In Nielsen’s case, the Boston University College of Education.

Working both from alongside and against recent work on peer review in composition studies and from across disciplines (Brammer and Rees; Corbett et al.; Nielsen; Patchan et al.; Walsh et al.), I propose a means of reframing peer *response* as a connective practice encompassing a range of purposes, modalities, and locations that attends to both generative and formative value. I then address a particular assumption in composition studies that complicates and perhaps even compromises peer response as a connective practice by examining and challenging our own and our students' implicit (and sometimes explicit) belief that peer review is a "proxy" for instructor feedback. In examining peer response as connective practice, I situate it in and refer to data and student examples from the teaching and research that colleagues and I have undertaken since 2013 in several iterations of the second-year writing course at Ohio State in hybrid, face-to-face, and MOOC instructional spaces. I chose these locations in part because the instructional development teams intentionally constructed those courses (offered between Spring 2013 and Spring 2016) with peer response as a defining feature using a locally-developed and locally-administered online platform, WEx, The Writers Exchange.

Before beginning our WEx-based approach to peer response in 2013, those of us on the instructional team regularly employed peer review in our face-to-face courses: designing peer review methods, creating peer review sheets, and modeling for students the kinds of collaborative review we practiced in our own work as writers. We were also aware of the divided nature of research on peer review as early as the 1970s, with some studies demonstrating that peer review had little to no effect on the quality of student writing and others showing gain across a number of skills and affective areas (Griffith 17-20). And, like many writing teachers and scholars (Bedore and O'Sullivan; Brammer and Rees; McKendy), we also often felt disappointed at the inconsistency in the quality and efficacy of peer review in our courses and students' abilities to engage in meaningful, substantive, constructive commentary with one another about their reviews. We also aligned ourselves with John Bean, who argues that without adequately structured peer review activities and instructional support, "peer reviewers may offer eccentric, superficial, or otherwise unhelpful—or even bad—advice" (295). And, we often reflected on the wisdom of Kenneth Bruffee, who told compositionists many years ago, "[p]eer criticism is the hardest writing most students will ever do" (78)—a point that reminded us of the complexity of peer review and the challenge facing students who are asked to engage in the practice.

The hybrid courses and MOOCs gave us the opportunity to both test our assumptions about peer review and extend students' engagement with it. If it were—as we had experienced in face-to-face classrooms—a less than satisfactory activity with unpredictable outcomes for students, why did we continue to include it in our courses? One answer, however unsatisfactory, is disciplinary habit.

Peer review has long been a customary and staunchly defended practice in composition studies, with Anne Ruggles Gere dating some of the earliest classroom uses of peer review to the 1880s (17). Coming of age in the 1980s and supported by the work of Piaget and Vygotsky through the social constructivist movement, peer review has stood—if not unassailable (as many of us experience and express concern and frustration about it)—as a ubiquitous practice in college writing classrooms.

REFLECTING HISTORICALLY ON PEER REVIEW

A first step in taking up a historical review of the scholarship on peer review is to acknowledge that the terminology around the practice is inconsistent—both historically and in contemporary scholarship. Although peer “review” appears to be the most frequently used term, peer “evaluation,” peer “assessment,” peer “criticism,” peer “grading,” and peer “response” are also common. Throughout this chapter, I use peer “review” to connote those activities most commonly aligned with the practice: in-class written or spoken feedback on or assessment of a piece of writing typically guided by instructor-developed guidelines and feedback forms. I distinguish peer “review” from peer “response,” a much broader term that encompasses other forms of feedback with much broader ranges of purpose, modality, and location. Given this distinction, peer “review” is a *form* or *type* of peer response but not synonymous with it.

Even after the early work on peer review in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, in which researchers situated peer review as one means of establishing exigency for conversation and creating authentic social contexts and audiences for writing (e.g., Bruffee; George; Grimm; Holt; Newkirk), peer review has rarely been valued as a rhetorical act of knowledge making or textual production in and of itself. Instead, more often than not, peer review is positioned almost exclusively in service to “real” classroom writing, those compositions for which students receive a grade. Whereas the audience for peer review may be more “real” (that is, not simply the teacher), the contexts, investments, and stakes rarely are, relegating the activity to a role as an ancillary practice. Moreover, it is not a practice defined or enacted in composition studies scholarship in terms of universal or participatory design. Peer review—if completed during a single class session in which students read and comment on one or more peers’ drafts—is not an accessible practice for students who, under the pressures of time constraints, socio-emotional stressors, and other factors, may not perform to their highest ability, an actuality students themselves report. The PIT Core Publishing Collective, for example, relates several students’ apprehensions and the impact of their past experiences with peer review as affecting their view of peer review, noting,

in particular, the challenges to students of “time-driven” in-class processes that mitigate against “quality-driven” responses (108).

Complicating matters even further, the scholarship regarding students’ valuing of peer review is—like much scholarship on the subject—not definitive. Peckham claims that students prefer their peers’ responses over instructors (62), while more recent research (especially in L2 contexts) suggests otherwise (Braine; McCorkle et al.; Ruecker). Peer review has been, to my knowledge, almost exclusively a teacher-conceived and teacher-monitored practice, a point made by others, as well (Nielsen). Certainly, other scholars in the past forty years have argued for a richer, more engaged and connective understanding of peer review (DiPardo and Freeman; Ellman; Newkirk, “How Students”). Some scholars (Ede, Nielsen, Griffith) also call into question the proxy model, but by-and-large, the disciplinary understanding and deployment of peer review remains informed by the proxy model, wherein student peer review stands in for or supplements instructor feedback and evaluation.

Moreover, as a discipline, we harbor a kind of collective uncertainty about the value and effectiveness of peer review and have not come to a consistent understanding of just what it is we want peer review to do—or even how it should be deployed in our classrooms (Ashley et al.). The most frequent understanding, however, is that of peer review as proxy for teacher commentary and evaluation, an understanding, I argue, that problematically limits the possibilities of peer response as a connective practice, subordinating it and ignoring its possibilities both as substantive commentary and rhetorical practice. In short, when student writers, student peer reviewers, and teachers conceive of peer review as a proxy for teacher feedback on writing, peer review will fall short of expectation and fail to function as a constitutive feature of instruction and learning.

The problems with proxy are numerous. When assuming the role of proxy, students attempt to mimic evaluative “teacher talk,” responding in ways they *believe* teachers would respond (Griffith). They often focus their comments on discrete elements (LOCs, or lower-order concerns) and on correcting error. Because they do not have (and *realize* they do not have) authority as “teacher,” they also often have little confidence about their own and their classmates’ abilities to provide sufficient (i.e., accurate) response. As a consequence, writers often ignore or discount peers’ responses. Peer reviewers are also burdened by the perception that they can’t live up to the expectation. They’re not teachers, after all. Even when asked to “respond as readers” or as “members of the intended audience,” the specter of the teacher continues to overshadow peer reviewers’ contributions. Finally, by assuming the proxy role, students essentially distance themselves from their own expertise and perspective, which in turn limits the range of the feedback they provide.

I argue, in short, that when students (as well as teachers) conceive of peer review as a proxy for teacher commentary—peer review is all but bound to fall short of our own and students’ goals. To make matters worse—or at least more likely to compromise the value of peer response—how, when, and where we situate peer review in our classrooms also undermines its potential affordances. Peer review that is immediately followed by teacher commentary, for example, is subordinated by that teacher commentary as students reasonably turn to the teacher’s response for guidance for revision because attending to teacher commentary is more important to improving grades (PIT Core).

Fundamental to my developing thinking on proxy is Kevin Griffith’s 1992 dissertation, *Metalanguage about Writing and the Transition from K-12 to College: The Written Responding Processes of Six First-year Students Entering the University*. In his study, Griffith examined the written peer reviewing practices of first-year college students before they had entered a composition course at the university. His hypothesis—informed by a Bakhtinian understanding of the word as always already partly someone else’s—was that students brought with them practices informed by their previous schooling and the habits and voices that dominated that schooling. In short, he “hypothesized that the students’ responding behaviors would have clear roots in past experience,” and his research bore out that hypothesis as students’ “responding language” was “not ‘their own’ as they entered the university” and the voice most dominating their responses was that of an authoritative “past ‘teacher’” (249). With that hypothesis in hand, Griffith’s goal was to examine the tendencies and practices students brought with them to the university and the possible sources for those tendencies and practices.

The Bakhtinian has always struck me as a meaningful frame through which to examine composition pedagogy and what our pedagogies and materials relate to students or what students might well infer from our pedagogies and materials (Halasek). Griffith’s examination into the voices that populate the narratives students bring with them about peer review serves as a meaningful point of departure for demonstrating that the narrative is one of proxy: The role of students is to mimic (insofar as they are able) the voice of authority, of critic and teacher. Shifting students away from this narrative into the narrative I propose—that of connective practice set within ecologies of writing—entails extending the scope of peer response by enacting practices and creating opportunities for the dialogic that demonstrate the connective nature of writing, responding, and learning and emphasize the qualities of meaningful peer response that Kenneth Bruffee articulated over forty years ago: Clarity, tact, honesty, truthfulness, thoroughness, and helpfulness (78). Another way of putting this is to move from a product- to a process-oriented understanding of peer response (Griffith 5) *and* to extend it beyond responding to drafts of students’ formal compositions.

PEER REVIEW AS “PROXY”: THE EFFICIENCY ARGUMENT

One of the recurring arguments in the conversation in the scholarly literature about peer review that implicitly situates the student as proxy for the teacher is that of efficiency. The argument, in short, suggests that peer review be implemented in the classroom as a means of lightening instructors’ workloads. Both shortly after the turn of the twentieth century and again in the 1970s and later, scholars proposed peer review as a means of reducing instructor workload (Bright, Cook, Ellman, Hardaway, Peckham; Wagner). In fact, these articles make no secret of their positions. Cook’s article, for example, is entitled “Reducing the Paper-Load” and Wagner’s “How to Avoid Grading Compositions.”

Griffith, in critiquing the proxy assumption, cites two studies by Newkirk, giving voice to the opinion (in Newkirk) that the goal of peer review is to mimic teacher response: “Without . . . training, students may respond differently from their teacher, in unpredictable and unsatisfactory ways” (qtd. in Griffith 26). Certainly, training in peer review—even extensive training and repeated practice—is a productive pedagogical intervention, but that training should not take as its end training students to read and respond as teacher. Nielsen makes an observation similar to Griffith’s, noting that scholars such as McLeod et al. argue for peer review as a means of managing instructional demands (12). In other words, scholars continue today to leverage the efficiency argument, as Nielsen notes, as we can see demonstrated in numerous locations, such as the “Peer Review and Scaffolded Assignments” on the CUNY-Staten Island writing across the curriculum site, which suggests peer review as a way for teachers to “manage the stress and time of scaffolded assignments” by “divid[ing] the labor” (n.p.).

At the same time the efficiency argument situates peer review as a substitute for teacher feedback, it also subordinates the value of peer evaluation to teacher evaluation. Francine Hardaway demonstrates this contradiction in “What Students Can Do to Take the Burden Off You” when she both argues that “[a]ll the actual work . . . is done by the students” and teachers serve only as a “resource—not as a fount of specious authority” and that “individual conferences are a necessity” for the teacher both as a means of corroborating (certifying) the peer evaluation and as a kind of final check for “special problem[s], or matters not identified by the student evaluators (578). In other words, students’ may relieve some of the burden, but—as laborers—they still require managerial supervision and oversight.

Rather than being efficient, the practice as Hardaway outlines it is, in effect, duplicative and therefore massively *inefficient*, not to mention exploitative. If our primary (or even secondary) goal is to reduce our workload and make it more efficient, and if our primary means of accomplishing this is to

use students as free labor (essentially as graders), we’re exploiting students. Scholars do not acknowledge this material reality of peer review, instead focusing on whether peer review is valid and reliable, whether it stands the test as a marketable commodity. By focusing our attention on determining whether peer review is valid and reliable, we miss the opportunity to ask our research questions differently, to examine, for example, the affordances of students responding from their own experiences, perspectives, and expertise, even if (or perhaps even *because*) those responses don’t mimic or align with teacher response. Griffith rightly notes, in my mind, that asking training students to read “according to what the teacher expects they should say . . . reduces peer responding to mere parceling of the teacher’s task” (27). Peer review in this model is no more than a convenient means of distributing labor away from the instructor and on to the students.

Let me point out that it’s not as if only Griffith, Nielsen, and I question what I’m calling the proxy model, but efforts debunking the proxy model are far less common than representations of peer review as proxy. Nonetheless, productive efforts to reframe peer review are worth acknowledging. A quick review of textbooks like those used in the Second-year Writing Program at Ohio State University, for example, demonstrates that compositionists relate to students the various and productive means by which they might engage peer response. Stephen Wilhoit distinguishes productively among various roles for peers reviewing their classmates’ work: “average reader,” “adviser,” and “editor” (307). Jordynn Jack and Katie Rose Guest Pryal encourage students to realize that they have valuable contributions to make if they “draw on [their] own experience as a reader and writer” (482). Lisa Ede explicitly warns students, “Don’t attempt to play teacher.” “Your job is not to evaluate or grade your classmates’ writing but to respond to it” (355). Ede’s use of “respond” rather than review is a critical distinction as it signals the critical turn I wish to make in moving away from proxy, as even “review” carries with it suggestions of evaluation, of grading. Moving away from proxy is facilitated by this subtle shift in peers’ roles: They respond rather than review.

But other locations in which peer review is described or enacted give conflicting advice. Ede’s recommendation and those of Wilhoit and Jack and Pryal contrast with other representations about the purposes and focus of peer review, as with the CUNY-Staten Island website and Peerceptiv, a digital peer review platform, which in its promotional video characterizes peer review as “improv[ing] learning by placing students in the role of the teacher, making assessment part of the learning process.” Its website banner also recalls those early efficiency arguments: “Eases Instructor Workload” (Peerceptiv). These are among those many voices students encounter as they are asked to conduct peer review.

MOVING FROM PROXY TO CONNECTIVE PRACTICE

As I mentioned earlier, we also catch glimpses from past scholarship that both question the proxy model and provide a more expansive vision of peer response, as with Anne DiPardo and Sarah Warshauer Freedman, who write,

Indeed, where group work is seen as a parceling of tasks normally completed by the teacher, any digressions from a given instructor's response norms might be seen as a major flaw; but where groups are conceived as having more fully collaborative life of their own, *providing an extended social context in which to give and receive feedback*, failure to match a teacher's response mode perfectly does not present such a consuming concern. (140; cited in Griffith 32-33; emphasis added)

DiPardo and Freedman's observation emphasizes the value of understanding and enacting peer response as situated within an "extended social context" of the classroom, a defining characteristic of what I term "connective practice" Connective practice is an approach to teaching based on the assumption that all elements of a writing course—from learning outcomes, assessments, and content to classroom activities—circulate around and connect through students' engagement with and responses to those elements. Connective practice integrates peer response fully into all aspects of a course, presents peer response as a rhetorical practice, creates the means through which students understand it as a genre situated within particular contexts and serving particular purposes, and creates the means through which students may construct reflective and cumulative understanding of their writing, peer response, and learning.

Based in part on the principles of backward design (Wiggins and McTighe), connective practice takes peer response as the central means through which knowledge is generated and course objectives are met. Within connective practice, peer response stands, as it does for Steven Corbett, the "prime pedagogical mover" of the course ("More is More" 173). Peer response as connective practice means connecting peer response to and engaging it through all facets of a course and curriculum—not limiting it to commenting on students' more formal compositions. Instead, peer response is enacted throughout a course in multiple forms and modalities for multiple purposes and engages course materials and the theories that inform them. In other words, when enacted as a fully connective practice, peer response is no longer a "stand-alone," "time-driven," "mindless and repetitive task[. . .]," or "evacuated form that lacks substance" (PIT Core 107-8). Instead, it becomes a critical organism, a kind of connective tissue in the ecology of the writing classroom.

In invoking the ecological, I mean to illustrate the reach and impact of peer response as connective practice. Like Marilyn Cooper, I recognize writing as a dynamic social activity and wish to extend that understanding explicitly to peer response, noting in particular that peer responses, like all forms of writing and interpersonal engagements “through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems,” “both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all other writers and writings in the system” (367-368). In terms of peer response as constitutive of connective practice, the ecological model at once acknowledges and demands that the peer response be understood as means through which “writers connect with one another” (369). Given this understanding, to limit peer response to only drafts of formal compositions or peer review to proxy is to deny the critical social functions of response throughout the ecology of the writing and learning taking place in the classroom.

The concept of connective practice draws in small part from Jenny Corbett’s work (2001) in special education, which describes “connective pedagogy” as “a form of teaching which opens up creative possibilities to learn” (56). Connective practice also shares characteristics with Dana Lynn Driscoll’s “connected pedagogy,” which advocates for creating and making explicit connections for students across their learning. Unlike Driscoll’s connected pedagogy, however, which focuses on transfer and the importance of connecting learning in first-year writing courses to other courses and students’ lives (2013, 70), my focus is decidedly local in that I propose that we examine the connectiveness among the various practices *within* our courses, including how peer response functions with that classroom ecology. Despite the differences between the frames through which we conceive connectiveness, I share with Driscoll two critical observations relevant to connective practice as I conceive it. First, we must debunk the assumption that “students [in their writing courses] are able to make connections . . . themselves,” absolving teachers from responsibility to articulate those connections. Second, connectiveness should reside in all elements of a course: “activities, readings, class discussions, writing assignments, metacognitive reflections, and student research” (2013, 71). The practices Driscoll suggests in her work—scaffolding assignments and creating assignments that promote student inquiry, not assuming that students will make connections on their own, and “building in metacognitive reflection . . . and having students monitor their own learning” (2013, 73, 75-6)—are integral principles that guide my concept of connective practice.

I think of connective practice—both within a given cycle of peer response and across an entire course or curriculum—as ecologies informed by Barry Commoner’s tenet that “Everything is connected to everything else.” Peer response occupies a particular niche in the system but also extends across and throughout a course to multiple kinds of texts with multiple purposes.

Understood as connective practice set within a classroom ecology, peer response can then take on more complex roles and serve greater ends in the classroom as sites of learning about writing, rhetoric, and course content, contributing to the classroom ecology in these “reciprocal, mutually dependent roles” (Nystrand et al., 61). As such, peer response becomes the hub of a “dynamic and integrated system of resources for learning” in a context in which “development in one area often impacts and/or possibly inhibits development in another” (Nystrand et al., 63). In making this claim, I follow the lead of contributors to Corbett et al.’s *Peer Pressure, Peer Power* who articulate the value of connecting peer response to and deploying it throughout all facets of writing courses and situating it as a pivotal practice (Ashley et al., Steven Corbett, LaFrance, PIT Core).

PEER RESPONSE AS CONNECTIVE PRACTICE

Interestingly, some of the most innovative work in peer response that I would identify as connective practice is taking place across the curriculum and being reported in disciplinary pedagogy education journals such as *Teaching Philosophy* and *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*. For example, Kate Padgett Walsh et al. found that a semester-long curriculum that engaged students in a series of peer review (their term) activities surrounding a scaffolded research project improved student writing performance, especially among the least skilled writers (482). Their two-year study demonstrated not that peer review alone but that the integrated (I would say *connective*) practice of scaffolding the research paper into “manageable pieces so that students can practice the skills specific to each task” *along with peer review* of each of these products *together* had the positive effect (482). The study also demonstrates another element of connective practice: separating peer response from grading. Padgett Walsh et al. required students to complete each of the scaffolded assignments and the peer review associated with each (for which they received completion points) (484), but only the final product received a grade from the instructor (483). Although they articulate efficiency as its primary value, the “multiple rounds” of peer review Padgett Walsh et al. built into their scaffolded research paper are critical to the kind of formative feedback peer response offers. Working in cross-ability writing groups and using instructor-developed rubrics, students were prompted to “offer constructive criticism on how to improve the writing” and address strengths and weaknesses in the writing (486). While still closely tied to the traditional concept of peer review, the scaffolded nature of the research project and peer reviewing in peer writing groups created an ongoing exchange between reviewers and writers that facilitated a different

understanding of peer review. Students worked in peer writing groups sustained over the term and instruction around the research project aligned with the scaffolded tasks and reviews students composed. For example, instruction in drafting thesis statements preceded a task in which students were asked to review their peers’ thesis statements (486). In other words, the content instruction in the course and expectations for the assignment aligned with and informed the peer review tasks students were asked to complete, creating a connective approach that integrated content knowledge, writing task, and peer response.

As has been our experience in using peer response as connective practice here at Ohio State, Padgett Walsh, et al. report that many students in their study commented that they “benefitted more from *giving* feedback, and that they found exposure to the writing of others to be of great value” (493; emphasis added). Steven Corbett describes this disposition toward the value of peer review (as benefitting the reviewer who encounters peers’ texts) as a critical point of understanding for students (“More is More” 179). Kristi Lundstrom and Wendy Baker report similar results from their study in which “givers” (those who reviewed peers’ writing but did not receive peer review on their own writing) “made more significant gains in their own writing” than “receivers” (those who received review of their writing but did not review their peers’ writing) (30). In interpreting their results, Lundstrom and Baker posit (citing Rollinson) that in being taught to conduct peer review and then undertaking peer review, the “givers” were able to “critically self-evaluate their own writing in order to make appropriate revisions” while the receivers, who were instructed only in how to interpret feedback, did not realize the same degree of success in revision (38). The work of Padgett Walsh et al. and Lundstrom and Baker point to the importance of understanding peer response as an *exchange*, as a reciprocal act comprised of distinct actions and skills. Their work also anticipates another critical element of peer response as connective practice: understanding and enacting peer response not only as active but also constructive and interactive practices (Chi).

Micheline T. H. Chi’s work on conceptual frameworks for learning activities has been instrumental to our instructional team as we have reflected on peer response as connective practice. Distinguishing among passive, active, constructive, and interactive activities, Chi argues convincingly for the value of leveraging the active (making or doing something such as composing a summary or manipulating objects) to the constructive (extending the making or doing by inferring or integrating, elaborating, justifying, linking, reflecting) and elevating it to the interactive in which students dialogue with one another or the instructor in joint learning or creating knowledges, processes, and understanding

(77). In terms of peer response, this entails engaging the practice as reciprocal exchange and dialogue—something that goes beyond simply producing a peer review and instead uses reflection to synthesize peer reviews and, ultimately, engages students in dialogue about peer response, which in the connective practice described here takes the form of helpfulness scores and responses.

TOWARD CONNECTIVE PRACTICE: THE “RHETORICAL COMPOSING” MOOC

Between 2013-2016, I was a member of an instructional team that designed and offered the MOOC, “Rhetorical Composing,” a second-level writing course. The team for the MOOC initially included Professors Susan Delagrange, Scott Lloyd DeWitt, Ben McCorkle, Cynthia L. Selfe, and me. Ph.D. students on the initial team were Kaitlin Clinnin and Jen Michaels. Our programmer was Cory Staten. In subsequent years, the research team expanded to include Ph.D. Students Michael Blancato and Chad Iwertz. Chase Bollig, Chad Iwertz, and Paula Miller also contributed substantively to developing and delivering the course in hybrid platform. Built intentionally (and out of necessity given the thousands of persons enrolled) as a site in which responses to writing fell entirely to the participant writers in the course, we constructed a systematic approach and digital platform to accommodate peer response. (See Clinnin et al. 2017; Clinnin et al. 2018; Halasek et al.; McCorkle et al. 2016; and McCorkle et al. 2018 for detailed discussions of the Rhetorical Composing MOOC and WEx.) Figure 4.1 depicts the cycle of peer response in the WEx-based MOOC and later hybrid second-year writing courses at Ohio State.



Figure 4.1. The cycle of peer response in WEx.

Students submitted assignments (syntheses, multimodal public service announcements, research-based projects) to WEx, The Writers Exchange, that were randomly assigned to and read by other MOOC participants or students in one of five hybrid sections of our second-year writing course. Once completed, peer reviews were electronically distributed back to authors, who then completed reflections on the peer reviews and created working revision plans based on them. After completing the reflections, authors were prompted to respond to their peer reviewers with feedback on their reviews and provide a rating (1-5) reflecting the helpfulness of the individual reviews. At the end of the term, students also completed end-of-course reflections that engaged all assignments, reviews, self-reflections, and helpfulness scores (both helpfulness scores they both received *and* gave), engaging them in assessing themselves both as writers *and* reviewers. By situating review and response as a system of reciprocal exchange, we sought to engage students in the kind of purposeful reflection that Michelle LaFrance (268) recommends by having writers respond back to peer reviewers with feedback on whether and in what ways their reviews were helpful to the writers as they reflected and began framing revision plans. As we note (McCorkle et al.), Chi’s framework provided a means of assessing the degree to which we created constructive and interactive opportunities for peer review in the MOOC. In short, while the peer review stage engaged students actively and the reflection stage allowed students to engage in individual constructive activities, the cycle of peer review represented in Figure 4.1 did not allow for interactive engagement (63). However, interactive engagement *did* occur in course discussion forums and were largely initiated by the participants.

To introduce the goals of response as connective practice, the instructional team created *The WEx Guide to Peer Review*, a digital instructional manual designed to introduce students to the peer response process (DeWitt et al.). The *WEx Guide* employs a Describe-Assess-Suggest model that aligns with recommendations from Bean and others who advocate for descriptive—rather than judgment-based—responses to peers’ writing (297). *The WEx Guide* also includes a teaching module, which serves as an informal means of calibrating peer response through an anchor paper. It’s important to note, however, that unlike CPR (calibrated peer review) systems, the WEx platform neither prohibits students from completing peer review if their scoring deviates from the norm nor statistically adjusts their scores as in SWoRD (now Peerceptiv). Moreover, the “helpfulness scores” in WEx are not (as in SWoRD or Peerceptiv) “computed from . . . back reviews” (Bean 302) but are assigned directly *by the writers themselves*. Rather than focus our attention on whether students’ reviews stood in as a successful proxy for instructor feedback or aligned

with other reviewers' scores, we asked students to relay back to peer reviewers whether reviews were "helpful." We gave no specific definition of helpfulness and provided no rubric for scoring helpfulness, instead asking students to "rate each of the reviews . . . received for helpfulness": "The Helpfulness rating is based on how useful the feedback in the peer review was, not necessarily how flattering the review was or how much you agree with the review" (DeWitt 27). We did encourage students to consider when assigning helpfulness scores features of the reviews (as opposed to their content) such as its clarity and specificity and whether the review included "concrete, practical advice to improve your paper" (*WEx Training Guide 27*).

Although this chapter does not provide detailed description or analysis of the MOOC and hybrid data sets, the data sets from which I select examples and in which I situate claims include 140 assignment submissions, peer reviews for those submissions, peer review scores, reflections, helpfulness scores and course evaluations from students in five sections of the hybrid course; 12 focus group interviews with students in the hybrid sections; 1200 submissions, peer reviews of those submissions, peer review scores, reflections, and helpfulness scores from participants in the MOOC; and 327 MOOC participant discussion forum posts. These data are part of "Writing II: Rhetorical Composing in MOOC Environments," an IRB approved research project at Ohio State (2013B0076).

STUDENTS COMMENT ON PEER RESPONSE

The final two stages of peer review in WEx—writers' reflections and helpfulness responses—stand as the critical elements in the WEx cycle of peer response as connective practice. These two stages stand in contrast to more traditional deployments of peer review in which the cycle is significantly truncated—with writers handing their assignments to peers who complete the peer review and return it to the writer. Peer reviewers receive no feedback on their feedback. Unless classmates informally relate information to reviewers about their reviews, reviewers have no means of knowing whether their feedback was helpful. Moreover, instructors using peer review in these face-to-face contexts will likely not even see peer reviews until the writers turn in their final versions. WEx has demonstrated to those of us on the OSU instructional team that when situated as that "prime pedagogical mover," a robust, extensive, and integrated approach to peer response enhances students' writing experiences, their writing, and their conceptual understanding of writing, rhetoric, and course content.

One student exchange in WEx that illustrated for me the power of self-reflection as a critical part of peer response as connective practice is one between a

peer reviewer and writer. In response to a draft of a synthesis assignment the peer reviewer wrote the following (anonymously and in part) to a writer in a different section of the hybrid course: “This writer’s style seems distractingly pretentious and deters me from wanting to read the essay. Loosen up! If you’re more casual with the essay stylistically, that’ll get more people to connect with your essay and your cause.” The peer reviewer closed the review by granting the assignment a score of 2 out of 5 (“not very well”) for the criterion that asked reviewers to rate how well authors “composed a critical synthesis that is . . . engaging and compelling, created critical reflections, and utilized meaningful evidence to make a claim about the narratives.”

In her reflection (which included a response to the peer reviewer who assigned her a “2” on the criterion noted above), the author composed (in part) the following:

[M]y last peer review noted that my writing style is “distractingly” pretentious and a few others [peer reviewers] said it was difficult to read at times. After reviewing the analytics on WEx, I noticed that I have a high rating for the average characters per word, grade level, and reading ease [elements of descriptive analytics reported through WEx]. I thus think that I need to be conscious of loosening the formality of my writing and word choice. I also need to revise my sentences and recognize which run on and cause confusion.

After composing her reflection, the writer responded with a helpfulness score to the “distractingly pretentious” peer review, assigned it a “5” (“Extremely helpful”). I find several elements of this exchange compelling. First, the peer reviewer describes both the writer’s style *and its impact on him as a reader*. Second, he then suggests that by relaxing her style she may also reach more readers, allowing them to “connect” to her piece and the social cause about which she is writing. Third, the writer, rather than take a defensive stance in the reflection, situates the reviewer’s comments in terms of others’ (who found it “difficult to read”) responses and the features of her discourse, concluding with a focused revision plan that attends to these elements of the collective reviews.

By asking students to both reflect on the peer reviews they received and then assign helpfulness scores and compose responses to their peer reviewers, many conversations (meditated through WEx) like the one above ensued, giving both reviewers and writers opportunities to extend the conversation *beyond* the peer review. These two steps created critical opportunities connective practice, for peer reviewers to learn how their reviews were being received (and rated) by writers. Particularly in instances when reviews were not as thorough that depicted

in the exchange above, writers were willing in the discursive comments that accompanied helpfulness scores to encourage—even request—more substantive and critical responses from their peer reviewers, as in the following example:

Peer Review Prompt: Please take the time to share a few over-all thoughts with this writer about how you read this essay as an audience member, what you felt was done well and how this writer might improve this piece of writing.

Peer Reviewer's Overall Rating of the Essay: 4 ("Very Good")

Peer's Explanation of Rating: I think this blog post is great. As someone who doesn't know much about neutral net your blog post not only gave me information about it but made it easy to read and understand! I like how you threw in your own feelings about it but also gave straight facts.

Responding with a helpfulness rating and explanation, the author of the blog on net neutrality assigned the review a "3" ("Helpful"). The writer thanked the reviewer for the "kind words" but went on to note,

[T]here is very little constructive criticism in your review. Criticism, to me, is more helpful than just talking someone up. It is nice to know that my hard work was recognized, but don't be afraid to tell me what I did wrong either. Also, you don't have very strong reasons for giving me the scores that you did. . . . I don't mind receiving 4's, but please tell me what to do to improve my writing in the future. . . .

This kind of exchange—in which a peer reviewer assigned an overall score of "4" or "5" on an assignment but provided feedback that writers felt was average or below average in helpfulness—was not unusual in the hybrid course or MOOC and became a point of focused conversation in class and on discussion forums among the students and between students and the instructors. What the exchange above illustrates for me is the critical nature of that penultimate stage, of the author informing the peer reviewer that the review was only marginally helpful and why. The reviewer (who received helpfulness scores and comments from all of the peers whose work he reviewed) was then in a position to reflect on and synthesize those scores and comments before engaging in the next round of peer reviews. As a final stage in the cycle of response, students completed final course reflections in which they self-assessed both their work as writers and reviewers, allowing a longer holistic view and assessment of their work in the course.

A WORK IN PROGRESS: IMPLEMENTING PEER RESPONSE AS CONNECTIVE PRACTICE

As I reflect on the MOOC and assess our subsequent hybrid implementations of “Rhetorical Composing” through the lens of peer response as connective practice, I see we fell well short in some respects and succeeded in others. As we conceived of peer response and intentionally employed it in the classes, we limited it largely to responses to submitted drafts of assignments. In other words, we did not construct opportunities for peer response that moved outside of the traditional model—although we did deploy a dialogic, active, and reciprocal process of peer response in WEx by including reflections and helpfulness as features. Largely because of the affordances of the technologies available during the MOOCs, however, peer response did, in fact, inform participants’ learning outside of WEx as participants themselves engaged in constructive dialogue about writing and learning and connective practice on discussion boards and in a participant-initiated and participant-led Google Community (Halasek et al.; McCorkle et al. 2018).

Elevating peer response to connective practice cannot, however, be left to chance. It must be systematic and intentional. As I note earlier, connective practice entails integrating peer response fully into all aspects of a course, discussing peer response as a rhetorical practice, creating the means through which students understand it as a genre situated within a particular context and serving a particular purpose, and creating the means through which students may construct reflective and cumulative understanding of their writing, peer response, and learning, as illustrated in Figure 4.2.

As I reconceive my own teaching in writing courses in hybrid and face-to-face contexts to move fully toward peer response as connective practice, I ask myself five critical questions that prompt me to move beyond peer response as peer review:

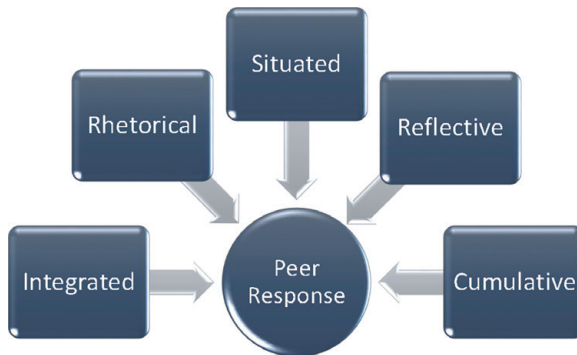


Figure 4.2. Peer response as connected practice

- In what ways might I better introduce, instruct about, and create more and better *integrated* approaches to peer response throughout my course? Specifically, how might I integrate it with other elements, activities, and goals that inform the course?
- What does it mean (and what does it look like to students and to me) to describe peer response as a *rhetorical act*? What pedagogical and scholarly sources might facilitate this understanding?
- What pedagogical strategies can I use, and what activities can I create that will demonstrate to students the *situated* nature of and purposeful nature of peer response?
- How might I encourage a *reflective* understanding of peer response—especially the value of having students reflect on what they learn about their own composing and learning by seeing and commenting others’ work?
- As we near the end of the term, what kinds of exercises, activities, or assignments might I craft that will encourage students to reflect in a *cumulative* fashion on the various ways they’ve engaged peer responses during the term?

Peer response as connective practice, in other words, not only includes but also goes beyond implementing conventional best practices such as offering instruction in peer review, providing guidelines, modeling, using rubrics, incentivizing review, and articulating the objectives of peer review (Corbett et al. 6). Connective practice requires careful, consistent, and repeated efforts to *demonstrate* and guide students toward a new understanding of peer response as integral to and integrated into the whole of the classroom ecology. Even as our MOOC instructional team strived to create opportunities for peer response, we were still employing practices that did not enable students to achieve the level of engaged learning and peer response that we sought. What does it look like to understand and deploy peer response as integrated, rhetorical, situated, reflective, and cumulative? In fact, this chapter has already taken up a number of these elements, noting, for example, the situated, reflective, and cumulative nature of peer response, reflections, and self-assessment. What it means to articulate peer response as rhetorical practice may be illustrated by the *WEx Guide*, in which students are told consistently that feedback itself (like any type of communication) is “rhetorical” as it is purposeful, audience-oriented, and defined by a particular context (DeWitt). Peer response, as integrated into the whole of the classroom and its curriculum, as the “prime pedagogical mover” (Corbett 173), is perhaps the single most important element in demonstrating how peer review is so much more than proxy. By situating peer response

alongside and within the particular pedagogical and theoretical frames of our courses, we elevate peer response.

In our hybrid classrooms and later iterations of the MOOC, we have begun to be much more intentional about situating discussions of and building opportunities for peer response in terms of scholarship on revision and research-based writing, both of which were integral parts of the writing objectives for the course. In short, we recognized the importance of making instruction in and practices of revision and research-based writing integral to the peer response objectives for the course. From Joseph Bizup’s “BEAM: A Rhetorical Vocabulary for Teaching Research-based Writing,” we now emphasize in peer response for the final research-based project the value of responding in terms of the rhetorical uses of sources as background, exhibit, argument, and method. Doing so allows students to both compose using Bizup’s framework for research-based writing and respond from and through that same framework, creating opportunities for students to develop a greater familiarity and facility with the critical terms and strategies Bizup outlines. From Joseph Harris’ *Rewriting*, we take the set of questions he proposes for writers as they draft and deploy them as peer response questions (98): *What’s your project? What works? What else might be said? and What’s next?*

Linking peer response in these explicit ways to the content of the course (as well as to rhetoric more generally) creates a connective practice in which peer response informs and is informed by theories of writing, research, and rhetoric—not simply that stand-alone, “time-driven,” “mindless and repetitive task” or “evacuated form that lacks substance” (PIT Core 107-8).

Reconceiving peer response as connective practice and integrating it fully into the ecology of the writing class entails focusing on the various ways it can be productively deployed beyond typical peer review activities. By understanding both the ecology of peer response and its connections to larger practice and ecology of the writing classroom, we can begin to nudge students (and ourselves) away from the belief that the goal of peer review is to emulate teachers’ evaluations or serve as proxies rather than provide helpful, responsive feedback. In effect, a pedagogy that engages peer response as connective practice will shift the focus from evaluating a single piece of writing to ongoing exchanges in which peer responses themselves are understood, engaged, and rated for their helpfulness to writers *as defined by those writers*.

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