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TEACHERS' CORNER

On Bringing the Pain and Pleasure of Peer Reviews into Developmental Courses

by Jonathan Santo, University of Nebraska at Omaha

I'd guess that anyone reading this column has a horror story to tell about having received a scathing review on a paper submitted for publication. The academic peer review process can be painful but almost everyone would be hard pressed to deny that the papers that are published are better for having gone through it. With that being the case, why not bring this process into the classroom? As in the academic publication process, the advantages of bringing peer reviews of student writing into the classroom far outweigh the drawbacks.

Each of the developmental courses I teach at the undergraduate level (adolescent development, peer relations and a developmental lab) and at the graduate level (socio-emotional development, cross-cultural human development and developmental research methods) have peer reviews built in to improve the quality of the writing. First things first, I should mention that I'm a strong supporter of the use of peer reviews in almost all of my teaching. However, there are a number of advantages to using peer reviews specifically in developmental courses. I've aimed to outline below what the peer review process looks like in general and in developmental courses in particular.

Peer Review Basics

At its core, peer review involves having students provide critiques of their classmates' writing. Exactly how this is achieved can vary. For example, peer reviews can be performed in class with students discussing the relative merits and weaknesses of each other's papers face to face. I prefer to give the students the chance to read the papers outside of class and prepare a semi-structured review (given to me to then forward to each author). I stress the importance of constructive criticism and use a template that can be filled out to ensure that students don't simply hurl criticism after criticism or offer glowing praise. For a brief description of peer reviews in general, go [here](#); whereas information on how to incorporate peer reviews in class can be found [here](#).

I recommend using peer reviews for paper projects that students tend to procrastinate on. If I give the students a week to read through their peer's paper and write a review followed by another week to revise their own based on the feedback they've received, students have to submit their work for peer review well in advance of when I need to grade them. Among other strategies to reduce procrastination (*The Compleat Academic* is my go-to source), using peer reviews means that at least one person (other than the instructor) gets a chance to read a student's writing before it is submitted to be graded.

Peer reviews are not without a few "pains." For one, students are unfamiliar with the process and apprehensive at the thought of criticizing their classmates. The most common concern I hear is that they don't feel qualified enough (as content experts) to provide a useful review. With that in mind, dedicating some class time to demystifying the review process is helpful in acclimatizing students to the idea. I stress that almost anyone can read someone's else work and provide improvements to the flow of ideas, sentence structure, and/or the presentation of core arguments. Lastly, making the reviews blind (more on that below) helps alleviate some of the anxiety.

The Pleasures of Peer Review in Developmental Courses

Peer reviews are particularly helpful in developmental courses because of the challenges inherent in the material. Understanding the subtle nuances of how change over time can occur, the commonalities of development, as well as individual differences does not come easily to all students. In such situations, having the opportunity to read another student's perspective on the content and provide a critique allows the information to be synthesized in a way that wouldn't be possible otherwise.

The advantages of using peer reviews in developmental courses is even more apparent when considering the sheer range of areas that can fall under the developmental umbrella. Neuroscience students in a developmental research methods course will get insightful feedback that their target audience may not know the brain regions they are discussing. When possible, I try to pair students with one reviewer closer to their area and another reviewer in a more distal discipline.

(cont. on p. 9)

TEACHERS' CORNER (CONT)

(cont. from p. 8)

Taking It a Step Further

It's worth pointing out (especially to undergraduate students) that the peer review system is used as major component of the scientific method. In that respect, using the peer review process in class can serve as a scaffold with which students can better understand what we spend our time on outside of class. It has the additional benefit of helping them when trying to get their own findings published. With a few modest changes, it's possible to structure the peer review process so that it's double-blinded for more authenticity. I even recommend going one step further and asking all students to submit a "letter to the editor" (i.e., the instructor) providing detailed responses to each of the reviewers comments including a description of the changes made to the paper based on the peer reviews.

All told, there's solid support for the use of peer reviews as a pedagogical tool in a teacher's repertoire. When properly implemented, it improves students writing, provides experience in analyzing other's work, and most importantly improves students understanding of the course material.

Recommended Reading

Cameron, J., Nairn, K. and Higgins, J. (2009). Demystifying academic writing: reflections on emotions, know-how and academic identity. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 33, 269-284.

Gottschalk, K. & Hjortshoj, K. (2004). *The Elements of Teaching Writing*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Paulus, T. (1999). The effect of peer and teacher feedback on student writing. *Journal of Second Language Writing* 8.3, 265-289.

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Darley, J. M., M. P. Zanna, and H. L. Roediger. 2004. *The compleat academic: A career guide*. Washington: American Psychological Association.

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