Peer Response: Only as Good as How It's Set Up

Many teachers try peer response and revision groups only to abandon them because they don't think the students use the time wisely and/or because they don't see sufficient evidence of improvements in the students' revised drafts. These problems with peer revision groups come not from limitations of the method but from how the groups are set up, orchestrated, and evaluated. Here are some important suggestions for making them work well.

- Logistics should be coordinated very carefully and in advance (e.g., copies circulated, instructions understood, etc.).

- Students, especially the least experienced, need to be coached in collaboration and the social dynamics of peer response, and they should be trained in how to provide useful feedback. It helps to do a dry run first on an anonymous draft from a previous class.

- Groups should be set up carefully, with attention to balance of gender, ethnicity, etc. (however, recent research shows that differences in *ability* do not seriously affect the success of peer groups). Have students work several times in small groups first, on active-learning tasks, so that a level of trust and familiarity is created; then use those same groups for peer response. Later in the course, groups can be mixed up to provide different audiences.

- Perhaps the single most important element in successful peer revision sessions is what you have students *do*. Left to their own devices, they may hunt for errors, provide only disingenuous praise, or not think critically about the papers at all. Intervention in the form of a set of questions or foci is crucial; ideally, these should be related to both the goals of the assignment and to formative assessment criteria. However, it is far more useful to have students *do* something with or on a draft—respond in some way, identify what they think is the thesis, place asterisks in the margins when the reading gets rough and check marks when it goes smoothly, say what each paragraph *says* and what it *does* to advance the paper, etc.—than to allow students to "play teacher."

- Group sessions should be carefully timed so everyone gets a full turn. The ideal number for a revision group is three (at least 15 minutes per paper in a standard 1-hour class).

- Accountability is crucial. Students need to 1) show up (some teachers count an absence from a group revision session twice); 2) provide evidence that they responded fully to their peers' papers (usually in the form of a sheet or draft with comments); and 3) provide evidence that they carefully considered their peers' responses and didn't just automatically incorporate everything but used sound judgment in making revisions based on the collective sense of the group. Assign low-stakes self-reflections to get at (3).

- In-class follow-up is helpful: use five minutes at the end, or five minutes at the start of the next class meeting, to gather thoughts about the process, what sorts of insights the writers drew from the meeting, etc. Have students write revision notes immediately after the session.

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