

## Peer Response Improvement

Student writers need far more feedback than any single teacher can provide. What's more, responding to someone else's work can be a learning experience for the responder as well as for the recipient of the advice. For these reasons, many experts recommend the use of peer response groups, groups of students who respond to the work of their classmates.

There are many different ways to set up such groups in the classroom. Some teachers prefer to assign students to long-term groups which meet on a regular schedule. Others assign students to groups, but change the composition of the groups often. Other teachers identify certain students who form a revising committee and another group which functions as an editing committee. Students take their papers to these committees whenever they need help. Periodically the membership of these groups changes. Teachers who are using a workshop approach often prefer to let the groups form and dissolve according to need. Students who need help with revising put their names on the board and when four or five names appear, the group gathers for as long as they need to meet to help each other. Similarly, editing groups are formed and then disband when their work is done. Other teachers allow students to decide whether they need to recruit a group or just share their work informally with people they choose. Each of these systems has advantages and drawbacks, such that no single method has been found to be more effective than the others.

What we need to focus on is not how the groups are formed but what happens in them. How can we help students provide effective responses to peers' writings? If peer response groups are to function at all, students must be taught how to work together. They also have to know the teacher's rules and expectations for group work. It is helpful if students have worked together enough to trust each other and share their writing and their responses willingly. Even when these circumstances exist, students may still be unable to offer constructive criticism. They may give each other suggestions which will help initiate writing and they may offer additional ideas while the writer is drafting, but they may falter when they need to suggest improvements. They may, for example, praise work even when they know it is awful, point out only the surface errors, or criticize in a way that demeans the writer (e.g., "That's a dumb idea! What a stupid paper!"). Actually, none of these responses should surprise us. When students share papers informally, they usually share with friends. Friends are expected to support and encourage, not criticize. They really don't want to hurt the writer's feelings. The correction of mechanics is often a reflection of what teachers and parents point out when they look at papers, so students may be doing nothing more than modeling adult behavior. Whenever students work in small groups, peer pressure is a factor. Offensively critical comments are the same kinds of put-downs young people use in social groups to establish a pecking order. Thus, offering unwarranted praises or sharp, personal criticisms are typical behaviors. If we want students to behave differently, we have to teach them how to respond.

To help students, we need to know first what we can expect from them. Observations indicate that responses typically form a hierarchy. The lowest level of response, the one used by inexperienced responders, is a subjective personal response. The reader basically states whether or not the topic is of personal interest. If the reader likes the topic, then the paper is judged as okay. The second level of response is to comment on the surface features of the work. The reader points out factors such as length, neatness of handwriting, and mechanical accuracy (i.e., incorrect spelling, punctuation, and so forth). The

third level includes comments about the effectiveness of the content as basic communication. The reader may note, for example, that part of a paper makes sense but another part seems incomplete. The next higher level of response is one which includes some comment about how the writer expressed content. For instance, the reader may say that the paper is good because it shows imagination or has well developed characters. The highest level of response is one which includes some concern for how well the paper addressed audience needs. For example, the reader may note that the writing could offend some readers or that it should entertain a broad range of readers. Much of what students do is at Level 1; they give a subjective personal response which is not very helpful to the writer. Students may also use a Level 2 response, especially if surface features are what their own teachers have emphasized. What most of us want is for students to move to the higher levels where they look at the piece more objectively and respond to its communicative quality, the effectiveness of expression, and its impact on the audience.

But how do you get students to move beyond personal reactions and surface features? In *Strategies for Teaching the Composing Process* (Koch & Brazil, pp. 8-12) there is a section on evaluating essays which makes an excellent point. Students may need reassurances that they can recognize good writing. Often they feel that what they consider good is not the same as what the teacher and other adults consider good. They really have little confidence in their own judgment. The book suggests that students be given three essays written by students whom they do not know. Working independently, they are to read each paper carefully and write notes telling why and how each paper represents good and/or bad writing. Students then meet in small groups, share their comments, and determine which comments were made most often and with which ones everybody agrees. These are recorded. Then they are shared with the class. A summary statement for each essay is written on the board. The teacher and the class discuss the similarities which appeared and acknowledge that they all can recognize good writing and agree on which papers are best.

Once this confidence is established, the teacher can move on to address the quality of responses. One way to help students focus attention is to distinguish clearly between revising and editing. To accomplish this the teacher can insist that students read their papers to peers but not exchange them when the goal is revising. Then when they edit, papers should be exchanged. This approach does help students avoid the trap of attending to mechanics when they need to focus on content. This also gives the teacher an opportunity to teach strategies associated with these two different writing activities.

One of the most effective ways to teach students how to revise and edit in small groups is to use a 3-step sequence:

1. Model
2. Fishbowl demonstrations
3. Independent practice

To model, the teacher begins working with the whole class as they examine a student-written (anonymous and not from this class) paper. This may be done by giving each student a Xerox copy of the paper or by making an overhead transparency of it. The teacher helps the students understand the kinds of questions to ask and the kinds of comments that are most likely to be helpful to the writer by modeling. A fishbowl demonstration is one in which a single small group meets in the middle of the classroom and conducts a discussion while the rest of the class sits around behind them and listens. The discussion may be

interrupted occasionally to point out or discuss with the whole class what is going on and how the discussion could be improved. When the discussion is done, the teacher leads a class assessment of how well the group functioned, what helped the group move forward, what hindered the group, and what comments seemed to be of most help to the writers. The next step is to have students practice in their own small groups. As they do this, the teacher must circulate, listen, prod, and praise. She must keep in mind that the goal is to teach the students how to respond in small groups. At this point the process is more important than the result. Throughout these three steps, students use papers provided by the teacher rather than their own papers.

When the students begin to use their own papers, the 3-step sequence might be repeated with reminders about commenting on the writing and not the writer. Also, those who are sharing papers with their group members should be advised to listen and jot notes while others respond, but to not talk except to answer questions posed by the responders. The reason for this is that students have a tendency to defend their work. This often leads to arguments rather than responses. Since the writer retains ownership and decides what advice to take and what to disregard, defenses are generally unnecessary in response groups. As students come to trust one another, they will gradually learn when it is appropriate to explain something which the group has misunderstood. In the meantime, writers should simply note that something went awry because the group missed the point they were trying to make.

While we hope that response groups will help writers produce better papers, it is important to keep in mind that one of the main reasons for response groups is to involve students in discussions about composing. One way to do this is to use sentence combining activities as a starting point. The entire class can be given an uncued sentence combining activity which they work on independently. They then write their results on an overhead transparency, a paper for Xeroxing, or the chalkboard. The variations are discussed and compared. One significant value of this approach is that no single version is best. Rather, different versions achieve different aims and produce different audience reactions. All of these can be discussed. This activity can then be repeated in small groups once students understand how the discussion is supposed to proceed. Eventually, students can use their own writing as the basis for similar activities and discussion.

Another possibility for involving students in discussion of composing is to engage them in devising the criteria for evaluation. In general, this is difficult to do until students have had some experience with the task at hand. If this is the first time that students have attempted a particular kind of writing, then they need to work on the discourse for awhile before trying to identify the factors which distinguish an effective from an ineffective product. Another method is to have students complete a sequence of activities which leads to devising a sound list of criteria. One such sequence which has been found useful with college freshmen begins with students interviewing each other in pairs. Students then write a personal ad for themselves to which a partner responds in a structured way by restating some of the information in writing.

The next task is the writing of a letter of application for a job. Once students know what the assignment is, the class brainstorms the criteria for evaluating the papers. Based on what the class with the teacher's assistance sets up, a response sheet can be devised which students use to guide their discussions.

There are many other approaches which can be used to help students become more effective responders. You might want to try some of the activities suggested in

"Peer Response: Teaching Specific Revision Suggestions" or the sequence recommended in "Improving Students' Responses to Their Peers' Essays." One of the most elaborate systems for improving responses is a sequence of experiences designed by Peter Elbow and Patricia Belanoff which is described in their book, *Sharing and Responding*. While these experiences were designed for college students, several of them can be used at the secondary and even elementary levels. There is also a videotape available which explains and demonstrates each of these techniques.

One final point to keep in mind is the idea that finding problems and fixing them are two different operations. Response groups may help writers find difficulties, but they may still be unable to help them improve the work. Nevertheless, being able to locate and communicate about strengths and problems are necessary first steps.

Recommended Further Reading:

Elbow, P., & Belanoff, P. (1989). *Sharing and responding*. NY: Random House.

Grimm, N. (1986). Improving students' responses to their peers' essays, in *Staffroom interchange, College Composition and Communication*, 37 (1), 91-94.

Koch, C., & Brazil, J. (1978). *Strategies for teaching the composing process*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.

Neubert, G. & McNelis, S. (1990). Peer Response: Teaching specific revision suggestions. *English Journal*, 79 (5), 52-56.