Pandemic Pedagogy: Anonymous Peer Workshop for Increased Effectiveness and Inclusivity

Stephen Caldes
California State University, Chico, California, USA

ABSTRACT

Peer review workshops are common practices in many writing and composition classrooms, and their benefits have been well-documented. However, complications arise when students arrive to workshops with their own baggage—unconscious biases, enculturated prejudices, and general anxiety about critiquing another's work. These impediments can negatively affect the classroom atmosphere in general and the value and effectiveness of peer review activities in particular. With COVID-19 causing many universities to move to online-only instruction, an opportunity arose to incorporate anonymity into the writing workshop. This article reviews the drawbacks of traditional, face-to-face writing workshops and the benefits of anonymity for peer review, and shares the nuts and bolts of one successful online, anonymous peer review activity. This article concludes by offering both student-participant feedback and suggestions for activity adoption and improvement of peer reviews.

Keywords: peer assessment, peer review, peer feedback, anonymity, inclusivity

Sometimes something so simple can yield extraordinary results. Sometimes obstacles, when looked at askance or through hard-squinted eyes, can reveal themselves to instead be opportunities. This past spring, when COVID-19 struck and we migrated to online-only instruction, I quickly crafted a new

activity for my narrative nonfiction class that—physical distance be damned!—created a closer, more encouraging and inclusive (and less anxious) writing classroom. My simple idea: maximize both author and assessor anonymity in the peer review workshop process using two common digital platforms. The result: a more effective peer review workshop filled with students more energized to write, revise, and provide constructive criticism than I had ever experienced or facilitated before.

   Nearly all of my favorite writers are people whom I have never met. Such is the case with nearly every reader; we feel a conviviality with and closeness to Ta-Nehisi Coates or Joan Didion or David Foster Wallace or Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie or whomever, based on their work and words and not any personal interactions. However, peer review workshops—from freshman composition to upper-division memoir, to thesis writing—are often fraught with impediments based more on interpersonal communication complications and prejudices than confusion about the activity's objectives. According to Latané (1981), things like implicit bias, social influence/peer pressure, power process struggles, and simple social discomfort about being critical are often inescapable features of group work. Regardless of genre, writing classrooms in general and peer review workshops in particular are often uncomfortable places for budding writers (Topping, Smith, Swanson, & Elliot, 2000); these spaces can become especially "chilly" for female students (Sullivan, 2002, p. 129). However, there is still so much to be gained from collaborative peer assessment learning activities like peer review workshops, which is why we need to get it right.

   Peer review (i.e. peer critique, peer evaluation, peer response), as we know it today, is a product of the collaborative learning movement of the 1980s (see Ching, 2007) and is designed for students to consider the quality and value of another student/learner's draft and provide both interpretations of that work and suggestions for improvement using written and/or oral feedback (Topping, 2009). Peer critique has been shown to not only improve student drafts, but to also help students better understand assignment criteria and course learning objectives (Wood & Kurzel, 2008) as well as promote lifetime learning skills like critical thinking and self-evaluation (Boase-Jelinek, Parker, & Herrington, 2013). However, time and time again I have watched as peer review workshops create division and increase social loafing in my writing classrooms, lessening overall accountability and productivity among students and undermining the effectiveness, accuracy, and reliability of the peer review activity. And sure, good things—good writing especially—can come from discomfort and contention, but to expect students to produce their best work while feeling anxious, embarrassed or uncomfortable, or to expect them to offer their most clearheaded constructive criticism without falling prey to social ills like unconscious bias or enculturated prejudice is to set your classroom up for disappointment and your activity up for failure. Research continues to demonstrate that variables

such as gender, race, age and relationship to group members influence the peer review process in consequential ways (Thondhlana & Belluigi, 2017; Wolfe, 2000). I saw an ongoing need to revise the peer review workshop and the sudden pivot to online instruction presented the opportunity: anonymous peer review.

This activity had three components: first, students anonymously crafted a feature article that adhered to the assignment criteria and its strict formatting rules, and uploaded their draft using "PeerMark," a peer review tool on Turnitin that allows reviewers to edit and respond anonymously. I stressed to students that before uploading they were to make sure their name and/or any obvious identifying attributes had been excluded from their draft. I also emphasized that drafts must follow the strict formatting guidelines (centered titles and page numbers, 1-inch margins, 13-point Times New Roman font, for instance) to ensure they all looked, superficially-speaking, nearly identical. PeerMark alerted me when drafts had been uploaded, but did not connect the draft to a student.

Second, students were asked to read their classmates' drafts and then craft and upload anonymous and highly-structured written responses. I asked students to not include any sentence-level edits in their anonymous letters to the author (that would be handled later in the process) and instead focus on more "global" feedback (e.g. What did you interpret the draft to be about/arguing and why? What did you admire or find successful about the draft? What constructive criticism/suggestions for improvement can you offer?). Here I reminded students that this "letter," with greetings and salutations, was to further encourage conviviality and camaraderie among this small writing community. I also reminded students to be direct in their assessment, but also gentle (as full-on attacks, anonymous or otherwise, are rarely heard), and focus their letter on *why* they were offering this feedback, instead of simply identifying issues or successes they found in the draft. Once complete, students uploaded their letters using PeerMark (again making sure the review was set to "anonymous"), and then attended to their anonymous, sentence-level (grammar, spelling, typing, syntax or sentence-structure) edits via Turnitin.

Last came the virtual peer review workshop itself, facilitated by Zoom. For this component, I asked students to switch off their cameras and eliminate their screen names using the "Rename" feature. Soon we were all looking at a grid of black rectangles. We were now ready for discussion. Over the course of four virtual class periods, using a predetermined schedule organized by essay titles only, we used our anonymous response letters as "jumping off points" to have constructive conversations about how we understood the drafts, what we liked, and how each anonymous author could improve their draft. Of course, student voices could not be altered or disguised through Zoom, but in talking with students later, many of them reported wasting no time (or didn't even think about) trying to figure out

who was saying what and instead focused on the content of the feedback. Unlike many in-person workshops I have previously facilitated, the conversation for each draft began quickly, flowed easily, and invited a wide variety of voices and opinions (instead of being dominated by a handful of extroverts). Thus, the obstacle of the hasty switch to online instruction presented an opportunity to host an anonymous conversation, a peer review addition that remains impossible in a traditional classroom/workshop setting.

It was the student response—both during and after, both publicly and in private—that really let me know I was onto something special. Of course, I could see—or hear, rather—for myself the improvement. The notable difference was that students no longer emphasized what they "didn't like" or what was "missing" or "confusing"; instead, they addressed those same concerns but framed their suggestions in positive ways, saying things like, "you know what would make this piece even better… ." The atmosphere for all four workshop sessions was genial, warm and—gasp!—fun (where earlier in the semester the peer review workshops were more of the teeth-pulling variety). A few students even offered me written feedback about the activity. One reported that this was their "first positive peer workshop," and that it was a "very comfortable…accepting space…free of judgement." This particular student also said the anonymous activity allowed her to write "deeper, rawer" work and "not be afraid to share something…personal." Another student reported that it gave her "confidence…to give more feedback" and even "speak up about my own work." Another student reported that he never felt "uncomfortable" and that both writing and speaking up "would have been a lot harder" if the activity was not anonymous. Many students encouraged me to include this anonymous activity in future classes; I will definitely take their advice and may even up the ante and try to establish anonymity from day one in my future online-only classes. However, given its clear benefits, I will also likely continue to include this activity when we return to traditional, face-to-face instruction by scheduling some virtual, synchronous online anonymous workshops.

There are plenty of great reasons to utilize an "actual" audience in your writing classrooms; the way they help students understand, analyze and thus make quality rhetorical decisions is probably the greatest. And for decades I have had students publish blogs, tweets, Amazon reviews and e-zines, and write articles for local weeklies and food/lifestyle magazines. My students have also uploaded podcasts, posted micro-documentaries to YouTube and even told digital stories via Snapchat. Throughout all this, I often talked to my students about the impact, responsibility, and blowback that come when you attach your name to something published in an effort to encourage them to think more seriously about what they say and share. However, the anonymity woven into this activity offered relief from such

responsibility and, similar to more comprehensive studies, led to increased participation (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011). It also allowed them to live outside the ego-centric digital world, if only for a moment.

With our cameras and names turned off, my virtual classroom became something of a digital void; we were all no one, we were all nowhere. This freedom—this near total removal from the new, digital world where we share our bylined and time-stamped thoughts, opinions and lives ad infinitum—created a less anxious and more productive learning laboratory where we were all welcome to fail. These results that have been affirmed by other scholars invested in understanding how and why anonymous reviewing works (Lu & Bol, 2007; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2011). Similar to the conclusion drawn by Lu and Bol (2007), I witnessed both the "immediate and long-term values" of this anonymous approach (p. 112). As such, I am encouraged to recommend its adoption across classrooms and disciplines.

While this example activity and much of its supporting scholarship focuses directly on anonymity in the *writing* classroom, with many universities online for at least another semester—not to mention the general rise in popularity of online and hybrid instruction—I could see this type of work being introduced across disciplines as a way to encourage peer interaction and honest reflection. Reviewing lab notes, critiquing speech outlines, assessing visual art, could be improved by integrating peer-to-peer feedback absent of social anxiety/embarrassment, prejudice and unconscious bias. As many fields and professions move more toward collaborative working environments (e.g. medicine), preparing students to workshop ideas, communicate criticism constructively, and receive and integrate feedback becomes paramount to preparing our students for their futures. Learning to depersonalize critique in service of improving a final product is a valuable skill that can be taught, modeled, and practiced through highly structured, anonymous peer review activities, like the one I describe.

The setup of this assignment does require above average organizational skills from both instructors and students alike, so a "practice" workshop may help address any execution snafus or student confusion. One thing I will do differently in the future is "practice" this anonymous workshop on a smaller, low-stakes assignment before utilizing it on a feature-length piece of narrative nonfiction, and I would encourage others to do the same. Additionally, I would encourage other instructors to host a transparent conversation with their students about the pitfalls of traditional face-to-face peer review workshops and the demonstrated benefits of anonymous peer review prior to this activity. I have found that doing so helps to affirm and alleviate many students' existing concerns about peer review, while also setting up some shared goals and expectations for the activity ahead.

What I noticed in my students, maybe for the first time, was that during this activity they were truly relaxed, blithe even. And the work they created and the suggestions they offered seemed more authentic and created a comfort I had not before seen and work that was some of the most honest and thought-provoking yet. Of course, there are problems with anonymity. Anyone who has read an online comments section can attest to this, and I was worried that class could turn into a callous gripe session. What I experienced, however, was the opposite: a collective and communal and downright inspiring cacophony of encouraging and helpful disembodied voices.

References

Baglione, S. L., & Nastanski, M. (2007). The superiority of online discussions. *The Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, *8*(2), 139–150.

Boase-Jelinek, D., Parker, J., & Herrington, J. (2013). Student reflection and learning through peer reviews. *Issues in Educational Research, 23*(2), 119–131. https://www.learntechlib.org/p/156408/

Ching, K. L. (2007). Peer response in the composition classroom: An alternative genealogy. *Rhetoric Review, 26*(3), 303–319. https://doi.org/10.1080/07350190701419863

Latané, B. (1981). The psychology of social impact. *American Psychologist, 36*(4), 343–356. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1037/0003-066X.36.4.343

Lu, R., & Bol, L. (2007). A comparison of anonymous versus identifiable e-peer review on college student writing performance and the extent of critical feedback. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning, 6*(2), 100–115.

Miyazoe, T., & Anderson, T. (2011). Anonymity in blended learning: Who would you like to be? *Educational Technology & Society, 14*(2), 175–187.

Sullivan, P. (2002). "It's easier to be yourself when you are invisible": Female college students discuss their online classroom experiences. *Innovative Higher Education, 27*, 129–144. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021109410893

Thondhlana, G., & Belluigi, D. Z. (2017). Students' reception of peer assessment of group-work contributions: Problematics in terms of race and gender emerging from a South African case study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 42*(7), 1118–1131. https://doi.org/10.1080/02602938.2016.1235133

Topping, K. J. (2009). Peer assessment. *Theory Into Practice, 48*, 20–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405840802577569

Topping, K. J., Smith, E. F., Swanson, I., & Elliot, A. (2000). Formative peer assessment of academic writing between postgraduate students.

Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 25(2), 149–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/713611428

Wolfe, J. (2000). Gender, ethnicity, and classroom discourse: Communication patterns of Hispanic and White students in networked classrooms. *Written Communication, 17*, 491–520. https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0741088300017004003

Wood, D., & Kurzel, F. (2008) Engaging students in reflective practice through a process of formative peer review and peer assessment. *2008 ATN [Australian Technology Network] Assessment Conference: Engaging students in assessment*. University of South Australia. https://ojs.unisa.edu.au/index.php/atna/article/view/376