The Effect of Peer-Editing on the Quality of 11th Grade Composition

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Abstract

The relationship between peer-editing and composition quality was investigated. The thirty subjects involved were 11th-grade English students randomly assigned to control and experimental groups. During a nine week period, both groups received the same assignments and teacher evaluation. The control group, which did not revise unless upon individual initiative, participated in a dramatics workshop while the experimental group used a worksheet developed by Leila Christenbury (1982) to edit and proofread each other's writing before evaluation by the teacher. Pre and post writing assignments were blind rated at the end of the experiment using the Diederich Rating Scale. Individual item scores and total scores were compared. The t-ratios proved insignificant at the .05 level. Positive student feedback, however, indicated that the procedure deserves further investigation.
Introduction

Problem Statement

English Educators have long viewed composition with mixed emotions: pleasure when their students show interest and promise, but dread when their hours are filled with marking compositions. Researchers in the field have been trying to formulate methods to make the evaluation of composition more rewarding and less time consuming. Many of these are exploring the uses of peers in the evaluation process. This study seeks to examine whether one method, peer-editing, can improve the rhetorical, structural, and mechanical quality of 11th-grade composition.

Rationale

The wealth of literature pertaining to the teaching of composition attests to the diversity of opinions concerning various problems and solutions in the discipline. Some facts, however, are rarely contested. One of these is that to write well one must write often. But, as Marion Crowhurst points out, "If students write as much as is desirable, the amount of marking may be more than teachers can handle" (1979, p. 757). Indeed, Karegianes, Pascarella, and Plaum (1980) feel that teachers often refrain from assigning themes for that very reason. Another fact is that good
writing is always a process. Thus the teacher is faced not only with many compositions to evaluate but with the many drafts of those compositions that good writing requires. Gebhardt (1980) tells us that good teachers do give instruction about the writing process but seldom have the time to monitor or evaluate it; yet Elaine Maimon feels it is vital to make time because, “Composition teachers can do their most effective teaching as they coach their students through successive drafts and revisions” (1979, p. 366). Peer-editing can relieve teachers of some editing tasks and thus enable them to give more individual attention and consideration to students involved in the writing process.

Besides relieving teachers of tedious corrections, peer-editing seems to have some other desirable effects. One of these is that the students begin to perceive revision as more than just a proofreading function in the composition process. They see that revision encompasses major changes as well as superficial cosmetic ones. Several additional effects have to do with the student's developing a sense of audience. Many students are apprehensive of instructors as the sole readers of their writing. Others quickly learn the trick of writing what they think the instructor wants.
rather than attempting to communicate their own ideas. Pianko and Radzik (1980) think there may be a generation gap between educators and students that influences both the students' writing and the feedback given by evaluators. By giving students opportunities to write for their peers, we give them a more realistic audience. They receive immediate, often corroborative, feedback from an audience they respect and trust. They have occasion to discuss ideas and develop skills to help them in their own revision as well as to help others with their work. This dialog is probably one of the most beneficial aspects of the peer-editing process. In fact, several studies have shown that students write much more carefully and thoughtfully for audiences of their peers than they do for the instructor alone (Strenski, 1982; Lewes, 1981).

Putting the obvious benefits aside, we are still left with the question which this study hopes to address. Can peer-editing improve the quality of student writing? Karegianes et al. (1980) cite dissertation studies which support both sides of the issue. They feel, however, that some of these studies may be flawed due to the influence of other instructional factors. "Thus, the seemingly positive results found in the dissertation studies may actually have been due to
other factors, such as the multiplication of writing experiences in one study" (p. 203). The authors also cite Bouton and Tutty's study which specifically calls for further work with careful control over such confounding factors (cited in Karegianes et al., 1980).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine if peer-editing can improve the rhetorical, structural, and mechanical quality of 11th grade composition.

Review of the Literature

Composition Research

When Janet Emig studied the composition processes of twelfth graders in 1971, she noted that, "Most pieces of empirical research on the adolescent writer focus upon the product rather than the process(es) of their writing and, consequently, do not provide an appropriate methodology for a process-centered inquiry" (p. 19). Since 1971, however, most composition research has focused upon composition as a process rather than as a mere product. The main controversy now seems to stem from whether this process should or even can be segmented and sequenced.

Some rhetoric and composition texts try to segment writing skills by having students complete writing exercises; yet Moffett (1968) feels that the preteaching
of writing problems is futile. Many teachers of writing believe that grammar and syntax must be mastered before higher ordered skills can be judged, but Perl concluded that, "the lack of proficiency in basic writers may be attributable to the way in which premature and rigid attempts to correct and edit their work truncate the flow of composing without substantially improving the form of what they have written" (1980, p. 22). Perhaps the variety of approaches to teaching composition is due to the variety of philosophies as Steward suggests:

If we are linguists, we work on their syntax; if we are perceptionists, we improve their powers of observation; if we are prewriters, we help them get their concepts manipulable before they begin to write; if we are behaviorists, we get them behaving and then proceed to modify that behavior on the spot; if we are rhetoricians, we make them aware of the subject, speaker/writer, and audience triangle and the way they must mediate between these entities (cited in Gebhardt, 1981, p. 156).

With this abundance of often contradictory material,
it is no wonder that educators are frustrated and confused. Hirsh thinks that teachers are unlikely to come to a consensus "in our present state of ignorance" and in view of the diverse approaches, habits, and convictions that educators hold (1980). Perhaps the very complexity of the composition process can assure that there is no one definitive technique that will teach all students to write well.

So, what are educators to do with all the conflicting information in the literature? Hirsh asserts that researchers are on the brink of significant discoveries. Already there are signs of agreement on at least three major points:

1. Writing is a process (Emig, 1971).
2. To write well requires practice (Kirby & Liner, 1981).
3. All writers go through prewriting, writing, and revision stages, although there may be no overt evidence of these (Mayher, 1983).

That is a beginning. In the meantime research must continue to develop and test promising techniques.

Evaluation of Writing

Donald E. Hirsh feels that evaluation is the most pressing problem, both in the teaching and in the
research of composition (1980). The bulk of the literature discussing evaluation supports this notion. Basically, writing can be legitimately evaluated to judge writing growth and to advise students on particular ways to improve their writing. Most educators are convinced that it is not legitimate to evaluate writing simply for a classroom grade, a grade which is often counterproductive to any real growth in writing (Hillocks, 1982a).

In his essay, "Holistic Evaluation of Writing," Charles R. Cooper (1977) outlines various types of evaluation techniques. Two which seem especially valuable for measuring growth are holistic scoring, where raters are guided through a procedure in ranking pieces of writing, and essay scales, where pieces are judged by comparison to six or so other pieces of various quality. Two which can provide important feedback to the writer are analytical scales which rate writing either high, medium, or low on various criteria and Elbow's center of gravity response, which gives verbal gut reactions to the author (see Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging for a detailed discussion of these options). Another scale often used is the Diederich Scale, developed to produce high reliability when used by several raters. It is
popular because it can be used as an analytical scale as well as an indicator of writer growth (Kirby & Liner, 1981).

Research shows that evaluation of writing is an abused tool in the classroom today. Rather than resulting in improved writing, teacher evaluation and comments often turn students off to composition. One of the reasons for this may be that teachers are confused about how to evaluate papers. They may mark grammatical items either out of a sense that grammar comes first or that these items are the ones they feel most comfortable marking. Moffett (1968) reports, however, that teaching grammar and rhetoric to improve writing is futile. Erika Lewes (1981) adds that most students view comments on papers as a form of punishment and merely a way for teachers to justify grades.

Another fact that must be faced is that many students do not trust feedback from teachers. They've learned to write what the teacher wants to hear rather than what they actually believe. The consequence of such writing is that it is not genuine. It becomes stilted academic prose (Pianko & Radzik, 1980). Part of this problem stems from the fact that students write for such a limited audience, often an audience of one, the teacher. Moffett tells us that in an
ideal situation, "a maximum amount of feedback would be provided in the form of audience response" (1968, p. 193). A student cannot receive maximum feedback from a single reader. Several authorities, Bruffee, Lamberg, Peckham, and Weeks, have suggested creating larger audiences by having students write for their peers, displaying writing or having student writing published in school and local newspapers. They contend that students will write much more carefully for these larger audiences.

Another problem with teacher evaluation is that teachers generally grade products. They usually haven't the time to coach students through successive drafts and revisions, although this is probably where they could be the most influential (Maimon, 1979). Instead they give letter grades on products. Sometimes they make comments or suggestions for improvement, but these are moot to students in light of the posted grades. What is needed instead is immediate, preferably verbal, feedback on writing in process, an unmanageable task for classroom teachers but a valuable and rewarding task for the writer's peers.

The Use of Peers in the Composition Process

Basically peers have been used in two ways in the composition process, as tutors and as evaluators.
Although research is limited and few formal studies have been performed, many educators are enthusiastic about the advantages of using peers in the composition process.

Peers have been used as tutors in several studies. One cited by Bruffee is Bloom's study, "Peer and Cross-age Tutoring in the Schools," in which Bloom states that 90% of the tutees in reported studies made significant gains (cited in Bruffee, 1980). Many colleges have followed suit and instituted tutorial writing programs in hopes of improving the writing skills of incoming freshmen.

Another method often employed by educators is the workshop method, where groups of students critique and advise each other. An interesting proponent of this method is Peter Elbow, who eliminates teachers from this process altogether and maintains that college level students and adults can improve their writing merely by group interaction (1973). Marion Crowhurst employed a writing workshop at the secondary level which also met with success (1979). Similar to writing workshops are programs that employ peers as graders. Many educators today are involving students in the grading process. John O. White (1982) trains students to use a holistic scoring guide to grade peers. Other
educators use a variety of rating scales, analytical scales, and questionnaires to guide students through the evaluation process.

Whatever peer involvement procedures are used, educators are reporting enthusiastic, if somewhat unscientific, results and point to the many advantages of peer involvement in the composition process. Kirby and Liner (1981) summarize several of the main advantages. First, peer evaluation helps students realize that there is a basis for the grades they have been receiving from teachers. Second, by reading other students' papers, writers become sensitized to problems in their own writing. As they offer editing and proofreading advice to peers, they are also teaching themselves. The authors also found that students write more carefully for their peers. As Irwin Peckham points out, "When a student's friends are going to hear, read, or, worse, talk about what he has written, then a misspelled word, an inappropriate fragment, an incoherent sentence is worse than wearing checks with plaids or having bad breath" (1978, p. 62). Cathy O'Donnell (1980) feels that the value of group editing has been underestimated. One advantage she cites is the spotlighting of talented writers while those less talented are able to hear and read examples of good
writing on the same topics as their own. Other advantages are increased motivation, real audiences, and varied feedback (Crowhurst, 1979) as well as the obvious advantage of fewer papers for the teacher to grade. A less evident but equally important advantage is the increase in class cohesion and lessening of anonymity reported by Pianko and Radzik (1980).

Though generally optimistic and positive, the literature was careful to point out a few possible pitfalls in the use of peers. The major one is that peers, in whatever capacity used, must be carefully trained and given explicit guidelines as to the feedback expected from them (Karegianes, et al., 1980; Lamberg, 1980; Weeks & White, 1982). Secondly, attention must be given to group dynamics so that a climate of trust and helpfulness is built. As O'Donnell (1980) points out, groups must have trust, believe that writing is important, and be able to diplomatically, yet effectively, comment on a piece of writing. She also noted that care must be given to the formation of groups so that all groups represent a variety of ability levels to assure that everyone can learn from someone else. Thus, with careful planning, many educators are coming to see that peer involvement can be a viable alternative
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to the common practices now employed, practices which
place the entire burden for teaching and evaluation
upon the already over-worked instructors.

Revision

Since we have only come to view composition as
a process in the last decade, very little research
has been done on its components, prewriting, composing
and revision. Some methods have been formulated to
teach these components, but the success of these remains
largely speculative in the absence of definitive research.
Since this study deals primarily with the revision
process, it is important to examine it in greater
detail.

Judy and Judy define revision as, "moving around
words and sentences and adjusting content" (1981, p. 92).
Murray views revision as, "seeing it again" (cited in
Kirby & Liner, 1981). Elbow chooses to call the process
editing and defines it as "...figuring out what you
really mean to say, getting it clear in your head,
getting it unified, getting it into an organized
structure, and then getting it into the best words
and throwing away the rest" (1973, p. 38). Koch and
Brazil call the final writing stage postwriting and
define it as the stage in which,

...the writer takes a cool, objective
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look at his or her writing to see if it really speaks to the audience and purpose he or she has in mind; if it has the correct tone and register he or she had hoped for; if it is rhetorically structured for maximum effect; and if the diction and syntax of the sentences are precise and smooth. In this editing process, then, the writer is looking for major problems (1978, p. 87). Kirby and Liner (1981) feel that there are three different but related activities in the revision process. The first step is in-process revision, where the writers adjust the writing to satisfy themselves. The second step is editing, where the writers alter their writing with the audience in mind. And, finally, the third step, proofreading, where the authors clean up their manuscripts. For the purposes of this study, editing will refer to both revision and proofreading activities.

Emig found that, "students do not voluntarily revise school-sponsored writing" (1971, p. 93). Thus, part of the educator's task must be to influence students that this phase of writing is equally important in producing good writing; a point Hillocks (1982b) supports. Indeed, Hillocks further suggests that
revision not only makes individual papers more effective but that the practice of revision can actually affect the writing quality of subsequent new pieces of writing (p. 276). Part of the problem, however, is that many students don't know what is bad about their writing to begin with. In other words, they haven't an inkling where to start revision. Thus, after convincing students that revising is important, teachers must find methods that enable students to see how to revise their papers effectively. Most teachers with classes of twenty to thirty-five students simply do not have the time available to work with each student on each composition. It is unrealistic to ask them to do so. Other methods must be found to give students the feedback necessary to make revision both possible in the first place and meaningful in the end. Recently, theorists have begun to argue in favor of peer involvement as a means to stimulate revision (Lewes, 1981). This study will examine the effectiveness of peer-editing in the revision process and draw some conclusions about its use.

Design of Study

Subjects and Groups

The students for this study will be drawn from two classes of average eleventh grade English. The
groups are randomly assigned as a result of scheduling. One of the classes will serve as the control group, and the other will participate in the experiment. Students will have no knowledge of the experiment either prior to or during its conduction.

Instrumentation

Both groups will be given a pre and post writing assignment, each to consist of two pieces of writing, a personal narrative and a persuasion/argumentation paper. Topics will be as similar as possible so that growth may be judged from similar writing tasks. At the conclusion of the experiment, all papers will be scored by three raters using the Diederich Rating Scale (Cited in Kirby & Liner, 1981). The scorers will know neither the students' names, nor their group affiliation. They will not know whether the writing sample is a pre or post assignment.

Teaching procedures

For a period of nine weeks, students in each group will be given a weekly writing assignment on a variety of topics and written in various modes of discourse. All instruction, prewriting activities, and class discussions concerning the compositions will be as similar as possible. The only variable will be the training of the experimental group in the
use of a peer-editing worksheet developed by Leila Christenbury (1982). The students in this group will revise their papers based upon the suggestions made by their peers before turning them in for evaluation by the teacher. Students in the control group will not be given the option of revision unless it is done upon their own initiative and prior to evaluation. All compositions from both groups will be graded by the classroom teacher and will receive both a letter grade and comments for improvement. While the experimental group is engaged in peer-editing activities, the control group will participate in a creative dramatics workshop, with activities taken from Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theater: a Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (1963).

**Analysis of Data**

At the end of the experiment, two series of hypotheses will be examined. The first series of hypotheses to be tested is that there will be no significant differences between the individual item and total ratings of personal narratives written by the two groups taught by different modes of instruction when rated by the Diederich Rating Scale. The second series of hypotheses to be tested is that there will be no significant differences between the individual
item and total ratings of the persuasion/argumentation pieces of the two groups taught by different modes of instruction when rated by the Diederich Rating Scale.

To compare the gain in scores, t-tests will be computed. The analysis will be computed for both groups by individual categories of the scale as well as for the total scores.

The ratings of the individual categories of the scale as well as the total scores will be averaged across the three raters to provide the scores for analysis. The reliability of the raters will be investigated by computing the Pearson product-moment correlations among the raters.

Results

Two series of null hypotheses were tested. In the first set the students were compared on pre and post persuasion/argumentation passages. None of the t-ratios were significant at the .05 level. (see table below) Therefore the null hypotheses for each category score and the total score were accepted. The second series compared the pre and post personal narrative passages. Once again the t-ratios were insignificant and the null hypotheses were accepted.
Table 1

Comparison of the Pre/Post Gain Scores by Treatment Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diederich Scale Category</th>
<th>Persuasion/Argumentation</th>
<th>Personal Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ideas</td>
<td>1.286</td>
<td>.812</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>.729</td>
<td>1.424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wording</td>
<td>.638</td>
<td>.696</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flavor</td>
<td>1.629</td>
<td>.655</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usage</td>
<td>1.929</td>
<td>.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Punctuation</td>
<td>.177</td>
<td>.764</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelling</td>
<td>.144</td>
<td>.168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handwriting</td>
<td>1.385</td>
<td>1.501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.996</td>
<td>.061</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reliability of the raters was investigated using the Pearson product-moment correlation, the results of which ranged from .586 to .755 for the persuasion/argumentation writing samples and from .568 to .755 for the personal narrative pieces. (see table below) The relationship could only be termed moderate in that the degree of agreement was 50% or less.
Table 2

Agreement of Raters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Raters</th>
<th>Persuasion/Argumentation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 x 2</td>
<td>.755</td>
<td>.586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 x 3</td>
<td>.737</td>
<td>.631</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 x 3</td>
<td>.658</td>
<td>.631</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Narrative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 x 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 x 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 x 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions

Because so many educators and researchers—Kirby, Liner, Crowhurst, and Elbow to name a few—are enthusiastic about the use of peers in the composition process, the inconclusive results of this study are disappointing but do not, of course, entirely discredit the practices of peer-editing and peer evaluation. Several factors may have affected the outcome of this experiment.
Brown reports that "short term growth is not easy to discern in a skill as complicated as writing" (1980, p. 110). Thus, the nine week experiment may have encompassed too short a time to expect any measurable improvements in composition skills. Brown also suggests that "before and after essay questions require the same primary skills in order to minimize the problems of comparability of the essays" (p. 112). Although the two pre and post writing assignments were the same type of writing, perhaps they did not require similar skills. Brown further suggests that blind pairs of pre and post writing samples should be judged by raters who merely pick the better of the two pieces. This method of evaluation might have yielded more positive results than did the use of the Diederich Scale employed by self-trained raters who achieved only a moderate degree of reliability.

Finally, then, we must examine the group-editing processes of the experimental group. The students had difficulty using Christenbury's questions (see Appendix) to improve peer writing. They seemed to understand the concept of main idea, for instance, but were at a loss to make specific suggestions to improve peer compositions. They understood the need for transitions from class instruction but could not
apply this knowledge to the transition problems of peer essays. As a class, they probably should have had more specific instruction in the application of concepts and more practice with the process of improving papers. Model essays should have been employed more frequently to give the class varied experiences in editing and proofreading. Using a variety of checklists, rating scales, and evaluation forms might also have given them more experience and eliminated some of the apathy that occurred during the final weeks of the experiment.

Recommendations

The students in the experiment were genuinely interested in what their peers had written and, conversely, in what peers had to say about their own work. They generally enjoyed the group-editing experience. Discussions were often stimulating and sometimes heated when students disagreed. Everyone was engaged, especially at the beginning of the experiment when it was a fresh idea. When questioned about the experience, most students had positive responses. They especially enjoyed peer interaction and valued peer comments. The majority of the students felt their work improved after the peer-editing and proofreading. It seems that peer-editing might be justified simply
for its positive effect on students' perceptions of the composition process. If it can also improve that process, as many educators believe, definitive research must now show how and to what degree.
References

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The Effects of Peer Editing on the Writing
Proficiency of Low-Achieving Tenth Grade Students.


Appendix A

Writing Stimuli

1. Pre-writing assignment: After reading "What Redburn Saw in Lancelott's Hey" by Herman Melville, the students discussed what the individual owes society. They then wrote to argue for or against the state adoption of a "Good Samaritan" law.

2. Pre-writing assignment: After discussion of "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" and "Because I Could Not Stop For Death" by Emily Dickinson, students were asked to share a personal encounter with death, fantasize about the actual moment of death, or speculate upon life herafter.

3. Students read selected poems from Edgar Lee Master's Spoon River Anthology and discussed lessons learned from experience. Later they wrote about lessons experience had taught them.

4. Students were asked to write a classification theme. Lesson and topics were taken from David Powell's "What Can I Write About?" (1981).

5. On the Tuesday of the New Hampshire primary, the classes discussed the various candidates and platforms and then wrote in support of the candidates of their choices. A mock election
was held the next day.

6. Students were asked to write a description. Lesson and selected topics were taken from "What Can I Write About?"

7. Students were given a list of objective and subjective case pronouns to use in an original story.

8. Students were asked to compare and contrast two items. Lesson and topics were selected from "What Can I Write About?"

9. After a discussion of the pending school prayer legislation, students brainstormed pros and cons and then wrote a paper supporting their positions.

10. Students were asked to write a process paper. Lesson and selected topics were taken from "What Can I Write About?"

11. Students were asked to write a cause/effect composition. Lesson and topics were selected from "What Can I Write About?"

12. Post-writing assignment: Students were asked to write a personal narrative. Topics were selected from "What Can I Write About?"

13. Post-writing assignment: After brainstorming the pros and cons of abortion legislation, students argued either for or against in a composition.
Appendix B

Leila Christenbury's Peer-Editing Worksheet

There are three members of the group, each of whom alternately takes the role of author, editor, and then proofreader. Each member, in turn:

- presents his or her written work,
- edits a group member's work,
- proofreads a member's work.

Note: The teacher will call time for each step and indicate when the editor should hand his or her composition to the proofreader.

As an author, your responsibility is to present a clean, readable rough draft. For the purposes of this plan, please double-space your draft.

As an editor, your responsibility is to review a rough draft and ask yourself--and the author--the following:

- What is the main idea of the piece?
- What aspects of the main idea are evident?
- Are sufficient examples, support, or illustrations used?
- Are there smooth transitions between ideas between Paragraphs?
- Is the end of the paper satisfactory?
Does the reader of this piece have any lingering questions or doubts?

As a proofreader, your responsibility is to review an edited rough draft and ask yourself—and the author—the following:

Is the language concrete, specific?
Are words used accurately?
Is there any repetition of words or ideas?
Is there correct spelling? punctuation?
subject/verb agreement? pronoun/antecedent agreement?