

Playing A Teacherly Role

POWER AND PEER RESPONSE IN THE FIRST-YEAR WRITING CLASSROOM

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PEER RESPONSE

Peer response happens when students exchange or share their writing and feedback with each other. Typically, peer response occurs in first-year writing classrooms before the assignment is submitted to the teacher for a grade.

Teachers often tell students that the purpose of peer response is for students to get feedback from each other so they can improve their writing. Students and teachers both report varied experiences on whether this purpose is achieved.

METHODS AND CONTEXT

This poster draws from a larger, IRB-approved ethnographic study that seeks to understand how instructors' and students' perceptions and experiences of peer response are affected by social power dynamics. For this poster, I'm drawing from these sets of data collected during Fall 2022:

- 7 classroom observations on peer response days in first-year writing classes.
- 18 semi-structured individual interviews with students.

FOSTERING THE TEACHERLY ROLE

AUTHOR'S NAME _____ REVIEWER'S NAME _____

BE AS THOROUGH AS YOU CAN WITH THESE COMMENTS. YOUR EFFORT WILL BE APPRECIATED.

Look at the introduction of your classmate's paper.

1. In the margins along the paragraph(s) that summarize the source, write summary and underline it. Circle the signal phrases that attribute quotations and other material to the source. Does your classmate include an accurate and effective summary of the source's content and argument? Does it identify who the author/speaker is, and when and where the piece was published/posted? The main message, and the important points that support the message? What is a strength of the summary? What needs some attention? (Please identify both.)
2. Put a star next to the paragraph that offers an accurate and complete description of the source's rhetorical situation? Does it address the rhetor, audience, exigence (context), purpose, and genre/medium? What is a strength of the description? What needs some attention?
3. Underline your classmate's explicit thesis pertaining to the rhetor's overall effectiveness. Did your classmate's thesis merely state that certain rhetorical strategies were effective? It should do more. Effectiveness means how well the strategy works to attain the rhetor's purpose. The thesis should make clear what the rhetorical strategies are effective at doing. Offer suggestions as necessary.

This sample handout, collected during field work, shows how students are guided into a teacherly role as they respond to each others' writing.

4 WAYS POWER MANIFESTS IN PEER RESPONSE

1. SEEKING A "GOOD STUDENT" FOR A PEER RESPONSE PARTNER

Students assess peers' in-class behaviors because they want to be partnered with a "good student" for peer response. They believe this type of partner will give them better feedback.

This highlights the transactional approach to peer response. Students size up their classmates because they want to get the most value out of the interaction. Value in this context typically means a good grade.

Students said:

- "If the person themselves has good grades or if they contribute to the discussion, they're just involved in the class, I think I would trust them more as my peer reviewer...my expectation is just having like a good student do my review." (KB2)
- "Those are the people I pay attention to...whether it's they have nothing to give or when they have a lot to give." (MP3)

2. SHARING WRITING MAKES STUDENTS FEEL VULNERABLE.

Whether sharing personal or academic writing, feeling vulnerable means students do not feel equal to each other during peer response.

Students said:

- "I'm a very self-conscious person...I need that validation that they aren't upset with me, or that they're just trying to give me honest feedback." (ST2)
- "I can get really insecure about my writing so if you're paired with someone that you don't know it all, it honestly can be more stressful for me to peer review than helpful." (ST6)

3. CLASSROOM DYNAMICS MATTER

Students acknowledged that the combination of students in a class affects how peer response goes, and that a teacher's influence and directions matter too. Students also pointed out that these dynamics are in play every day, not just on peer response day.

Students said:

- "I guess I feel like the teacher needs to say something, like, 'don't be shy'...The teacher saying, 'Make as many corrections as you can,' or whatever, would be helpful." (KB1)
- "We had class time to do it...so we spent more time on it." (ST7)
- "...if it's a comfortable classroom, it's a big positive, like everyone is discussing and it's very much like brainstorming." (ST6)

4. STUDENTS RARELY FEEL ABLE TO BE "HONEST" ABOUT FEEDBACK

Being "honest" denotes instances during which a peer can critique another peer's writing without fear of offending them, making them mad, or hurting their feelings. Students referred to honesty as an ideal, and one that rarely occurs. Students spoke about their ability to be honest about writing in terms of their relationships to their peers. However, there is not a consensus on which type of relationships are best to foster honest feedback.

Students said:

- "I don't think I would have been able to be open and honest to my peers regarding their paper, because I didn't know them at a level that would have been acceptable to provide the best amount of feedback." (JO2)
- "I feel like maybe if it was anonymous then you could just write freely and not care what they think." (ST4)
- "I prefer getting my friend's paper, because then I feel like I can actually be honest with them." (ST1)

THE TEACHERLY ROLE

Because it's framed as a transaction to help improve writing or to earn a better grade, **peer response puts students in unequal power relations to each other as they must evaluate, assess, and judge each other's writing.**

This is that "teacherly role" they assume in relation to each other.

This unequal power dynamic is likely exacerbated by the additional social power students hold, based on their race, gender, educational history, socioeconomic class, and language.

Attending to this power dynamic requires reframing the purpose of peer response in writing classrooms.

ALTERNATIVE, EQUITY-BASED PURPOSES

- Invitational: the purpose of peer response is to understand each other's writing. (Foss and Griffin, 1997)
- Abundance: the purpose of peer response is to see the growth and life in each other's writing (Shimabukuro, 2016; Sano-Francini, 2023)
- Generative: the purpose of peer response is to generate ideas as writing is happening (Simon, in progress)

WHAT MAKES GOOD PEER RESPONSE? PLEASE CONTRIBUTE YOUR WORDS TO OUR WORD CLOUD:

