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Higher level peer editing: an investigation of the use and quality of peer editing in an MBA program

Joanne Crossman
Johnson & Wales University, jcrossman2@gmail.com

Stacey L. Kite
Johnson & Wales University, skite@jwu.edu

Higher level peer editing: An investigation of the use and quality of peer editing in an MBA program

Joanne M. Crossman Ed.D.
Manager for Arts & Sciences
South West Florida College

Stacey Kite, DBA
Professor, Johnson & Wales University
Education Leadership Doctoral Program
and the
Center for Research & Evaluation

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine if a modified version of the Van den Berg et al. (2006) *Optimal Model* of peer critique of university coursework would lead to improved quality of a revised written product. Furthermore, the study sought to determine how *discovery mode* (Lockhart & Ng, 1995), interactions were naturally present among the peer editors.

Peer review is used extensively to improve students' writing in higher education business communications courses (Rieber, 2006; Liu & Carless, 2006; Nicol & MacFarlane-Dick, 2006). In fact, peer feedback is an end in itself to develop skills in "critical reflection, listening to and acting on feedback, and sensitively assessing and providing feedback. Students can learn not only from the peer feedback, but through meta-processes such as reflecting on and justifying what they have done" (Liu & Carless, 2006, p. 289).

Methodology

This mixed methods study investigated the use of peer editing to improve student work. The quantitative phase included a quasi-experimental design seeking to determine if the quality of a business communications proposal improved from the initial draft to the final revision following peer review of the document. Furthermore, the study investigated which of the four areas (focus, support, organization, writing conventions) had the greatest gains achieved from initial draft (week 2 of the semester) to final revision (week 3 of the semester). During the qualitative phase, the students were observed to identify how peer editors engaged in *discovery mode* interactions during the peer critique process. *Discovery mode* interactions include probing and collaborative editing styles (Lockhart & Ng, 1995).

Population

Students included in this study were enrolled at a medium sized private university in the north east between September, 2008 and February, 2010. A total of *N*=208 MBA candidates, *n*=138 were non-native speakers of English and *n*=70 were native speakers of English, were chosen to participate in this study. Intact groups of students were chosen if they were enrolled in specified sections of a business communications course between the Fall of 2008 and the Winter of 2010. A total of *N*=10 sections were chosen.

Instrumentation and Methodology

A rubric guided the directed peer review and was used for formative assessment (peer editing), and for summative assessment (final draft). The rubric served both analytic and holistic purposes. The researcher did assign grades for each performance trait.

Research Questions

RQ1: Among native and non-native speakers of English, will peer critique improve the quality of a business communication proposal from the initial draft to final revision?

RQ2: In which area (focus, support, organization, writing conventions) were greatest gains achieved from initial draft to final revision?

RQ3: How did peer editors engage in *discovery mode* interactions during the peer critique process?

Findings

In order to test for significant differences between the pre-test (draft copy) and the post-test (final draft following peer editing), paired sample t-tests were run. The

comparisons were tested for overall quality, as well as the four focus areas, audience focus, support, organization, and writing conventions. Finally, observation analysis was conducted to determine how the peer editors engaged in discovery mode during the peer critique process.

Table 1 presents the results of a paired sample t-test run to determine if the final version of a business communication proposal improved overall following peer critique of the document. The analysis revealed that there was a significant improvement from the initial draft (t = 20.453, p = .001, M = 24.22, *D=.32 Medium*) to the final submission (M = 26.19).

Table 1: Paired Sample t-test comparing initial draft score to final proposal score (*N*=208)

	M	*t*	*p*	*D*
Initial Draft	24.22	20.453	.001	.32
Final Proposal	26.19			Medium

Note. **Maximum score on the proposal was 30.**

Table 2 presents the results of paired sample t-tests run to determine if there were significant differences between initial draft areas (focus, support, organization, and writing conventions). Furthermore, for the items with significant change, differences were calculated to determine which area had the greatest gain from initial draft to final version. The analysis revealed that there was a significant improvement from the initial draft to the final submission for focus (t = 11.54, p = .001, Draft M = 5.82, Final *M=6.37, D=.31 Medium*), support (t = 12.31, p = .001, Draft M = 11.89, Final M=12.70, *D=.32 Medium*) organization (t = 6.64, p = .001, Draft M = 3.02,

Final *M*=3.26, *D=.17 Small)*, and writing conventions (*t* = 8.20, *p* = .001, Draft *M* = 3.53, Final *M*=3.88, *D=.*18 Small).

Table 2: Paired Sample t-test comparing peer editing areas from initial draft to final proposal (*N*=208)

		M	*Difference*	*t*	*p*	*D*
Audience Focus	Draft	5.82	.55	11.54	.001	.31
	Final	6.37				Medium
Support	Draft	11.89	.81	12.31	.001	.32
	Final	12.70				Medium
Organization	Draft	3.02	.24	6.64	.001	.17
	Final	3.26				Small
Writing Conventions	Draft	3.53	.35	8.20	.001	.18
	Final	3.88				Small

As seen in Table 2, there were statistically significant gains within each of the four areas. Further analysis of the growth between initial draft and final proposal revealed that the greatest gains occurred in Support (.81 pt improvement) followed by Audience Focus (.55 pt improvement), next Writing (.35 pt improvement) and finally, Organization (.24 pt improvement).

Regarding peer editors engaging in *discovery mode* interactions, during the peer critique process it was observed that 167 of the 208 (80.3%) students engaged in probing editing questions, and 78 of the 208 (37.5%) students engaged in collaborative questions. Probing and collaborative questions included the following: *"Why is this character in the case the best-suited for the project manager?" "How will this recommendation affect the company's ROI?" "What heading can we use to*

feature this section of the proposal?" "What do you think about adding more details to explain how the action plan's success can be measured?"

Implications of Results

While time intensive, peer evaluation may be a profitable investment. The findings suggest that a modified version of *The Optimal Model* proposed by Van den Berg et al. (2006) may engender face-to-face peer editing leading to improved quality of a revised written work. For example, given statistically significant increases in each of assessed writing dimensions, time spent discussing the assignment, reviewing the rubric, teaching students how to engage as a peer reviewer, and on the actual review process may indeed, be worthwhile.

When students talk about writing, they "develop a language to describe what they and others do to write, they learn about audience needs and expectations, and they develop criteria by which to evaluate writing…[this] type of learning extends into the student writer's future" (Gere, 1990, p. 117). She also noted that peer feedback fosters audience awareness, perspective, and reflection.

Recommendations for Future Research

1. The proposal assignment allowed for some *discovery mode* feedback, however, the researcher has noted that more complex and collaborative projects, that require more iterations and longer durations encourage, and demand increased discovery mode feedback. It would be useful to study such feedback and its impact on the final project.

2. Future studies may center on both *discovery mode* and *evaluative mode* feedback.

3. Future studies may use a quasi-experimental design with a control group to investigate the degree to which the peer evaluation had an influence on the final paper.

4. The weights on the rubric were determined using the literature and program requirements. An external analysis could be conducted to determine if the weights are appropriate for other settings.

5. It would be advantageous to conduct personal depth interviews with students following the peer evaluation process to describe their experience with the peer editing and the degree to which they felt it helped to improve their final document.

6. It would be useful from both a teaching and assessment perspective to learn about the lasting effects of peer review on subsequent work. I.e. are the lessons learned transferable to the next assignments and/or future writing?

7. Finally, the benefits to the authors was investigated, but what benefits, if any, are realized for the editor through the editing process?

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To the extent to which these results

are valid, a number of instructional practices are implied and are corroborated by reviewed

literature.

1. Invest in preparation: Successful peer critique requires that instructors prepare students for the purposes, content, and expectations of their role (Gere, 1990).

2. Feature benefits: Students should understand that assessing another person's work may allow them to more critically assess their own writing, and to draw on the features of others' good writing (Rieber, 2006). Moreover, researchers have found little difference between peer assessments and those by professors (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 1980).

3. Stress responsibility: Students should understand that they are ultimately responsible for their work, and peer review is only part of the iterative process of writing (Rieber, 2006).

4. Offer insight: Students should be reminded that better written papers are more enjoyable to read and grade (Rieber, 2006).

5. Highlight pragmatism: The peer review process introduces students to workplace practices. "A traditional view of writing portrays writing as a solitary activity. Locked away in some garret with a sheaf of paper and a supply of ink, the writer labors in uninterrupted concentration. Not so for many real-world writers" (Gere, 1990, p. 115). "All of us may expect to be peer assessor and assessee at different times and in different contexts. Consequently, involvement in peer assessment at school can develop transferable skills for life" (Topping, 2009, p. 21).

6. Feature the rubric as the tool for directed peer review: Students will need to understand the assignment parameters/rubrics as they assess whether and how their colleagues followed those guidelines. In turn, they will better revise their own work (Rieber, 2006).

7. Emphasize collegiality: Students may produce more sophisticated rough drafts knowing their peers will be reviewing them (Rieber, 2006).

8. Value inquiry: Faculty's' comments may appear more evaluative to students as compared with peer comments seeking clarification or depth. Authors may therefore consider peer feedback useful rather than punitive (Rieber, 2006; Gere, 1990).

9. Ease concerns: Directed peer review (following a rubric) is well-suited to students who have limited subject-matter and writing skills (Rieber, 2006). Also note that peers are not assigning grades to the projects.

10. Draw upon diversity and multiple perspectives: In the present study, given the particularly large number of non-native speakers of English, the directed peer review approach was likely salient as were *discovery mode* (Lockhart & Ng, 1995) interactions naturally present among the peer editors, possibly due to first-language differences.

11. Emphasize the value of listening and discussion: The process of listening to the peer read the author's draft evokes conversation about general impression, persuasiveness of argument, and effective phrasing rather than hastily concentrating on writing mechanics (Gere, 1990).

Gere (1990) explained that when students talk about writing, they "develop a language to describe what they and others do to write, they learn about audience needs and expectations, and they develop criteria by which to evaluate writing…[this] type of learning extends into the student writer's future" p. 117).

She also noted that peer feedback fosters audience awareness, perspective, and reflection. These skill sets go far beyond correcting grammar and punctuation, supporting interpersonal skills essential to personal and professional success.

A final review of the Van den berg et al. (2006, p. 35) *Optimal Design of Peer Assessment*

Table 3: Van den berg et al. (2006, p. 35) *Optimal Design*

(4) product	Draft version paper (5 - 8 pp.)
(5) relation to staff assessment	Supplementary; second assessment
(7) directionality	Mutual (2 assessments)
(8) privacy	Confidential (within the feedback group); teacher receives a copy
(9) contact	Written and oral feedback; plenary discussion of themes brought in by feedback groups
(11) ability	Constellation of the feedback groups at random on basis of joint topics
(12) constellation assessors	Small groups (3 students)
(13) constellation assessees	The same small groups
(14) place	Written feedback out of class/oral feedback in class (small groups and plenary discussion)
(17) reward	No credits for participation of peer assessment

Note: numbers and titles in the first column refer to Toppings' typology (Table 1).

reveals only slight modification employed in this study: *product, ability,* and *constellation assessors*. The draft version was approximately 3 pages, (final version was confined to 2 pages), the assessors were in teams of 2 unless a triad was required due to class size, and students selected peer evaluators following their delivery of brief biographies.