Supporting Peer Assessment through the Development of a Community of Writers

AMIE ELIZABETH WILLOUGHBY

Abstract
This paper outlines the value in using peer feedback as an assessment tool in high school writing communities. It explores methods for creating a community of writers, and how developing trust between students strengthens the effectiveness of peer assessment. After having explicit instruction and dialogue about how to give feedback, students engaged in various formative and summative peer sharing and editing opportunities. As indicated in student surveys, perceptions of their own ability to provide quality feedback improved over a four-week period. Also, student comments showed a new appreciation of the usefulness of peer feedback.

There are few issues more contentious amongst high school educators than that of peer assessment or peer feedback. (I will be using the two terms interchangeably in this paper, as I believe that peer assessment is a form of feedback.) In conversations with colleagues, there is general agreement that peer assessment, defined as students working in an arrangement “to consider and specify the level, value, or quality of a product or performance of other equal-status learners” (Topping, 2009, p. 20-21), has potential as a form of formative assessment. Similarly, given the social nature of adolescence, many secondary teachers enjoy capitalizing on learning opportunities that incorporate dialogue between students. However, despite teachers’ intuition about its promise, educators have not made peer feedback a routine in their daily teaching practice. Such hesitation is in part due to educators’ uncertainty about whether peer assessment can, in fact, benefit writing performance, and about instructional interventions that can foster effective feedback between students (Gielin, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010). Teachers will not invest time in implementing a process without believing in its effectiveness, and suitability to their students, nor without feeling comfortable with their knowledge of how to apply and trouble-shoot the strategy in their classrooms (Graham, Olinghouse, & Harris, 2009). Correspondingly, students are often reluctant to engage whole-heartedly in the process of peer assessment since they feel that the responsibility of providing feedback falls on teachers, the recognized “experts” on appraising learning (van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2010).

Despite the reluctance of many classroom educators, research outlines many benefits of peer assessment and feedback. First, Gibbs and Simpson (2004) describe effective feedback as timely, appropriate to the aim of the assignment, fitting with the students’ conception of learning, and that which students act upon. Given in student-friendly language, peer feedback provides “an immediate check of the performance against the criteria, accompanied by feedback on strengths, weaknesses and/or tips for improvement” (Gielin, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Struyven, 2010, p. 304). Similarly, while comments from teachers provide ideas for improvement and include a modest amount of praise, peers tend to request clarification and elaboration with a more positive slant. In addition, peer assessors benefit from seeing others’ examples and approaches to a task, and internalizing the standards of assessments (Gielin, et al., 2010). Peer assessment also fosters positive attitudes toward writing and “builds the self-confidence of student writers… [which]
promotes learning about the writing process itself” (McLeod, Brown, McDaniels, & Sledge, 2009, p. 489) and can improve students’ attitudes about asking for help (Topping, 2009).

Unfortunately, although peer assessment generates reflection and confidence in the classroom, teachers are justified in being apprehensive about its use. For instance, peer judgments may be partially or fully incorrect, or not regarded as dependable (Gielin, et al., 2010). Similarly, positive effects can be completely negated, depending on instructional conditions. Students need opportunities to learn how to provide formative feedback and practice, including scoring sample writing pieces and discussing the rationale for comments (McLeod, et al, 2009). This training consumes time that teachers may perceive as more valuable pursuing other curriculum.

There is also the challenge of navigating social aspects of peer assessment. According to McLeod, et al. (2009) the difficulty of peer feedback is “transform[ing] the class from a disconnected group of individuals…into a learning community with the confidence to give and receive frank and respectful responses to each other’s writing” (p. 491). Clearly, this is no easy feat. Time constraints in the classroom and teachers’ uncertainty about how exactly to build community among students can make peer feedback difficult.

The most significant obstacle to secondary educators incorporating the use of peer feedback into their practice is a lack of information describing what it looks like in the classroom. Despite ample literature that describes benefits and drawbacks to the strategy, there are very few authors who have outlined specific methods for successful implementation in high schools. Van den Ber, Admiraal and Pilot (2006) have described an optimal model in the university setting that includes these features: (1) a relatively short writing product (five to eight pages); (2) sufficient time between peer assessment and teacher assessment; (3) two-way feedback, in which the assessor will become the assessee; (4) verbal explanation of suggestions for revision; and (5) opportunities to engage in peer feedback during scheduled class meeting times. This ideal model shows some promise in high school conditions, but secondary teachers need to find out how the model would work within their individual contexts.

**Purpose of the Research**

In light of these findings, I have been left wondering whether or not I have used peer assessment to its full potential in my classes. I have made attempts at having students provide feedback on each other’s work, and have been left feeling unsatisfied and reflective, questioning why such a seemingly promising strategy would fail. I felt that there must be a way to facilitate effective peer feedback in the high school environment. My experience with collaborative learning indicates that coaching students to support one another is not quite enough for the peer assessment process to work, nor is it enough to model the process of providing feedback (checklists, guiding questions). For truly successful peer assessment to occur, group members must feel safe enough to ask about their own and other students’ work, and believe that peer assessment is valuable for themselves and others (van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema, 2010). This type of trust surpasses the usual social boundaries of a typical high school classroom and is likely teachers’ underlying reason for feeling that peer feedback cannot be used effectively in their classes.

This wondering has led me to conduct an action research study with my grade 12 Writer’s Craft, University level English (EWC4U) class to train students in assessing peers’ work. In addition to incorporating recommendations for technical organization from studies exploring optimal design for university participants, I explicitly created opportunities for
students to feel like part of a community. At both the beginning of the course, and the end of the first unit (four weeks later), I surveyed the students to discover their conceptions of peer assessment and participation in a community of writers. My research addressed the question: How will developing a community of writers influence students’ perceptions of the value of peer assessment?

Creative Writing and Thirst for Academic Achievement: Context

Participants

The twelfth grade University level Writer’s Craft (EWC4U) class was in a culturally homogenous area in a primarily middle-class neighbourhood. There were nine males and ten females. All of the adolescents spoke English as their first language and none had special needs, as identified in an Individual Education Plan. The prerequisite for taking Writer’s Craft is grade 11 University level English. As such, before taking this class, students should be able to demonstrate clarity in their writing, and a high degree of independence in their work habits.

Generally, students in this class are highly motivated. They typically enroll in the class because they have an affinity for creative writing, and feel they have some pre-existing talent in the area. More than half the class had intentions of attending university upon graduation, and students were naturally concerned about achieving high marks. It is the only elective course offered within the English department during their entire high school career at this school.

The Course and Unit of Study

The pacing and expectations for EWC4U are rigorous. Students are assigned two to three short writing assignments per week. Students must come up with a creative idea, write a draft, receive feedback, and have their pieces ready for submission within a few days of receiving assignment directions. Evaluation in EWC4U occurs through these writing tasks exclusively. There are no summative tests.

The first unit of study centers on the notion of persona—removing yourself from your own experience with the world, and communicating in a believable way from the perspective of a fictional character. There are seven short writing assignments expected during this four-week topic. Due to time limitations, students gave peer feedback during class time for three of the seven tasks. The action research study was conducted during this first unit and included peer assessment for both formative work and the summative task.

Strategies for Building Community and Facilitating Peer Feedback

Starting on the first day of the semester, students were encouraged to get to know one another as colleagues. Part of this meant sitting with someone new every day for the first two weeks. During this time, I also incorporated ample opportunities for students to work collaboratively through shared article annotations, think-pair-share activities (Lyman, 1987), and brainstorming for upcoming writing tasks. I also determined each group’s composition for the first two weeks of class to help learners adjust to working with new people. With every collaborative learning activity, I recognized the knowledge and ability in the room and challenged students to capitalize on their peers’ capabilities. I hoped that if I, as the “authority” in the room demonstrated confidence in this type of learning, students themselves would be more inclined to buy into the process.

While facilitating collaborative learning, I helped students connect with others who shared similar interests. For example, I encouraged conversations between students from
different peer groups based on their common enjoyment of a particular genre or author. These interactions enabled students to meet and talk with new people to support an inclusive and safe climate in the room. During the first week, we also established a “treat of the week” schedule, in which students signed up with a partner to provide a snack for one Friday during the semester. I have found that food is an effective stimulus for building community.

The use of peer feedback as a learning tool began in the second week of class. Students brought their work to class, assuming that they were submitting it to me for evaluation. I concealed the real purpose for the deadline because I wanted to ensure that students had something to share in the peer assessment process. I was not yet convinced that they believed enough in peer feedback to finish the assignment for the sake of this type of assessment.

To begin, the class brainstormed assessment criteria for this specific writing task. Students identified the following questions to guide their assessment:

1. Did it make me feel something?
2. Is the writing original?
3. Does it follow proper formatting and conventions?

Next, the class was numbered off into groups of three. Students had 25 minutes to exchange their work with peers and provide feedback. One copy of each student’s assignment circulated around the group. Feedback was verbal or written. Once the feedback session ended, students had the opportunity to take their work home for the weekend and consider their classmates’ input. They could use or disregard the comments on their work. Either way, they were asked to write an explanation for their choice. When they returned on Monday, they submitted both their rough and good copies for teacher evaluation and filled out a survey relating to the effectiveness of the group feedback they received, and the development of a writing community. Students also commented on their observations about the experience, and made suggestions for future peer feedback sessions. Their input was important to guide my understanding of the optimal conditions for students to assess each other’s work.

At the end of that same week, we discussed the comments made on the peer feedback survey. Students relayed that they were scared of being too honest with their peers and were uncomfortable critiquing anything beyond spelling and grammar errors. To ease students’ discomfort I offered my own poem for group critique so they could practice giving quality feedback. We discussed the need for writers to separate themselves from their writing, despite the difficulty in doing so. We also focused on reader-based comments, rather than criterion based observations (Elbow, 1998). While criterion based observations focus on technical aspects of the writing, such as content, organization, and general effectiveness of the piece, reader-based comments let the writer know what the reader is feeling and thinking throughout the text (Elbow, 1998). To address the concern of sounding too “mean” when giving feedback, we practiced phrasing criticisms in the form of a question. For example, rather than saying “Awkward word choice,” students were encouraged to offer, “Could you choose a different word here that evokes an image consistent with the first stanza?”

Next, we moved the desks into a circle to create a less institutional atmosphere in the room. Students got to choose their favourite of the first four writing assignments to share with the group. As each person read their work, the rest of the class picked out one specific, positive point and created one constructive question as feedback. The author could choose between receiving verbal feedback from the group, or written feedback on a short form I had created. About half of the students chose verbal, while the other half chose written feedback.

Listening to students’ verbal assessment allowed me the opportunity to coach them in
phrasing their comments. For example, instead of simply stating, “That was good,” I could prompt them to specifically identify a part that resonated with them such as, “I loved the image of the desert outside of Vegas. The word choice really helped the tone of being an outcast.” Given that students did not have access to a written copy of the piece, they could not revert to correcting technicalities, and were compelled to focus on the images and emotions evoked by the writing. Additionally, I encouraged them to contribute to the discussion without putting up their hand and waiting to be asked to contribute. During public sharing, it was important that I not stand out as an authority.

The next week, students shared another formative piece of their choice aloud. The intent of this activity was simply to support students in feeling more comfortable sharing work with their peers. The class did not offer any assessment of the writing, but rather provided positive reinforcement by clapping for each other and offering general praise. Students could feel proud of their work, and get positive recognition. This sharing session also showcased the variety in peers’ interpretations of the assignments, thereby reinforcing the value of discussing expectations and ideas with colleagues before and during the writing process.

Finally, students had the opportunity to provide peer feedback on the summative task. Since this assignment was of greater weighting than were previous pieces for the unit mark, I reinforced the impact that high-quality critique could have on students’ grades. I gave students the rubric for my evaluation of the summative writing task. We discussed what each indicator meant and assessed an exemplar together. Next, following students’ recommendations on the survey, I asked students to choose four peers to be part of their peer feedback group. Students brought three copies of their work to class. Those who neglected to complete their work for feedback received a late penalty. Students had the entire period to read their peers’ summative writing pieces, and then provide their comments. Each read the other three writers’ assignments quietly, made note of strengths and then posed questions to prompt reflection and refinement. The atmosphere was fairly casual, as students ate the treat of the week and dialogued about their work. Again, students could rework their writing over the weekend. They handed in all edited drafts along with a good copy on Monday.

Upon submission of the summative assignment, students completed another survey about the perceived effectiveness of the feedback they had received. This second survey contained the same questions as the first, with two additional questions exploring their confidence as an assessor (see Appendix 1).

Data Collection and Analysis

I analyzed the survey data by comparing the early and late unit feedback on the student surveys. This included calculating the mean score for each statement, as well as looking for trends in the ranking most commonly selected. I also took note of similar comments and suggestions for future feedback sessions provided at the end of each survey.

While students were giving and receiving feedback I took general observation notes about student involvement in editing activities and chatted with individuals about their overall perceptions of the usefulness of their peers’ support for their writing.

Following the collection of the final survey, I conducted interviews with a sampling of the class (six randomly selected students) to get more specific feedback about the value of peer assessment. The interview questions were based on the categories of statements in the survey. This gave students to opportunity to verbally elaborate on their perception of peer feedback. I asked:
1. Do you think there is a connection between feeling like you’re part of a community and giving and receiving peer feedback?
2. Did you use the feedback provided by your peers to improve your own writing?
3. Do you feel like you’re becoming a better writer because of the use of peer feedback in this course?

Results and Discussion

Students wrote more comments about participation in peer feedback at the end of the unit than at the beginning. They felt more invested in and familiar with the process, so they took the opportunity to provide more feedback about their experience. An increased number of comments and suggestions on the final survey also indicate that students felt more valued in their community than at the beginning of the semester. I believe that if the students felt that their opinions did not matter, they would have been less willing to trust that their teacher was sincerely considering their feedback, and would consequently have refrained from providing their insights. Students’ comments provided insight into their sense of community, perceptions of the value of peers’ feedback, and their confidence in their own abilities.

Table 1: Survey Results (n=16)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Average First Survey</th>
<th>Average Second Survey</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sense of community</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>It is easy to ask my peers for help.</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>The atmosphere in the classroom has a positive impact on my participation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>I feel like I am part of a writing community.</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Perception of Peers’ Competence</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My peers are good at giving me feedback.</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer feedback is useful.</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Student Confidence in Own Ability</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Assessing each other made it easier to look critically at my own assignment</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had enough time to provide and receive thorough feedback.</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I felt comfortable giving my peers honest feedback.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>4.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am more confident about the feedback I give, compared with the beginning of the unit.</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>3.4</td>
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</table>
Students’ Sense of Community

Student perceptions of community were positive at both the beginning and end of the unit (see Table 1). The results have to be interpreted cautiously because students were in a small class in a relatively small school, and were likely comfortable with one another before experiencing any of my community building efforts. Students felt that this class lent itself well to giving peer feedback. They commented that they felt comfortable because of how well they knew the other students, as expressed by one student: “I know most of the people so it isn’t too awkward.” Another student explained why it was easy to give and receive feedback in this class: “Everyone else is doing it and everyone is pretty much in the same boat.”

Follow up interviews indicated positive perceptions of peer feedback and community. One student said, “Yes, [my relationship with my peers] definitely affects the way you give feedback, and get it. If you don’t really know them then you don’t really want to ruin a potential relationship.”

Perception of Peers’ Competence

Perceptions about the quality of feedback received from peers remained static. On both early and late surveys, the majority of students indicated that peers are “sometimes” good at giving feedback. Comments on the final survey elaborated on this feeling: “Sometimes people don’t give much feedback,” and “most people…are too scared.”

According to the average responses there was a slight decrease in students’ perceptions of peer feedback being useful. However, the majority of student responses moved from “Sometimes” to “Most of the time” when assessing the usefulness of peer feedback. One student wrote, “It’s nice to have class time to do feedback.” Another noted, “Most feedback helps.” Chatter around the classroom also indicated that students increasingly trusted the value of peer feedback. Whereas they groaned and hesitated to participate in giving and receiving assessment on their first formative piece, they were happy to exchange their work on the summative assignment. Most students were also fully engaged in the process, using the time to provide their best feedback rather than simply socializing with friends. A few indicated verbally that they were happy to have the chance to improve their writing. Van Gennip, Segers, & Tillema (2010) predicted this outcome, as their research findings showed that “students’ perceptions of peer assessment generally change for the better as they gain more experience with this mode of assessment” (p. 282). In the follow up interview, one student explained that he used peers’ feedback because, “[He] knew that [his] writing wasn’t the best there is and other people’s opinions and ideas made [his] story better.” Another expressed confidence in her peers’ ability, relating, “There is always room for improvement. Other people may also be able to notice things I did not.”

Overall, students’ comments showed a favourable view of their peers’ ability to provide feedback despite the decline in ranking on the survey scale (see Table 1). By the end of the unit, students accepted the role of peer feedback, especially in a creative writing class. In the interview, one student said, “[Peer feedback] is better because in this class we are meant to help our peers. In other classes you’re on your own!” This reveals that a norm was established during this first unit of study. Students expected to help one another in this class and peer feedback was the primary vehicle for this support.
Students’ Confidence in their Own Ability

Perceptions of students’ own ability as writers and editors also improved over the course of the unit. This mirrored Van Gennip, Segers, and Tillema’s (2010) finding that “trust in the peer as assessor…did not turn out to be a direct predictor of perceived learning. In contrast, trust in the self as an assessor appeared a predictor of perceived learning” (p. 288). Gielin, Tops, Dochy, Onghena, & Meets (2010) also echoed this result. In their comparative study between peer and teacher feedback they found that in peer assessment performance improved because “learning goals [were] clarified and internalized…A clear view of the goals, criteria and standards of assessment is essential, and even without the actual feedback taking place can raise performance by generating appropriate learning activities” (p. 145).

Students in EWC4U also gave high ranking to “I am more confident about the feedback I give, compared with the beginning of the unit.” This indicates a more reflective approach to the writing and editing process, and perception of improvement in understanding assignment criteria and course expectations.

Overall, most students experienced moderate improvement in their summative grade, relative to their formative work. This, in part, can be credited to their increased efforts and understanding of giving effective feedback. However, factors such as previous my formative assessment, student perceptions of the importance of a summative task (versus formative tasks), and interest in the writing task itself also could have contributed to the students’ improved grades.

Implications and Limitations

Overall, students enjoyed the instruction and the amount of time spent on developing community and honing their peer assessment skills. The short time frame may help to explain why the surveys did not show a significant increase in their perceptions of the value of peer assessment. A longer period of study might reveal a more positive effect on peer feedback. As Van Gennip, Segers, and Tillema (2010) describe: “The idea that psychological safety may influence the learning effects of peer assessment has arisen because of the positive impact of psychological safety on learning...that was found in several studies” (p. 282). Students need to feel safe and valued in order for their own learning to occur, and to support the learning of others in the classroom. Students liked this writing class, not only because of their pre-existing interest in writing, but also because of the atmosphere I developed in the classroom.

Given the limitations of a small sample of highly motivated students, it is difficult to generalize widely (perhaps not even to other English classes at my school) the positive findings about students’ perception of their ability to provide peer feedback. EWC4U is an elective course filled with students with a talent for reading and writing. They were highly motivated to follow teacher instruction to obtain high grades. Moreover, many of the students in this class had already taken two classes together during the previous semester. As such, our class may have been safe for them in part because of previous teachers’ attempts at community building and fostering positive relationships between students.

My findings indicate the need for future research using a quasi-experimental design, in which one class receives community-based training on peer assessment and the other acts as a control group by using teacher based assessment. Further, in future research it will be important to include the influence of teaching style and personality on peer assessment. Because I was the students’ teacher who was evaluating their writing, I chose to exclude questions asking them to assess the influence of my teaching style on their feedback and writing. In order to determine the
influence of teaching style, future research could also compare and contrast two classes using the same interventions, but having different teachers. This would carry the action research one step further to assess the impact that a teacher bears on the development of community, and students’ commitment to one another’s success.

References


Author Biography
Amie Willoughby is a high school English teacher and Program Leader of languages. She recently completed her Master Of Education in Curriculum and Teacher Leadership at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto.
Appendix A

**Peer Feedback Student Survey** (Final, additional questions are italicized)

Please answer the following questions with honesty.

Rate your answers on the 1-5 scale.  
1=not at all  2=rarely  3=sometimes  4=most of the time  5=all the time

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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Additional comments:

Suggestions for future peer feedback sessions: