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PEER CORRECTION VS. TEACHERS' CORRECTION OF WRITING.

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RECENT RESEARCH WOULD SEEM TO IMPLY THAT THE RESULT OF INTENSIVE TEACHER-CORRECTION OF STUDENT COMPOSITION DOES NOT JUSTIFY THE EFFORT. IF TEACHER-CORRECTION DOES NOT PRODUCE THE IMPROVEMENT OF STUDENT COMPOSITION, PERHAPS PEER-CORRECTION WOULD BE MORE EFFECTIVE. A REVIEW OF THE FEW PERTINENT STUDIES INDICATES THAT PEER-CORRECTION IS AT LEAST AS EFFECTIVE AS TEACHER-CORRECTION. ALTHOUGH THE RESULTS OF A 7-MONTH STUDY CONDUCTED IN SYOSSET, NEW YORK, TO COMPARE THE WRITING GROWTH OF NINTH-GRADERS TAUGHT BY EITHER THE TEACHER-OR PEER-METHOD OF CORRECTION WERE SOMEWHAT INCONCLUSIVE, THEY DEMONSTRATED THAT USING THE TEACHER-METHOD REQUIRED 8 TIMES AS MANY HOURS AFTER SCHOOL AS DID THE PEER-METHOD. THUS, THE PEER-METHOD APPEARED TO BE MORE EFFICIENT, IF NOT MORE EFFECTIVE. ITS USE IMPLIES THE FOLLOWING STEPS--(1) PRELIMINARY TRAINING OF STUDENTS IN EDITING, (2) THE TEACHING OF A SHORT UNIT ON COMPOSITION BEFORE EACH NEW PROJECT--INCLUDING INITIATORY ACTIVITIES, WRITING, CORRECTING, AND REVISION, AND (3) THE PRODUCTION OF CHECK LISTS OR GUIDE SHEETS TO SHOW STUDENTS WHAT TO SEEK AND TO SAY IN CORRECTING THE COMPOSITIONS OF THEIR PEERS (THIS SPEECH WAS DELIVERED AT THE 1967 NCTE ANNUAL CONVENTION.) (MM)

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PEER CORRECTION VS. TEACHERS' CORRECTION OF WRITING

by Howard Pierson *Ab*

"Sp." "Run-on." "Dang." "Omit." "Comma splice." "What does this word mean?" "How do these two paragraphs connect?" "Fragment." "Have you any evidence to prove this?" "Capitalize." "Colloquial." "Too vague." "Weak intro."

Between September and June of the present school year, English teachers will have written corrections like these in the millions. No one really knows how many millions; assuming 90,000 teachers, each making five corrections on each of five compositions written by 125 boys and girls, one may compute over 281 million corrections. Whatever the actual magnitude, it is big. And time-consuming. Some members of the profession have consequently begun to wonder whether the game is worth the candle. Do the results of marking papers justify the effort? Research in composition seems to imply that they do not.

Not that there has been enough research. But the few studies that have been made of correction by teachers generally have served to intensify doubts. Investigating freshman composition at the University of Alberta, Buxton learned that the teachers who corrected papers thoroughly, obtained better improvement in writing than the teachers who corrected papers scantily. However, no one else has found any good words to say for teacher correction. In comparing ninth graders in Iowa, Fellows arranged for some classes to have essays corrected by their teachers and other classes to have essays marked with letter ratings only. After this study ended, neither group wrote any better than the other. Recently, Arnold and Burton saw the same results when they had teachers in Florida mark tenth grade compositions with varying degrees of intensity. It seems that the case for

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teachers' correcting has yet to be proven.

Should it be true that corrections by teachers are not effective, what might be ^{aspect of} missing from this procedure ^{dis} that encourages writing progress? Maybe students just can't learn to write by reading criticisms of their writing. After all, some items like "run-on" are repeated in every composition a student writes between grades seven and thirteen. It is tempting to conclude that writers are born and not made, that no one can teach composition. Persons successful in the literary world tend to this view of the matter.

There is a chance, however, that many students could become better writers if they stopped resisting or ignoring corrections. Maybe they are more willing to listen to their peers than to their elders. James Coleman has found that many able high school students curb the expression of their intellectual talents in order to gain the acceptance of their peers. Such is the power of one's contemporaries. Perhaps boys and girls should correct one another's writing. Maybe this kind of correction accomplishes what traditional correction does not accomplish. Is the peer method better than the teacher method? Again, there has not been enough research to provide conclusive answers. So far, the one method seems to be no better than the other.

When Dora V. Smith used peer correction with large classes of ninth graders in Minnesota, she found that they were able to score as well on composition tests as small classes whose writings she corrected herself. With freshmen at Purdue, Maize got better results from a combination of peer correcting and frequent writing than he did from a combination of teachers'

correcting and infrequent writing. Freshman in Oklahoma tested no differently regardless of whether teachers corrected their papers or whether they corrected one another's, according to Boyet. Sutton and Allen noted the same outcome in a study of Stetson University freshmen. These few investigations suggest that the peer method is at least as effective as the teacher method.

We may not learn which composition teaching method is truly the more effective, however, until measurement of achievement in writing becomes more precise. It is still a very new and unsophisticated discipline. For this reason, one could not call the results of my own research in peer and teachers' evaluation conclusive. I do feel, nonetheless, that they merit the attention of English teachers who correct writing. The study, conducted at South Woods Junior High School in Syosset, New York, on Long Island, found no differences in the writing growth of ninth graders when they were taught by means of either the teacher or the peer method. In addition, it took the teachers eight times as many hours after school to correct themes as it took to do paper work related to using the peer method. If further investigation supports the notion that the peer method is as effective as the teacher method and is also less time-consuming, then English teachers, long concerned about the burdens of teaching loads, may wish to know more about peer correction.

There are many ways of using the peer method, just as there are varieties of correcting by teachers. In Syosset, it was first necessary to train the students in the art of acting as editors of each other's writing. The teachers provided their classes with samples of writings by students and with samples

of peer corrections and of comments on the efficacy of these corrections. These samples were the subjects of class discussion. After the training period, the teachers conducted a three or four day unit of composition in the following sequence: (1) prevision, (2) writing, (3) correcting, (4) revision. Such a unit would occur every two or three weeks.

The first stage of the sequence, prevision, consisted of procedures of an introductory and planning nature. Teachers would ask questions like "Have you received any good letters lately?" to stimulate thought about the impending assignment. They would also discuss with students ways of doing an assignment, for example, listing the ideas one wishes to support in an editorial. If the assignment were to be the composing of a personal essay, the teachers might have their students examine Chesterton's style of developing "On Lying in Bed." Sometimes prevision meant practicing skills needed to do the assignment, such as punctuating dialog in anticipation of writing a story. Prevision was considered essential in both the conventional and the peer method classes. Because many teachers minimize this aspect of composition instruction, the Syosset faculty sometimes found it a new experience that they came to value highly.

While prevision activities were frequently similar in both comparison groups in the study, a unique kind of prevision arose in the peer method classes. There, the teachers and children devised materials called guide sheets. These were lists of ideas that served to show each peer critic what to seek and to say regarding a classmate's written work. Knowing that their compositions would be read with the help of the guide sheets, young authors also used these materials as pointers to what and how to write. Copies of a typical guide sheet are available for those in the audience who wish to examine a sample.

During the second stage of the composition sequence, students wrote their compositions in class. Next, in stage three, teachers organized groups for peer correction. These groups consisted of four or five students who read their papers to each other or who exchanged papers and then wrote their critiques on the guide sheets. Occasionally, more than one critic reviewed a paper. When problems or controversies arose between authors and critics, teachers arbitrated or suggested the use of reference volumes which were available in the classroom. From time to time a group thought very highly of the work of a member and read it to the whole class, explaining why it had been chosen. In order to encourage criticism and its acceptance, teachers did not allow critics to rate each other's products for the record. There were also attempts to balance the numbers of weak and strong members in each group; memberships that did not relate well together would be reshuffled.

After the first three months of the experiment, an observer read sample writings and peer corrections. He noted that many young critics were skillful in finding mechanical, sentence, and paragraph weaknesses. The mechanical errors that peers noticed easily included punctuation, spelling, manuscript conventions, and abbreviations. Run-ons, fragments, and lack of sentence variety were also discovered without difficulty, one student noting: "Your sentences should be different types instead of every one being the same." Among paragraph deficiencies found by peers was the absence of separate paragraphs for different speakers in dialog.

The observer also remarked that peers seemed less able to correct mistakes in usage, diction, and organization. A major inability to correct usage was seen in regard to pronoun reference. For example, three peers

read this sentence: "He told everyone to go into their basement." In the context, "their" should have been "his." One young critic commented, "Words confused," but neither of the other two students referred in any way to this lack of agreement between pronoun and antecedent. When one considers the widespread occurrence of "their" for "his," one may not wish to judge the students very harshly. In regard to errors in diction, few peers objected to the needless repetition of words. When it came to helping one another to organize content better, not many peers were equal to the task, confining themselves to such vague comments as "good, well-organized." As one could expect, critical abilities among peers seemed to vary from poor to good: a case in point was two widely different readings of one paper; the first containing abundant references to spelling, punctuation, sentence, and manuscript convention errors; the second listing no mistakes at all.

In the sixth month of the study, the same observer felt that students had made much progress in learning how to correct errors in diction but less in usage and in organization. There was also a lamentable tendency of the young writers to accept mistaken corrections. Peers, however, seemed to have become very much aware of when compositions lacked audience appeal.

What follows is a sample of an editorial that one student wrote during the experiment and that a classmate corrected.

"Most of half a year of school have past. Day after day I have gone to the same room.

"All my subject classes are interesting and amusing, but then I have lunch. In the lunch room I eat with my fellow companions. By now, although I still like them I am getting tired of them and the surrounding area.

"In the lunch room there are two large drab, dull looking murals.

"I fell, if we had a bright new murals they would lift our morales and attitudes. And would certianly make the lunch room and lunches for the 40 min. we are there more enjoyable and interesting."

A classmate of the author reacted generally thus: "Sloppy. Margins O.K. Paragraphs indented O.K. Don't abbrev. min. Fell should be feel. Mural not murals. No basic facts all appeal to emotions. It would be nice to have new mural but its not that important to put in the school newspaper. There is so much going on in the lunch Room I never had time to notice the murals."

Here is a student writer getting a reaction from another student in reference to mechanics and ideas. Who can say that such an experience, even though incomplete, is worth less than the experience of being criticized by a teacher? During the experiment an observer sampled some of the papers corrected by teachers. The corrections varied in intensity from a four minute listing of correction symbols and short questions to seven minutes of comments, praises, questions, and symbols. In one instance of the more thorough and time-consuming kind of evaluation of a composition and where the student had concluded a description of his sense impressions, while at a beach, with the words, "I knew this was the end!" the teacher wrote, "Of the world? of summer? the ultimate experience?" In his revision, the boy changed the sentence as follows: "I knew this was the end of the ultimate experience." Perhaps this failure in communication proves that even more than seven minutes are needed to correct a composition, because the teacher in this case should have spent some time anticipating the effects of her comments and should then have written, "What do you mean by end? The ultimate experience? The end of the world? The end of summer?" I prefer to think that the boy read

the teacher's comments in a perfunctory way and chose the fanciest alternative without even knowing or caring about what it meant.

There is a view abroad that teachers are not making enough comments when they correct papers. I feel rather that there is a tendency to make too many comments and thus to cause students to become indifferent to corrections. I also believe that some English teachers make the wrong comments, stressing superficial matters rather than items connected with the communicating of ideas. Solely to insist that a student begin a sentence with a noun clause is to me superficial. To pick at every mechanical error is the same. Perhaps the most discouraging method of all is to tell the student that he somehow just doesn't have what it takes to write: "Get better organization." "This isn't a good characterization." "You simply touched the surface of this topic; it's a very large one to explore." I fear that something is very wrong with correction.

To get back to my general description of the peer method, you will recall that each unit in composition at Syosset was conducted in the sequence: pre-
vision, writing, correcting, and revision. I should now like to proceed to the fourth stage of the sequence, revision. Like pre-
vision, revision is very important in writing and is often neglected by teachers of composition. It is probably neglected because, as illustrated in the foregoing sample, it is very difficult to persuade impatient children to polish and to perfect their work products, especially those they have been more or less compelled to produce. In the study reported here, neither the conventional classes nor the peer groups distinguished themselves as revisers of their own writings. Now it seems to me that no method of correction, be it teacher or peer, merits any effort unless those who receive the corrections take them seriously.

In either case, students will certainly view revision lightly if their teachers do. The Syosset experience suggested that teachers should refuse to accept unedited drafts of compositions and should also provide class time for revision after correction. What is more, if the teacher has been the one to correct papers, he must collect them again, after the students have revised them, and he must reread the compositions in order to pursue further those writers who have not revised adequately. Where peers correct one another's work, the teacher must see to it that classmates not only evaluate papers but also verify that their suggestions have either been followed or rejected for good cause.

It may very well be that the frequency of the writing experience is less important to composition growth than is the quality or intensity of the writing experience. And quality may be largely a matter of revision.

So much for the sequence of activities in the peer method of teaching composition. Syosset teachers repeated the sequence thirteen times in seven months. In so doing, they learned much about its advantages and shortcomings. They found out, for example, that some students in classes of average ability were unable to edit the writings of classmates usefully. Some were also unable to make good use of the help of their fellows. Also, just as it is difficult to train writers, it was hard to train editors. The teachers, did, however, find some values in peer correction. Students in peer method classes, they noted, seemed to acquire a better sense of audience than did those who wrote only for teachers. In addition, many students appeared to be able to acquire the ability to talk about writing with a precision and an ease that the teachers had not anticipated in children. And, although some of our colleagues would

call them merely noisier, peer method classes were livelier and more enthusiastic than the traditional groups.

Since the days of their experiment, the teachers have occasionally combined both methods of correction. At the beginning of a semester, which is a very busy season, they prefer to use the conventional method, because it does not call for as much training of pupils in new ways as does the peer method. When the pressure relaxes, they then introduce the peer method. Combining of methods also occurs when the labor of correcting is divided between students and teachers: students commenting about each other's mechanical, sentence, and paragraph errors, and teachers carrying the burden of criticizing more difficult matters like usage, diction, and organization.

To conclude, the peer method seems to lead to the same measured results as the teacher method and has the added advantage of constituting much less of an after-hours problem for teachers. It is also possible to use both methods in varying combinations. Although no one has as yet proven conclusively which is the better way to teach writing, enough doubt has been cast upon the efficacy of teachers' correcting of writing to suggest that it's time for a change.

PEER CORRECTION

A Sample Guide Sheet for Correcting a Friendly Letter

Form

- | | | | |
|------------------|------------|---------------------|-----------|
| 1. Appearance | attractive | sloppy | |
| 2. Error in form | heading | salutation | body |
| | | complimentary close | signature |

Content

1. Is the letter interesting and informative?
2. Is the writing natural and friendly?
3. Did the author organize his material?
4. Did the writer use good taste?
5. What do you like about this letter?
6. What can be improved?

Mechanics

1. Spelling errors, lines:
2. Punctuation, lines:
3. "Words frequently confused."
4. Dependent clauses written as sentences (frag.), lines:
5. Run-ons.
 - a. Long, stringy sentences, lines:
 - b. Commas for periods, lines:
6. Error in use of possessive.
7. Wrong word or poor choice of word, lines:

Written by _____

Rated by _____

Date _____

South Woods Junior High School
Syosset, New York 11791