

TITLE PAGE

Peer Interaction and Writing Development in a Social Studies High School classroom

Erik Berridge

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## ABSTRACT

Peer review can be a valuable tool in the writing development of high school sophomores. Specifically, this research study explores the use of peer review to improve writing skills and to build content knowledge in a social studies high school classroom through the use of peer interaction. The problem in social studies high school instruction is that students do not make the connection between thinking and writing, that writing can help clarify thinking. The current educational environment does not adequately support ideas around the use of peer interaction for student improvement.

The purpose of this study is to examine peer review as a part of the writing process, and to evaluate the effectiveness of this approach in building content knowledge. Students engaged in a structured peer review process as part of a written assignment in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade world history class. The students worked in small groups and analyzed each other's written draft. The students had guiding questions to assist in this process. Students reported a deeper understanding of historical events by interacting in the peer review process.

An interview was conducted with Sylvia Jones, an experienced high school English teacher. She offered insights into the use of peer review and the importance of modeling in a cooperative learning environment. Sylvia supported the notion that both content-building and critical thinking can happen in a social studies high school classroom that uses peer review as part of the writing process.

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

My initial desire and motivation in writing a research paper was focused on finding support for students and teachers engaged in critical thinking. I was interested in research that focused on not assuming that everything that one has learned is the only answer. Critical thinking theory framed my thinking. Elder (2007) frames this concept as a “self-guided, self-disciplined thinking which attempts to reason at the highest level of quality in a fair-minded way” (p.1). Critical thinking supports life-long improvement in reasoning abilities, analysis, assessment and self-improvement (2007). My concrete steps in research were linking critical thinking to reading and writing. This attachment initially fulfilled my desire of finding more specific research that supported people engaged in analysis of information, questioning, and deep learning as opposed to superficial learning.

As an active member of my school community, along with other social studies teachers at the school site, we support the concept of critical thinking linked to student reading and writing. However, social studies teachers in secondary education always seem perplexed with exactly how to get students to show written analysis of historical information. Conversations amongst educators usually support the notion that students can do a good job of summarizing history, but they have a difficult time using an historical event to support an idea or argument.

A professional learning community focuses on what students learn, not necessarily just what they are taught (DuFour, 2004). DuFour emphasizes that this subtle shift of a teachers’ mission “from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning-has profound implications for schools” (2004). This type of community is in place for teachers of

world history, a subject at my school site where teachers collaborate to improve how students show analysis in their writing.

Thinking in this context, further refinement and focus of the research was needed. I was interested on keeping my examination of this topic above an ending point of some *type* of learning and into the awareness that active participation can bring in *any* context or environment. Thinking like this led me to investigate the writing process and ideas surrounding it. Research was kept within the scope of the writing process in the context of high school social studies.

Research on the writing process opened my eyes to different forms of constructive learning (Harlow, Cummings & Abersturi, 2006). This form of learning is based around the notion that being engaged and active in learning has a more powerful and long-term effect on a student than a passive or teacher-centered form does. Sometimes this type of learning takes place by individuals reflecting on outside realities or in the inner mental realities that exist in us all (2006). Harlow et al. (2006) point out that their interpretation of constructive learning is “through the interplay of the constructive power of the mind and the independence of the external world” (p. 2). Essentially, constructive learning can take place when a student is engaged with their surroundings.

In a classroom this engagement is directed by the teacher and the environment they help to create. This type of constructive learning is best carried out when interaction is fostered and developed amongst students (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). This interplay among students and the environment they occupy is what can be called a cooperative learning environment, an environment where “students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (p. 286). Findings on the use of the writing process in a

classroom presupposed that the classroom be set-up as a cooperative learning environment. This crystallized my view of cooperative learning as being a good learning environment for my high school students and the use of the writing process.

Continued research revealed that peer editing is a part of the writing process, a process that is interpreted differently by teachers. Analyzing the “peer” part of the writing process allowed me to choose one which was authentic to my purpose, and that is peer review. Peer review is the interactive part of the writing process that focuses on substantive revision issues of interpretation, meaning and development (Armstrong & Paulson, 2008).

Holistic commentary is utilized in this approach that can also allow students an active role by forming questions to direct the reader in further refinement on coherency of their writing (Armstrong & Paulson, 2008). Feedback on student work in the peer review process can also allow for teacher-guided, directed feedback. This type of hands-on, student-centered learning allows for reflection of one’s own work by looking at the work of others. Armstrong and Paulson point out that this can lead to students learning about the responsibility for and authority of their own learning (Armstrong & Paulson, 2008).

In this collaborative exchange, students apply critical thinking to their writing by constructively engaging in methods of inquiry and reflection with the group. Depending on how this peer review is organized by the teacher, key historical elements can be included in this interaction. Pre-planning and explicit instructions are critical for this to occur, peer review can only work with social studies curriculum if the teacher is committed to structure lessons that reflect the importance of writing (Kennedy-Kalafatis & Careleton, 1996). Keeping this in mind will lead to deeper understandings of content

in a social studies classroom while improving writing skills at the same time. As Peterson (2007) points out, “content area subjects provide real-life questions and topics, as well as authentic contexts for student writing” (p. 3).

Authentic, applicable learning is not something that is done to us, but rather it is something we must do. Learning to write using the writing process is such a way, it allows for engagement of the student in the *act* of writing to improve their skills. This *act* is supported by interaction with others, and it is through the act and the use of peer interaction that meaningful growth in one’s writing ability and application of critical thinking can be utilized.

Reviewing one’s own work and the work of one’s peers on an assignment can allow the reader to see how one set of events can be explained in different ways. Ideas around cause and effect and points-of-view on a specific set of events can further cement content of historical facts through repetition, reflection, and reading the work of others to provide different perspectives. The teacher needs to be clear about the parameters of this type of student learning. Once an organized and supportive environment is in place, learning and application of content can take place in an interactive environment.

#### Statement of the Problem

The process of peer review is not documented in a manner that translates to application for professional collaboration and student implementation. The process itself involves students actively critiquing the written work of others, and reflecting on their own work.

The English Language Arts Standards do not address peer review. It is not discussed in state based English Language Arts Standards for secondary education



(English-Language Arts Content Standards, 2008). Also, the “peer” part of the writing process has vague and abstract language that describe a variety of teaching methods and student interpretations. Peer review does not seem to be consistently applied or understood instructionally in working with high school students. Lack of information on what exactly the “peer” part of the writing process even is ultimately fails to engage students in the practice of peer review.

Furthermore, there is a general lack of support in current mainstream education for a cooperative learning environment in a high school social studies classroom. Ultimately, all of this fails to engage students in the practice of peer review as part of the writing process, the interaction necessary for critical analysis, and the ability of our students to “think on their own feet” so to speak.

#### Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to examine the writing process, explore in detail the “peer” part of the process I call peer review, and understand the role of a cooperative learning environment as a key element for this process to work in building students’ critical writing and thinking skills.

This paper also explores effective teaching strategies using peer review in a social studies high school classroom. Theories and practices are identified from the research literature.

#### Research Question

Peer review is the part of the writing process that uses student interaction to provide feedback on development of written analysis. A teacher implements this to provide for the application of said content that allows a student to place facts in a context

that is understandable. This construction of meaning provides for clarity of content and the possibility of further analysis of both content and context. What is the effect of using peer review as a strategy in increasing clarity in content through building the writing process in a social studies high school classroom?

### Theoretical Rationale

#### *Cooperative Learning: Johnson and Johnson*

According to Johnson and Johnson (2005), “Cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning” (p. 285-86). Johnson and Johnson (2005) also clarify what the process of cooperative learning accomplishes.

Through experiencing cooperative learning in all subject areas and grade levels, students gain a cognitive understanding of the nature of cooperation of mutuality, procedural competencies of how to initiate and maintain cooperative efforts, and the emotional commitment to attitudes and values underlying cooperation and mutuality (e.g., valuing the well-being of collaborators and one-self, promoting the common good). (p. 286).

In theory, the educational support of student interaction in the process of writing and peer review is found in the understanding of cooperative learning. Cooperative learning, as defined by the Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota, “is a relationship in a group of students that requires positive interdependence, individual accountability, interpersonal skills, face-to-face promotive interaction, and processing” (author unknown, <http://www.co-operation.org/>). The work of Johnson and Johnson has been instrumental in this area of educational research and theory. The authors’ basic premise around cooperative learning can be found in a quote from Montagu, (1965):

Without the cooperation of its members society cannot survive, and the society of man has survived because the cooperativeness of its members made survival possible.... It was not an advantageous individual here and there who did so, but the group. In human societies the individuals who are most likely to survive are those who are best enabled to do so by their group (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

Johnson and Johnson bring clarity to the idea that cooperative learning has life-long benefits and practical uses. It behooves a high school student to practice these skills for their preparation in an engaged adult life. Beyond the connections that cooperative learning makes to one becoming a life-long learner, Johnson and Johnson's observations have also shown immediate benefits for students and their learning community. Research has shown that cooperative learning increases student achievement, improves how they feel about school and the teacher, fosters a positive relationship with self and peers, and develops self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1994).

#### *Constructivist Theory: Jean Piaget*

Further support of the writing process, cooperative learning and content acquisition can be found in the works of Jean Piaget (Harlow, Cummings & Abersturi, 2006). His ideas focus on the active part of learning, specifically actions with the environment. Piaget found that learning is more effective when a student is actively engaged in the construction of knowledge rather than passively receiving it (2006). It is in the students' interest to participate in their learning environment, and by engaging in content as part of a process, students can move from cognitive disequilibrium to accommodation of a new schema (2006). Piaget believed that this type of environment supported real acquisition of knowledge, as opposed to a teacher-centered one.

### Assumptions

I assumed that some type of explicit standard relating to the writing process would be found in the research. A working assumption during research reveals that ideas about the writing process and cooperative learning seem very practical and important for a young student. We know that teenagers are already well-versed in verbal communication, so we can extrapolate that written communication is possible.

### Background and Need

Teaching and learning about *the writing process* is documented in the United States in the early 1970s (Freeman, 2007). This was important because it represented a fundamental shift in how writing should be taught, moving instruction away from attention only on the result to a focus on the process. The shift towards looking at writing this way allowed for the possibility that good writing could be taught. This differs from traditional methods of writing which looked only at the end product of writing (Yood, 2005) and the notion that there are some good writers out there, and there are some that are not so good. According to Yood (2005), “the process theory of composing was an outgrowth of the New Rhetoric and a pedagogy aimed at the unprepared, open admissions student” (p. 3). Teaching writing as a *process* allowed for the *teaching* of writing rather than student motivation as being the initial source of which to guide a teacher in a students’ learning desire.

Reading one’s own work and the work of others is a vital part of the writing process, and allows for the reader to formulate alternative thoughts and perspectives from the existing perspectives and norms that they may have. Cornis-Pope and Woodlief (2000) point out that using interpretive abilities allows for more active modes of critical analysis and construction in one’s writing. Reading and writing become both “part of a

critical dialectic that both interprets and reperforms the text” (p. 2). Rereading and writing seem to be a part of cultural construction, offering a stronger mode of how to move from understanding to reformulation.

Another approach to the writing process looks at cognitive mapping (Flower & Hayes, 1981). The “flow chart” indicated in their model represents processes of revising/reviewing one’s work that identifies crucial steps that a writer should be aware of using or not using. This awareness should ultimately allow for a more holistic view of writing. This awareness should also show that writing is not a linear act, but in fact a complex and recursive one that can move in several directions at one time (1981). Essentially, this model is rooted in awareness.

In 1971, Emig produced some significant work just as the teaching and learning of writing as a process was in its early stages of development (Nelms, 1992). Emig started to look at the process of writing, not just the end result, and identified that writing could be broken down into steps and taught/learned. One of the steps mentioned here is what I have been calling the “peer” step, the fourth out of five steps before submission of a finished written piece. Emig supported peer review and participation in the writing process which gave impetus to the consciousness of writing as a process (1992).

The need for peer interaction as a part of the writing becomes apparent by this point. Again, peer interaction serves many roles in the growth of awareness and critical analysis of an individual student and to some extent the community of learners. The writing process allows for students to LEARN how to write, that it is not something reserved just for the “smart” kids, and that writing is a complicated and messy process,

just like our thoughts themselves. As E.M. Forester once said, “how do I know what I think until I see what I say?”

The writing process is important because it allows for steps to be followed that can significantly improve one’s writing ability. Instead of the view that the only thing that matters in writing is the end product, the writing process allows for prewriting, draft, revision, editing and submittal. According to Kennedy-Kalafatis and Carleton (1996):

In becoming aware of their thought processes and of how they use language to encourage the audience’s acceptance of their views, students practice precisely the type of critical thinking that teachers hope to stimulate in students and to see expressed in their writing (p.1).

Experienced writers would be the first ones to validate the importance of the process and specifically the use of peers to help complete the goal of a finished, polished product.

The use of peers is a social activity that requires interaction in the translation of the written language. As Stemper (2002) has pointed out, “If there is no participation of students in their writing, editing suffers, revision has to have feedback” (p. 12). The use of peer editing is a peer interaction, and as described so eloquently by Kennedy-Kalafatis and Carleton (1996):

Quite simply, teaching editing skills is part of improving student writing because critiquing others’ texts eventually leads to the internalization of standards and the ability to evaluate one’s own work” ( p. 1).

Peer interaction also seems to bring added benefits to both the students and to the community of learners at large. Medcalf , Glynn and Moore (2004) point out how peer

interaction can improve social acceptance of differences as well as social interaction with different types of teenage students.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature initially explores the historical context of teaching writing in this country. A revolution in teaching students how to write began almost 40 years ago. This revolution led to the teaching of writing as a process, and the literature also examines the specific part of this process known as peer review. Statistical information is also reviewed. Finally, literature explores the research on cooperative learning and its connection to teaching writing as a process.

### Historical Context: National Writing Project

The 1970s seems to have been a time when public schools were thriving in California, or at least doing much better than the current state of affairs. To aid the new idea of teaching writing as a process during this time, the University of California at Berkeley held the first Bay Area Writing Project (BAWP) Invitational Summer Institute (Freeman, 2007). The goal of this institute was to harness the notion that teachers who had developed successful strategies around this new process of teaching writing should share their ideas with other teachers (Freeman, 2007). The need for sharing these new ideas became obvious amongst educators and enthusiasm was built around this concept.

By 1978, BAWP had morphed into the National Writing Project (NWP) and had 41 local sites up and running (2007). Today, there are over 200 NWP sites nationwide that promote the teaching, sharing and learning of best practices around the writing process. The core principles of NWP have been, and still are that teachers of writing should write themselves, teachers should use a broad range of techniques when teaching writing and teachers need to encourage students to write a lot (Freeman, 2007). With the amount of information that is now being communicated via all the new electronic



gadgets, the importance of writing, especially of being a proficient, reflective and thoughtful writer, are more paramount than ever. The NWP has an interactive website with unrestricted access, located at [www.nwp.org](http://www.nwp.org).

### The Writing Process

The literature represents a variety of perspectives on the writing process. Stemper (2002) points out that students have learned to hate writing and revising because in the traditional method of teaching writing, messing up is considered a form of failure. A community of learners needs to come together with an understanding that writing involves the process of being dirty. Being confused and messy in one's work with writing is a normal part of the process; it is not a sign that the author is wrong!

Medcalf et al. (2004) emphasize the fact that peer tutoring as part of peer interaction is **cognitively-oriented**, and is geared more towards self-management when it is taught effectively. Self-management is a hidden benefit of having a student engaged in the writing process. The authors also emphasize the benefits of school-wide inclusion into the process and point out a host of 'other' social benefits that come with using peer interaction with teenagers in a school setting (2004).

Kennedy-Kalafatis and Carleton (1996) point out that writing is communication, and that without an audience communication cannot occur. Thus, the purpose of writing is lost without peer interaction. They point out that New Rhetoric looks at a more complex relationship between thinking and the process of writing (1996).

Schuster (2004) points out the insanity of trying to demonstrate writing proficiency in today's national and state writing test environment. His article begins by

pointing out what the research shows. “Imagine what kind of writing you would produce if you could not plan it or revise it” (p.1).

Voss (1983) cautions that teaching writing as a process is not nearly as easy as it may seem. Voss goes on to mention that teachers originally focused on the correct “product” of student writing. However, training in the teaching of the process of writing shows teachers “can be persuaded that they are not really teaching *writing*, and can learn process pedagogy” (p. 278). Prewriting and planning is a key for the process to begin, and Voss even mentions “composing aloud” (p. 280) as a useful tool in certain parts of the writing process. Voss credited Emig (1983) with the idea of “composing aloud” and shared her assumption that this composition reflects, if not parallels, the actual inner process.

Cornis-Pope and Woodlief (2000) discuss the importance of rereading and rewriting to improve formal analysis, awareness, construction of meaning and potential for renewal. Discussion is also focused on new technologies and how hypertext and networked communication allows readers to interact with the text more closely in a variety of ways.

Yood (2005) looks at the writing process with facts around its inception, and then much more in-depth into how the “process” became part of a “paradigm.” Yood argues that in light of today’s challenges in public education, thinking in paradigms is useless to the point of paralysis. The teaching of writing must find its way back to understanding it by the process, and the author proposes a “present-process” as a new, workable perspective to move forward.

### Writing and Peer Review

Armstrong and Paulson (2008) point out that the use of the term “peer review” is one of the most abused, confused and misused terms that are associated with the writing process. The authors point out several terms that mean the same thing as “peer review,” such as “peer response, peer editing, peer evaluation and peer critique/peer criticism” (Armstrong & Paulson). This article explains some of the variation and confusion with the approach of certain titles to applying this “peer” part of the writing process. “No community-wide, common understanding of what peer review is-or what it should accomplish-currently exists” (p.398).

Within this ambiguity however, commonality is found in the fact that all the terms support student-centered learning. Armstrong and Paulson break down and analyze each of the “peer” titles, matching to the best of their ability the title with a description that fits. Armstrong and Paulson emphasize that this fit is very important for the teacher, that the teacher must be aware of what they are trying to accomplish before assigning student’s responsibility of this part of the writing process (2008). Armstrong and Paulson urge teachers to choose their language carefully, pointing out after all that “if we cannot clarify our terminology and say what we mean, how can we expect our students to do the same in their writing?” (p. 406).

### The Relationship between Writing and Building Content Knowledge

According to Ediger (1992), “writing needs to be given adequate emphasis in the area of social studies” (p. 1). Emphasizing the importance of creativity, Ediger points out useful writing techniques to use depending on the historical topic being studied. Some of these ideas include outlines of text, summaries of content, scripts or illustrations, poems, diary entries, summarizing pros and cons of historical controversies, reports, hypothesis

and logs (1992). Optimal writing in these and other creative techniques in a social studies classroom needs to be guided by the teacher (1992).

Using writing in content classes helps reinforce and build understanding while students think more deeply about information and ideas that they encounter (Peterson, 2007). Pools of knowledge that come with units of study can be drawn upon when a student is asked to write. This type of writing allows students to find connections to their own experiences with the world around them, leading to an authentic context for understanding content and writing (2007). Peterson shows the connection between writing and building content knowledge by pointing out that “As students are learning about the concepts within a subject, they can also be learning about writing” (p. 3). Peterson (2007) also points out that using writing in a content-based classroom can complement and expand the learning and teaching of content concepts. Writing also allows for students to reflect on their ideas and to shape and consolidate their learning as they move forward with the building of more content.

Writing allows students in a content-specific area to be assessed on their conceptual learning to the highest degree (2007). Using student writing as assessment allows for a shared-sense of ownership for the learning and assessment that goes on in a content-specific course, and ultimately this interaction between content and writing allows for authentic assessment of a student (2007). In conclusion, Peterson (2007) provides the reminder educators should always try to not forget. “Across the curriculum, we can enrich students’ learning of content when we also teach them to write well” (p. 8).

## NAEP Statistics on Writing Proficiency

Measuring the use of peer review and cooperative learning are very difficult to quantify, so the relevant statistics surrounding this topic focused on writing skills, skills which are hopefully born out of students engaging in the process of writing. The U.S. Department of Education has a National Center for Education Statistics (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007). This site contains an array of statistics and analysis focused on specific subjects and topics of K-12 education in the United States. For the purposes of this paper, research focused on “The Nation’s Report Card,” and looked at the statistics and analysis of writing from the federal government’s perspective of both eighth- and twelfth-graders nationally from the year 2007.

Starting with the eighth-grade, student writing scores have improved compared to previous measurements in 1998 and 2002. The analysis of the data provided seems to indicate that lower- and middle-performing students have improved since 1992. Further analysis reveals that every race/ethnicity category as classified by the Department of Education has shown progress in their writing skills since 2002. These categories include White, Black, Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Additional analyses of data found that:

- The White/Black gap in writing improvement is narrowing
- Females continue to outperform males
- Direct correlation found between scores and family income
- Private school eighth-graders performed higher than public schooled
- Public school students in urban areas improve since 2002

Eighth-grade writing assessment focused on more narrative and informative essays vs. persuasive essay writing. The NAEP provides examples and a very detailed breakdown of Excellent, Skillful, Sufficient, Uneven and Insufficient.

In the twelfth-grade, writing scores have also improved from previous measurements in 1998 and 2002. The analysis of the data provided here seems to parallel some of the eighth-grade results. Specifically, since 2002, lower- and middle-performing students have shown improvement in their writing achievement results. Also, the same racial/ethnic categories used for eighth-graders were used for twelfth-graders, and the results provided show the exact same results for twelfth-graders. The one area where there was a difference between eighth- and twelfth-graders was in the White/Black score gap. There was no change in this gap in the twelfth-grade from 2002 to 2007. Additional analysis of twelfth-graders reveals:

- Females outscore males
- Public school students improve more than their private counterparts
- Direct correlation found between higher student scores and higher parental education

Twelfth-grade writing assessment focused more on persuasive writing tasks as compared to narrative writing, and the NAEP provides similar, detailed breakdown of scoring as they did for the eighth-graders.

Additional information relevant to this topic includes:

- The State of California seems to be behind a majority of states in their average writing scores of writing proficiency

- The first NAEP assessment of World History is scheduled for 2012 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007)

Looking critically at this data shows surprising parallels between eighth- and twelfth-graders in terms of writing performance. Generalizing the results found in the analysis of eighth- and twelfth-grade writers, this shows that students are writing better and that the system of education we have is improving. Furthermore, the way the information is presented, for example the PDF documents showing students of ethnically diverse backgrounds looking/being studious, leads one to believe that students and professionals are working together to meet the expectations of school improvement in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

This generalization falls into direct contradiction to what the research reveals around the teaching of writing. It also seems to fly in the face of what is said about our current school system in mainstream media and in comparisons to other countries.

#### Cooperative Learning Center at University of Minnesota

Educators interested in professional development and studying what exactly cooperative learning is and how it can be applied in a learning environment need no more than an internet hookup to start. The Center, found at the website address of <http://www.co-operation.org/>, is a resource looking at the power of human interaction to break-down walls of misunderstanding and build-up ideas around community. Using peer review as part of the writing process only works in the context of a cooperative learning environment. This environment provides not only for peer review to take place, but also a multitude of external benefits among which include awareness, understanding, higher-level thinking and sharing of perspectives. All of these and other benefits of a

cooperative learning environment are precisely what a social studies classroom should model.

Serrano and Pons (2007) discussed cooperative learning, and believed that as long as individual responsibility and group incentives were present, individual learning could take place. It is the connection between individual and group goals that makes cooperative learning the rich educational environment it can be. According to Serrano and Pons (2007), cooperative learning is obvious in its importance from research done by the University of Minnesota focusing on eight meta-analyses of cooperative classrooms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Finally, a cooperative learning environment is the type of classroom setting that allows students to engage in teacher-guided practice that supports the thoughtful person, fosters information and interaction in the workplace, and can provide for lifelong learning (Maiorana, 1992). Mariorana (1992) explains what he sees as a crisis in education today that is promoting memorization instead of critical learning. This “lecture-for-recall” (1992) crisis can be solved with a cooperative learning environment. As Mariorana (1992) argues, “it is aimed at transforming students intellectually, at rescuing them from being passive in the acceptance of subject matter and making them active analysts of subject matter” (p. 20).

### Summary

After exploring the California Department of Education website, I did not find a mention of using peer editing/revision as a specific Content Standard for the English-Language Arts. A detailed inspection of the evaluation and revision section did not find a single reference to the term “peer” at any high school grade level.



Further attempts guided me to the Curriculum Frameworks section of the English-Language Arts, and on page 216 of the document, under the heading Writing Strategies, was the following: "on occasion students should work cooperatively in revising for coherence using scaffolded thinking sheets as guides for helping one another obtain useful feedback and revise text." (California Department of Education, 2008, August). The use of any "peer" part of the writing process is not explicitly spelled out, only referred to generally as one of many ideas that may be useful to a high school English student. This is a major problem for anyone wanting to teach writing as a process.

It is interesting to note the research that revealed peer editing/revision is only spelled out in content standards/curriculum frameworks in non-traditional schools (charter, private, etc.). Peer editing/review may very well be taught in traditional public high school settings, but it is not explicitly spelled out as a state standard.

In relation to this, it seems that peer review is in place at schools (public or private) where *integration of curriculum* is happening and is supported by school leadership. It may be that peer editing/revision/response is explicitly spelled out in schools that are trying to create a cooperative learning environment.

Something else to consider in today's educational environment is the effect of standardized testing on the teaching of the writing process. Schuster (2004, p. 3) points out the absurdity of today's national and state writing test environment by questioning how the current testing environment can even call what the students are doing as writing.

For every serious writer, revision, in the global sense- revision as re-seeing is the vital step in the writing process. Indeed, it has often been said that writing is

rewriting. Unless we consider and redraft, we are not truly writing. Is this belief honored by national and state writing tests?"

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

## The Interview

*Sample and Site*

An interview was conducted with Sylvia Jones, an English teacher at a high school in Marin County, CA. Information was provided that shed some light on her career as a secondary education teacher. Sylvia attended Central Washington University, and her first year of teaching high school was in 1959. Sylvia has been an advance placement (AP) literature and composition teacher since 1987, and she currently holds a general secondary, life credential. Sylvia is a Fellow for the Bay Area Writing Project administered through the University of California, Berkeley. Sylvia is a reader, table leader, and a chief reader for the Educational Testing Service, scoring writing for AP and other tests mostly at the college level. She is also a consultant for the College Board.

The interview took place in Sylvia's classroom at the end of a school day. The site of the face-to-face interview was Redwood High School, a comprehensive public high school located in Larkspur, CA.

*Access and Permissions*

Upon approval of my format for the interview by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS) at Dominican University of California, a date and location was set between the interviewer and the interviewee. A consent form was given to Mrs. Jones before the interview, read, and signed by myself and Mrs. Jones before the interview began. Both parties were very comfortable with the format and the process of the interview.

### *Ethical Standards*

The interview questions were approved by the IRBPHS at Dominican University of California. This study adheres to Ethical Standards in Human Subjects Research of the American Psychological Association (Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 2007). IRB number 7090.

### *Data Gathering Strategies*

The interview took place in an informal setting, sitting at students' desks in a classroom. The 5 specific questions asked are as follows:

1. Please tell me your background. From where did you graduate? What credentials do you hold? What is your current position at Redwood High School?
2. What expertise do you have with teaching writing as a process, and specifically with the part of the process known as peer editing?
3. What is the most effective method of using peer editing?
4. Do you think that peer editing can be used to help students gain content knowledge in a social studies high school classroom?
5. In your opinion, does peer interaction have more applications for our students in real world settings compared to traditional methods of teaching, testing, and learning how to learn? Why?

The interview was more of a discussion around the questions rather than a formal question and answer format. While discussion occurred around the questions, both the interviewer and interviewee wrote notes that were all kept by the researcher and used in summarizing the session.

### *Data Analysis Approach*

Interview notes were gathered and grouped under each of the 5 questions. Findings beyond answers to the original 5 questions were provided as well, and all information from the interview is summarized in the following section.

### *Findings*

The first thought to strike me was that she has been teaching English at the secondary education level since 1959. Mrs. Jones' unique sense of perspective on the role of using writing in a high school setting over the last 5 decades obviously made her the right choice for me and this interview. She began teaching students how to write before there was anything even called the writing process, back when teaching students how to write typically involved assigning an essay on Friday and telling them to turn it in on Monday. Period.

As our conversation began around the interview questions, I became aware that teaching writing as a process takes more "time" than current educational trends seem to allow. This presents a quandary for teachers who value many of the ideas around teaching writing through the writing process, yet who are stuck with so much content that it seems to leave so little other "time" to teach anything else. Sylvia agreed that this is indeed a quandary for a social studies teacher, and of course she has heard this before. This made me realize that teachers will have to strike some unique chord in the classroom to balance duties as a social studies teacher AND a teacher of the writing process to students who one day will be adults.

Using students to teach students was an important idea that Sylvia emphasized repeatedly. This highlights the practical benefits for students and cooperative learning. Students would rather at times, and do in my experience, prefer to see their peers' works

and have their works critiqued by their peers. To some, this may seem like a recipe for classroom behavior gone mad, but a prepared teacher can set-up a classroom environment that can organize, control and emphasize the value of students using students to learn.

Our conversation kept circling back around the ideas of cooperative learning, the type of environment that must be in place in a classroom to teach the writing process. Beyond the myriad of benefits that seem to be associated with cooperative learning, an organized, structured and controlled cooperative learning environment can really foster critical thinking by students.

Analyzing the results of the interview led me to reflect on my original ideas around aspects of critical thinking. I find it fascinating that this interview around peer editing led me back to a place I originally wanted to start, that this type of process led me to something concrete that has tangible benefits and practical applications.

Another idea that Sylvia emphasized was the idea of modeling. Modeling best works of students/peers, modeling the format of group-work around a said topic (i.e.- the cooperative learning of teaching the writing process), modeling editing with the teacher as the initial example, basically modeling anything and everything that goes into teaching and learning in a cooperative environment. Ideally, once a system is in place, all the modeling should be done by students to students with teacher direction. This points out that one cannot expect students to know how to learn. If a teacher models correct methods and behaviors, then students have the freedom to learn how it is they learn and apply that introspection to their analysis of themselves and their peers.

During our conversation, we also touched on ideas of holistic scoring and how the process of writing is messy. Basic comments teachers can make to students on their

paper that apply across the process of writing and make the grading of work by teachers a bit less overwhelming were also discussed. Having students read their work or the work of others, aloud, was another strategy we discussed. Additionally, having students keep dialectical journals helped to increase analysis of certain topics. I thought this last strategy could work well in a content heavy class.

## CHAPTER 4 PEER REVIEW IN HIGH SCHOOL WORLD HISTORY

The final unit of study for a high school world history class was the Cold War. Typically, the unit outline is provided ahead of time with assignments of textbook reading appropriately assigned to follow what we do in class, other assignments, and due dates. This outline included a writing assignment based on the following prompt:

Evaluate the impact of the Cold War. Was it a good or bad thing for the United States and/or the Soviet Union? How about the world? Use historical evidence to support your analysis and make sure your intro. paragraph has a thesis!

During the second week of the three-week unit, a peer review day was used to help students gain a deeper understanding of content and perspectives on this last unit. A rough draft of a writing assignment that had been assigned from the beginning of the unit was used by peers during this 90 minute peer review activity. When students came into class that day, they were assigned to sit in groups of 4 and to get out their rough draft. Alas, being what most high school 10<sup>th</sup> grade classes are like, not everyone came prepared, so some shifting of individuals was required to make sure every group had at least 2-3 rough drafts to work with.

When everyone was seated and the teacher had given appropriate students credit for turning their work in on time, the teacher directed the class to look up at the whiteboard. Verbal instructions were given and teacher-guided questions were shown from the overhead to provide focus for peer interaction. Constructive feedback of peer work was to be written on a handout answering the following questions:

- Re-state the thesis. If you cannot find one, write down what you think it is.



- What Cold War terms were used in the essay? Please add comments on the terms....inaccuracies, accurate use, please elaborate, etc....
- After reading the rough draft, do you think the author made a coherent argument that was backed up by historical fact? Please explain....
- Any other comments?

Each reader signed the handout and attached it to the rough draft. The process of answering these questions and providing feedback happened in 3 different rounds, each round taking approximately 10-15 minutes each. During these rounds, the teacher made sure every student was quiet and not disturbing others.

After three rounds, the teacher asked each group to have a final verbal round of feedback, directing them to talk about their written comments to each member of the group. Students were told to keep this conversation on topic and that all group members participate, but this did not always happen.

Finally, each group was allowed to share the two most significant things they learned about the historical content of the Cold War. Students used this discussion to form perspectives around their answer to the prompt. As students shared, the teacher wrote down highlights on the board to emphasize how certain historical events can mean different things to different people based on their perspective of the event. The class concluded with a discussion of students' questions around the assignment. The teacher provided friendly reminders as to the due date of this assignment right before the bell rang, and thus ended another class in the day of a life of a high school classroom.

Student responses to the day's activities included the following comments:

- “my opinions are constantly altered when hearing the thought process of another person or peer”
- “I like peer reviewing when your fellow peer takes it seriously, and I think that it really does help my work in the long run”
- interaction amongst peers “allows you to have a deeper understanding of a topic from all angles and makes you capable of fully comprehending an idea and forming an opinion”
- “if everyone was capable of putting themselves in other people's shoes, the world would be a much better place”
- interaction amongst peers “causes dialogue, which has the possibility for new pathways of thought that normally wouldn't occur”
- looking at another's writing allows “you to gain understanding of their thought process, which further deepens your knowledge of the subject”
- “peer review is an ineffective way to learn because my peers don't take it seriously”
- “I find it more helpful to learn from a teacher”
- interaction amongst peers “gives you a glimpse of the ideas and thought process of a mind independent of your own, and can reveal different perspectives and point of view other than your own that can help you better understand a topic”
- interaction with peers and using peer review allows for “alternate perspectives and connections”
- “it's a good way to get a second eye on your paper without it being your parent”

- using peer review in a world history class “can be helpful if someone has enough knowledge about the historical event”
- “I think sharing ideas is a very important concept”

My analysis of the peer review activity mirrors the usefulness of sharing writing as a method of peer review within a structured cooperative learning environment that a majority of the research in this paper shows. My analysis also points out three crucial components that must occur for this type of activity to be productive for all students. I label these components as: (1) teacher modeling, (2) embedded writing in the course, and (3) accountability of constructive student interaction.

These three components seem like the place to start with a class using peer review at the beginning of the semester, and then developing a routine with the class as the class progresses. Personally, this feels like a necessity in order to incorporate writing into my social studies classroom. Sharing my thoughts around this lesson with my fellow social studies teachers can also be helpful as we continue to try and improve student analysis in their writing.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Summary of Major Findings

I do not see many teachers using interactive cooperative learning environments. Could this be because of the current educational environment? It has become apparent that teaching to the test is doing nothing for the skills these students will need as they move on in school and in their adult lives. Life really is interaction, teaching to the test and/or not allowing for time to look at the writing process is negating the chance for students to learn these valuable life skills. The writing process and student-centered learning can unlock hidden potential that is not utilized nor realized in traditional classroom instruction.

### Comparison of Findings/Results with Existing Studies

Literature and the results from the interview and student feedback support that using writing and peer review in a social studies classroom is effective in teaching both content and improving writing skills. The interaction among students that is required for this does increase awareness and offer differing perspectives for one to analyze historical events. The results of the study in a high school world history classroom were also clear that students can learn how to be better writers and improve understanding of historical content by teacher-guided interaction using the peer review process.

A point that the literature continually showed, and my study failed to plan for, is the importance of embedding writing into the classroom routine from the very beginning of the school year. Students need to have strict parameters around how to interact with each other and guidance in providing useful feedback to their peers. A teacher needs to model how to use peer review effectively. Students need to be aware that their

interaction in this process is evaluated as part of their grade. For my class, the students who took this exercise seriously did expand their understanding of the Cold War and gain awareness of different perspectives and varied writing styles while reading the work of others. Not emphasizing the use of peer review as a specific part of their grade resulted in the effect that some students did not take the exercise seriously.

The importance of structured student interaction, modeled review and integration of writing throughout the course cannot be emphasized enough. The process of writing and understanding self and other perspectives is a complicated and messy process, and practice is essential if authentic growth is to occur with this type of learning and teaching. After all, as they say, practice makes perfect!

#### Limitations of the Study

One world history classroom was used for two sections of 10<sup>th</sup> grade students. Each section was 90 minutes in length and took place in a comprehensive public high school.

#### Implications for Future Research

The “peer” part of the writing process lacks current research or support in state-frameworks, and is usually confusing and vague at best when found. The positive relationship between writing and comprehending content should not be forgotten in the current standards-driven educational environment. Ideas around teaching the writing process such as peer interaction, cooperative learning, and critical analysis do more for students in preparing them to be life-long learners and excel in today’s global society than other forms of teaching. Teaching writing as a process is authentic, it is how

humans communicate, and it is ultimately how we as a society will continue to allow for education to play a vital role in the important decisions of tomorrow.

#### Overall Significance of the Study

As a social studies teacher, it is easy to get mired in the enormity of teaching content. Inevitably, one realizes that one person can never teach all there is to know on any subject. Knowing this, it is obvious to this author that the main purpose of a high school teacher should be to attract the student to becoming an active learner.

Active learning is supported by much of the research revealed in this paper, and this leads a student to some type of ownership of their learning. Ownership and responsibility of learning sows the seeds of a student today into a thoughtful adult of tomorrow. Using a cooperative learning environment is the interactive place to support practice of thoughtful engagement with another human.

Using writing as an educational tool complements content, interaction, cooperation and understanding. Good writing is good practice, and with the increase of writing on the internet and all of the other electronic devices of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, more teacher-guided practice of this form of communication is imperative.

Snap decisions based on personalities and sound bites are decisions that lack analysis and evaluation. A thinking and questioning populace, with the ability to communicate and share effectively their ideas on improvement and progress, is more of what we need. To educate someone is to teach them the ability to know this and to do this, and the specifics of this paper offer some ideas and a guide for continuing to engage our students.

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