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A STORY OF PROMISES AND PITFALLS IN WHOLE-CLASS PEER REVIEW

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In *Straight Man*, a satirical novel featuring a small-town college English professor, Richard Russo presents the following scene from a creative writing class: The protagonist informs his class that the workshop on a classmate's short story is beginning; the class members immediately fall silent until finally:

“I like the clouds,” somebody offers. “They're, like, a metaphor.”

…“They are a metaphor,” I point out. “If they were like a metaphor, they'd be, like, a simile.”

“I liked the clouds too,” somebody else offers. “Good writing.”

“Are metaphors good?” I ask.

“Sure. Yeah.” General agreement on this point. “You said so yourself.” (350)

Undoubtedly, many of us have had a similar experience. I certainly have. In my freshman composition classroom, I value peer feedback, largely because it helps students to develop confidence and ability in analyzing various texts, including, of course, their own. Like most instructors who use peer review, I recognize that although I'm capable of, and quite comfortable with, offering students detailed feedback at the global and local levels, that is not the best means by which to develop students' abilities in writing. Better—and far more difficult—is to build into the course ways through which students may develop their skills as critics. Better—and far more difficult—for me to stand out of the way.

I offer here a teaching strategy that I use to help my students become more self-sufficient and less reliant on my feedback. It's a form of peer-review, in which one essay from each student receives criticism from the whole

class at one particular session during the semester. I call it a “publishing day,” a term I borrowed from Donald Murray's A *Writer Teaches Writing*. The strategy has been more commonly used in creative writing classes, like the one Russo describes, but I'm surprised that more teachers of freshman composition don't make it part of their courses. I share it not as a model of a strategy fully realized but one in process, in hopes that readers might find something to try, something to avoid, something to adapt.

I've been experimenting with this activity, in one form or another, for about eight years now. To detail my experiments with the basic process would take more space than I have here and probably more patience than any reader has. In brief, my current process is as follows: each student has a 20-30-minute session in which his or her essay is discussed by classmates, who have read the essay at home beforehand. Two other classmates, whom I call “lead critics,” share the responsibility for directing the publishing day session.

I should say, if this activity sounds like it requires a lot of organization, time, and energy (on everyone's parts), it does. And during some semesters, deciding the whole publishing day process wasn't worth it, I've tossed the idea out wholesale and gone back to more easily manageable, more predictable, lower stakes forms of small group peer review.

But I keep coming back to this kind of whole-class peer review, convinced—despite my frustrations with the process at times—of the ultimate benefits of such a practice. I need not list in great detail the potential benefits of such an activity, as I'm sure they're readily apparent. Not only do students get feedback phrased in student-, rather than teacher-speak, but when students write for a real audience, with real and differing opinions, they understand—for real—how the rhetorical situation works.

I had a student about to publish say to me once, “When I wrote this I didn't really think *people* would be reading it. I thought it would just be *you*.” Well, as he himself assured me, this student knew about the publishing day activity, knew he was writing a draft to be shared with “real people,” knew that the specified audience for the essay was the class members, but didn't really *know* all of that until that real sense of audience came upon him. Most students just don't get that sense of spotlight with smaller peer review groups. But they need it.

Now, of course, ideally in a publishing day session, all members of the class will eagerly, but respectfully, offer a variety of reader-ly and writer-ly responses to the text under discussion. They will listen to their fellow critics, build upon their suggestions, modify the opinions with which they entered the classroom, and in 20-30 minutes, provide the author with a host of practical suggestions for revision. But especially when not well managed by the instructor, the situation can be much more like that portrayed by Russo in the vignette at the beginning of this essay.

To help in designing for a successful session, I have some suggestions: First and foremost: keep things lively. If the energy in the classroom seems low, propose a slightly different procedure—have students begin by writing about the text, by moving around the room, by talking in pairs, and so on. Slavish devotion to the process can drain the lifeblood from the activity.

Secondly, encourage affective responses. This may seem strange. Shouldn't we keep the “I liked the clouds” kinds of comments to a minimum? I certainly used to think so. When I first began using publishing days in the classroom, I would become silently frustrated with these kinds of comments. But then I realized that these kinds of low-level, gut responses help get students warmed up and prepare the way for more substantive comments.

Similarly, repeated comments—“I liked the clouds, too”—have surprising value. I've learned now to encourage such comments from students by pointing out the value of redundancy in the publishing day session. In a normal class, once one student makes a comment, it need not be repeated. Here, that's all different. I tell students that it makes a great deal of difference whether one person or ten people believe that the block quote in paragraph two seems off topic. Publishers need to get a sense of what the whole audience thinks, so I encourage students that even saying “I agree” is valuable; some more timid students find that through these small comments, they ultimately find themselves freer to make more sustained contributions. Also, it encourages students to listen to

one another and evaluate what others have to say, thus increasing the coherence of the discussion, making it less atomistic.

I do, however, have a couple of suggestions for pushing the class beyond merely affective and/or redundant comments. First, specific prompts. These aren't so different from any list of prompts that many of us use in small-group peer review, so I won't dwell on them too much. Lead critics should be encouraged, however, to modify the prompts for their particular essay, making sure to avoid asking “yes-no” questions. The important thing, as always, is to raise the discussion above grammar and mechanics to issues of content and structure.

Also, I find it useful to have students write the first critique in class. In this process, someone reads the essay aloud. Everyone listens with no writing instruments in hand, to emphasize the need to review the whole essay at the global level. I ask them to determine the one, highest-ranking question most in need of addressing, and to write only on that. This focus on one larger question helps elevate the discussion to the global level and, I've discovered, it also makes students feel as though they haven't said it all before the publishing day session. Before they begin to write, I show them sample good and not-so-good critiques. Students do need training as critics, as Jay Simmons points out in his aptly titled article “Responders Are Taught, Not Born.” We should remind ourselves that when students write weak critiques, it's often not a lack of effort; rather, it's a lack of the very particular skill of criticism that requires so much practice of all us. As students write their first critiques, I chat with each briefly, helping them to sculpt their comments. Although this kind of training is time consuming, it's essential to the success of the process. And, after all, when training involves *writing* it's not as if it's wasted time in the classroom.

To help train students how to *talk* about a piece of writing (a much different skill than writing about it), Ian Barnard, in his 2002 article on a kind of whole-class workshop similar to mine, suggests that the instructor play the role of “facilitator” (or discussion leader) during the first session, deliberately making mistakes that the author and class can discuss afterwards. I suggest doing this as well, but I also strongly suggest the use of the two lead critics per session in the “student version.” I've discovered that this solves the practical dilemma of what to do if one lead critic is absent. Also, it takes the pressure off of one student, making the entire class atmosphere more comfortable and conversational since, at the very least, the two lead critics are talking with each other, and it allows the two critics to generate more than twice as many good suggestions for discussion through their purposeful discussion of the draft together. (A few minutes can be set aside at the beginning of class for lead critics to get together and plan their session, or this can be assigned as work outside of class.)

With the lead critics in place, I almost never get involved in a publishing day session. Granted, if a session goes really poorly, I may ask a few follow-up questions to engender some productive discussion. But I do this sparingly because the danger is, of course, that students will come to depend on my role and my judgment—to make comments like “metaphors are good; you said so yourself”— judging writing as good because it bears the instructor's stamp rather than because it works for more readers. When I do get involved, I'm up front about my motive: to train them to go solo. That helps them to know not to depend on my intervention for long.

I'll conclude this discussion by addressing a few questions that I often receive about this process. First, colleagues ask: How do you have time for all this? It's true that the amount of class time necessary for such a practice, even allowing for 2 to 3 publishers per period—is relatively high. It means that some of the students' reading texts become *student* rather than *professional* texts. It means that they don't always have superlative models of writing to emulate. But, ultimately, I think the sacrifice is worth it, both because the publishing day process is so valuable, and because the reading that they *do* do is more active, more real. Plus, those of us who are really concerned with providing model texts can always have students reading more than we actually discuss in class.

Second, students ask: “Isn't everyone just going to slam my paper?” They worry about the possibility of very harsh criticism in front of the whole class. With careful set-up on the instructor's part, very little of this actually occurs, and the comment I receive over and over again on semester-end evaluations is “I thought having the whole class read and comment on my essay would be horrible, but it was actually very helpful.” I do allow class

time throughout the semester, however, to help the students develop bonds with one another. For one thing, in the first days of the semester, I have them interview one another and write biographies, which I collect and put together in a packet for distribution. Also, this past semester, I had each student draw a square of a paper quilt that represented his or her contribution to the whole. This quilt always covered the central table during publishing day sessions. These kinds of strategies develop bonds of attachment and trust.

These strategies, incidentally, also help in answering an opposing question that colleagues sometimes ask: “Do students actually give each other real feedback, or do they worry too much about being ‘nice’”? When instructors devote time to helping students develop bonds with one another, students feel freer to criticize each others' work, because they see that helpful criticism is actually “nicer” than bland compliments. The analogy I often use is not letting a roommate walk out of the dorm room in the morning dressed in an outfit that looks really awful. It's a kindness, I point out, to suggest that the roommate wear another outfit that really looks great on him or her. (Note that even in the example, it's not about “slamming” what's bad, but “revising” for improvement.)

In the end, the real benefit of publishing days is not so much the several good suggestions a student might receive on his or her essay; rather, it's about the general practice of making writing, and criticism, highly public. It's about seeing how one's peers react to a text and comparing that reaction with one's own. It's about developing confidence in one's reactions as a reader. Students often have really good instincts about what works in a text. The problem is that these instincts become dulled, and sometimes oddly warped, as students struggle to adopt conventions of academic discourse—to “invent the university,” as David Bartholomae has put it . Publishing days can help in recovering their better instincts.

Finally, a question I get from both colleagues and students: “What happens after the publishing day session?” More particularly, students ask “What am I supposed to do with all this stuff?” And colleagues ask: “How do you know this is worth all the work?” I've learned to address the important issues behind these questions by requiring a written summary of feedback and/or a follow-up meeting with me at which the student explains the feedback and sorts through it. Students have to wrestle with the fact that no one writing approach will satisfy all audience members. In other words, they learn that they can't write an essay “the right way.” For instance, recently I had a student publish an essay on a store that specializes in the selling of organic products. The assignment was to write the essay for the members of the class. When the essay was published, about half the class maintained that they didn't know exactly what the term “organic” meant in context. The author came to me later, indignant. “How can they not know this term? It's basic. I don't have to explain that, do I?” I said, “Well, your job here is to communicate your points clearly and gracefully to your readers [who, for that essay, were her classmates]. If they don't understand a term, communication fails.” With that, the author began thinking of ways in which she could better meet her readers' needs for clarity. And I, happily, stood out of the way.

Note: A version of this essay was given at the April 2006 meeting of CEA in San Antonio, TX. I'm grateful for the comments I received at the session, which shaped my revisions.

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