PROVIDING STUDENTS THE TOOLS TO *Write Effectively* IN A STUDENT-CENTERED CLASSROOM

By Elizabeth Bump

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Abstract: Especially since the implementation of T-TESS, it has become imperative for Texas English teachers to examine ways to incorporate student-centered instruction and activities in all areas, including the writing process. This article provides techniques and examples for English teachers who desire to work smarter and more responsively to meet the students' needs by empowering their students through in-process peer feedback and self-reflection that lead to an increased learning and quality of writing for students. The ideas and explanations provided can be altered to meet the needs of students in many grade levels and for several writing genres.

Keywords: student-centered, writing process, peer feedback, self-reflection, collaborative learning

During a weeklong summer training for English teachers, the consultant asked this thought-provoking question: "Are you *assigning* writing or *teaching* writing?" This was not a new concept, but it caused me to pause and reexamine my methods. Although test results and student feedback proved that I have helped my students become better writers, the consultant's question continues to remind me to teach rather than assign. As I examine my techniques and planning, I try to watch for ways to make the English language arts classes more student-centered while also trying to make the never-ending essay grading less of a burden.

Peer Feedback

Obviously, teachers provide students with feedback that is intended to teach them how to improve their writing. Unfortunately, this type of feedback often proves discouraging for both teachers and students. For teachers, the discouragement stems from spending countless hours making corrections and suggestions that are seemingly ignored, if they are even read at all. Bean (2011) explains that the "traditional way to coach writing—making copious, red-penciled comments on finished student products" is ineffective because those comments "seldom lead to improvement in student writing" and that "the thought of grading stacks of depressingly bad student essays discourages teachers from assigning writing" (p. 314). For students, all those comments on their essays can feel

like evidence of their inability to write well or to meet the teacher's expectations. In contrast, using peer feedback as a method for teaching writing can be far more effective and less discouraging for students and less energy-draining for teachers. In fact, Bruffee (1984) claims that "students' work tended to improve when they got help from peers; peers offering help, furthermore, learned from the students they helped and from the activity itself" (p. 638).

According to Bruffee (1984), peer feedback is a type of collaborative learning first developed by British secondary teachers in the 1950s and 1960s but did not become widely used in American until the 1980s. During the 1970s, college faculty struggled with an increasing number of students who were not prepared for the work required in college classrooms and who refused to attend tutoring. Peer tutoring arose from this need. Bruffee explains that "through peer tutoring teachers could reach students by organizing them to teach each other" (p. 637). According to Bruffee (1984), peer criticism, which is also called peer evaluation, can be classified as a type of collaborative learning, a term coined in Britain.

One of the most successful methods I have found in teaching writing is to include guided peer feedback as part of the lesson. This can be accomplished several ways. One way is to have students move desks to form two long rows, each row consisting of desks placed where partners face each other and where the desks touch each other side-to-side as well as face-to-face. After students have been seated, I say something such as this: "If you are facing the door, you will stay in your same seats. If you are facing the windows, you will be the ones moving." I vary this so that students don't know when they first sit (after desks have been moved) if they will move or stay. Although the pairing of students is similar to "Clocking" that Carroll and Wilson (2008) describe, this desk arrangement has worked better for me due to classroom space, and the activities that follow focus on more than just editing. After students move the desks, I have students exchange the rough drafts or revised drafts (whether on paper or on their electronic devices) with the person sitting directly opposite.

I project instructions concerning what aspect to analyze and provide feedback—revealing only the first instruction. I then time the students to fulfill the first task, which focuses on the effectiveness of one paragraph—or section if it is a longer paper. The amount of time varies based on the task. Each student reads the partner's paper and provides specific feedback. This feedback may be spoken, written/typed, or both. For high school students, I leave that choice to the individual writer's preference, but younger students may need written feedback so that they do not have to rely on remembering the advice later and so that parents who want to help can see what was suggested. When the timer sounds, I tell students to thank their partners. The moving side goes to the seat to the right; the person at the far right goes to the seat at the far left. Then I show the next task, and the time begins again. The following is an example of the guided peer feedback I have used for an expository essay in which students choose a technological/scientific advancement that has occurred within the past fifty years and describe or explain the advancement itself, its significance now, and its implications in the future.

First, I direct students to read the section of their partner's essay that describes and/or explains the technological/scientific advancement that is the topic of the entire paper. I ask them to consider whether, as a reader, they understand the advancement. Especially in the cases of topics that may not be widely known, the reader may find gaps in the foundational understanding of the topic even though the writer may have believed the description is clear and thorough. If there are lapses—from the reader's perspective—in the explanation or description, the reader is instructed to offer suggestions about making clarifications or elaborating upon the explanation. This step accomplishes two goals: It helps the writer improve upon this portion of the essay, and it helps students to learn to write with the reader in mind.

Next, I tell students to thank their partners, move, and exchange papers (or electronic devices) as previously explained. I then direct them to read the section of the essay that explains the significance of the technological/scientific advancement and to offer suggestions about making clarifications or elaborating upon the explanation. This step helps the writers see what informational gaps exist for their readers.

After the students change partners again, I direct them to read the section of the essay that discusses future implications of the technological/scientific advancement and to once again offer suggestions about making clarifications or elaborating upon the future effect and implications that they, as the readers, feel is lacking. In this section, however, I suggest that they focus their feedback on telling the writer what questions they still have about the future implications, and I ask them to provide ideas that they see as possible future implications. This is another way for students to focus on writing with the reader in mind.

For the next set of partners, I instruct them to read the entire essay to determine if there are words, sentences, paragraphs, or entire sections that do not contribute to the paper overall and to make suggestions on any rewording that they think would improve the quality. As the teacher, I know that Texas students are tested for these skills and by practicing providing this kind of helpful input for their peers, they develop their capacity in this essential area. Although not all students are equally capable of offering helpful suggestions in this area at the beginning of the year, the expectation is for them to provide any insight they can from the reader's viewpoint, and they improve with repeated opportunities to practice. With that in mind, this step can be separated into two steps early in the school year but may be combined near the end, especially if the skill level of the students reaches a point where there are few instances of parts that do not contribute to the whole.

I then direct the next set of partners to read only the introduction and the conclusion. I tell them to give suggestions regarding whether the introduction makes them want to keep reading and whether the conclusion sounds as if the response is coming to a close. Ideally, the reader should be able to see a clear connection between the introduction and the conclusion. Examining the introduction and conclusion can be separated into two steps at the discretion of the teacher, taking into consideration when the activity occurs and the age or skill level of the students. Before students begin reading for this step, I remind them of strategies that I have already taught them. For example, I remind them that opening an essay or a new paragraph with rhetorical questions is usually not effective in expository essays. I also remind them that the opening should be a general introduction, and the closing should not introduce new material that is not developed. Otherwise, a judgment that the introduction does not make them want to keep reading must be accompanied by specific suggestions on what might be added or reworded to interest the reader.

For the next set of partners, I direct students to read the entire essay to determine if there are smooth transitions between paragraphs to

make the reading of the paper flow and to offer suggestions if there are not or if they seem weak. Although a handout of transitions may help younger students, I usually teach high school students to provide fluency to their papers by writing phrases or clauses rather than using stock transitions and by tying the previous point to the new point. For example, a student might write, "Although this surgical system is a significant breakthrough in current medical practice," which was the topic of the previous paragraph, "the future implications are even more promising," which leads into the topic of the new paragraph.

For the next set of partners, I instruct students to assist with editing. I tell them to read the entire paper, looking for errors in spelling, capitalization, punctuation, subject/verb agreement, and other similar problems. Since this is an area of weakness for many students, there may not be much assistance from one student to the other unless the teacher guides students to focus only on one or two specific areas, such as watching for sentence fragments or comma splices. Nevertheless, some students think revising is the same as editing and just want to correct their peers' errors. This station gives those students a chance to provide the kind of help they like to give, and it sometimes turns into a mini peer tutoring about rules in grammar, spelling, and other similar areas.

For the last set of partners, I instruct students to read the entire paper and make sure that the paper maintains a consistent and accurate purpose. In this case, students make sure that the paper consistently attempts to explain rather than persuade, and students are asked to provide whatever other feedback the writer would like. I typically combine these two tasks into one step because at this point in the activity, many students feel that they do not need any additional feedback. Nevertheless, I add the second task to enable the writers to take ownership of what advice, if any, they would still like to receive. Like other combined steps, this one can be separated at the teacher's discretion. Even without the second portion, the task of providing feedback about purpose is important to include because I found it to be a frequent weakness in student writing. Ideally, students have been taught the difference between expository and persuasive essays. However, prior to the peer feedback activity, I teach students about common pitfalls. For example, I tell students that if the paper ends with a call to action, such as, "So, you should purchase this device," the paper is trying to persuade rather than explain. Through practice, students learn to recognize if an essay is mostly explaining, even if it has what I call a persuasive flavor, such as discussing only positive aspects.

The guided peer feedback may be adjusted as appropriate for the writing assignment, but it can also be modified for writing tasks that receive holistic scores, including state standardized tests and college-level national or international exams. One method I have used to help students prepare for these is teaching students to provide feedback using the rubric. The students begin by becoming familiar with the verbiage of the rubric accompanied by examples of released sample or anchor essays. This is an early and repeated step in the scaffolding process of teaching writing. Then I assign students an in-class writing task on a different topic but with the same holistic requirements of the samples we read and discussed together. The next class meeting, we review the rubric and examine released samples/anchor essays of the same prompt about which the students have just written. I prefer starting with the released essays with lower scores and working up so that students can see how the quality of essays on the same topic can be improved. After this, I model and instruct students to follow my example of making a "feedback sheet," consisting of a narrow column labeled "Score" and two even, wider columns labeled "Justification" and "Suggestions." Each student then reads a classmate's essay (which can be anonymous if students have written an ID number instead of a name). Afterward, the reader places a score in the first column.

In the section labeled "Justification," students must justify the score by including wording from the rubric. In the section labeled "Suggestions," students provide specific feedback concerning what was an example of good writing and therefore should be continued (such as "Your thesis is clear" or "You have good transitions") and how the essay could be improved (such as "Provide a specific example in the third paragraph" or "Start the second paragraph with your point before quoting a source"). Students then trade papers within their groups or around a circle, depending on how the teacher arranges the classroom, until each essay has received feedback from three people.

I have observed as well as received student feedback that this activity serves several purposes. For one, students become more familiar with the writing expectations through their continual referencing and application of both the wording and meaning of the rubric. Second, although in the beginning students may feel—even with the teacher's front-loading with instruction and practice with released essays and discussion—that they are not knowledgeable or skilled enough to provide authentic help, through time they increase their skills in analyzing the overall quality of other people's essays. Third, and possibly most important, they consciously apply to their own subsequent essays what they have learned about the expectations while providing feedback to their classmates' essays. These are all student-centered results that have the added benefit of saving the teacher hours of work that are, for the most part, teacher-centered anyway.

Practice Doing It Right and Self-Reflection

As in so many other areas of life and education, practice does not make perfect if the practicing does not come with improved techniques and methods by the writers. For students to obtain those improved methods and techniques, they need more than teacher feedback and definitely more than continuous writing assignments; they need to reflect on their own writing. Two ways that I incorporate the reflection are through self-scoring and journal prompts.

Self-scoring occurs directly following the peer scoring. After three classmates have provided suggestions on the feedback sheets, students find and reread their own essays and the comments given by their peers. Then they self-score, justify, and make suggestions for themselves in the same way they did for their peers. Bean (2011) states that after students have "internalized criteria for an assignment through norming sessions or teacher-provided rubric," they should be able, as the writer, to "take the reviews as advisory only and make his or her own decisions about how much of the advice to use" (p. 298). This self-reflection provides students with such an opportunity, and I have found that it often yields insightful responses, such as "Apparently, I am not explaining thoroughly enough for my readers, so I need to add to my explanations."

I also provide students an opportunity to self-reflect by giving warm-up prompts for their journals that require students to write about their writing. The exact wording of the prompts can vary based on the type or purpose of the essay. However, students should be required to examine their previous work and peer feedback and to reflect upon their past areas of weakness, their growth, and/or their goals for the next essay. For example, on the day before my class of dual credit seniors were to write a synthesis essay for fifty percent of their semester exam grade, I instructed them to examine the essays they had written so far and review the peer feedback they had received. Then, I told them to write a reflection about their writing: what they had been doing and what they needed to do to improve for the semester exam. By this point in the school year, the students had peer-edited enough times to become familiar with the expectations and qualities of a good essay. Lindemann (2001) claims that students learn what constitutes good writing as they provide advice to one another. They learn that "good writing … is writing that readers, including classmates, find interesting and effective" (p. 205). By reviewing the peer feedback from previous essays, students might also notice patterns, such as frequently being advised to explain more thoroughly or to bring a point to a close before beginning a new one.

Because several of those students complained every time they were required to write, I anticipated quick journal responses with little thought. Instead, the students scrutinized their essays and peer comments, and they analyzed what changes they felt they needed to make to improve the quality of writing for the upcoming test. Not only were the journal responses of higher quality than I anticipated, but the result of the self-examination proved to be a noticeable increase in the quality of their writing on the semester exam. Overall, it was a win-win situation: the students confidently wrote higher-quality essays and I as the teacher spent less time writing comments. According to Lindemann, "Self-evaluation realizes an important goal in a writing course: to help students become self-sufficient writers" (p. 244). Giving my students the opportunity to write about their writing enabled them to make informed decisions about their future strategies. This self-awareness enabled them to set goals for themselves, which is an important source of motivation that is student-centered rather than teacher-centered. In addition, the students' realization that their essays had been lacking depth and were, therefore, ineffective and unconvincing transferred into other classes that required written responses. As a result, I, too, felt a sense of accomplishment by seeing that the time and effort I had put into planning opportunities for students to help one another and themselves was time well-spent.

Conclusion

Rather than simply assigning more essays and spending countless evening and weekend hours marking errors and writing comments that often discourage students rather than train them, teachers can create a more student-centered classroom. Through peer feedback and opportunities for students to reflect upon their own writing and to make improvements, teachers can utilize class time to implement valuable techniques that help their students grow as writers.

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