Politeness Profiles in the First-Year Composition Classroom

Pennie L. Gray

During peer review, students often exhibit resistance when asked to respond critically to their peers' writing. Most students tend to offer gentle critiques, especially when they personally know the peers whose writing they are reading. This tendency to be overly kind can be frustrating for instructors, yet there may be logical reasons for students' hesitancy to engage in critical peer review. This study explores students' peer review letters through the lens of linguistic politeness theory and illuminates one possible explanation for the reluctant peer review.

Benefits of the Peer Review Process

The peer review process, a mainstay of many composition classrooms in the United States, requires students to read one another's writing and offer—or attempt to offer—substantive critical feedback. However, the peer review process is somewhat complex and nuanced. For instance, as Donna Johnson and A. W. Roen note, the peer review process necessitates students' negotiation of the liminal space between helping their classmates improve their writing and simultaneously meeting the expectations of the instructor who assigned the peer review (34). Other factors also influence the peer review process: the age and experience of the students; the format of the peer review, whether electronic, face-to-face, or written; the social relationship of the peer reviewers, and more.

Nonetheless, many instructors turn to peer review as one way to give students more feedback than they are capable of generating themselves and as an avenue for involving students in the response process. As Ruiling Lu and Linda Bol found, using peer review in the composition classroom has its benefits: It lessens the instructor's workload and leads to better writing outcomes (101). Korey Lawson Ching points out that an additional benefit of the peer review process is that it minimizes the "binary distinction between teacher authority and student autonomy . . . and reconfigures the participation of students and teachers" in the composition classroom (314). By asking students to participate in the feedback process, the classroom environment can become more community oriented, a kind of "apprenticeship in which students participate alongside teachers" (314). Furthermore, peer review allows students to "take

an active role in evaluating the work of other students" rather than remaining passive recipients of teacher commentary (314). Even more, by encouraging students to review one another's work, the peer review process can serve instructional purposes. As students compare their own work to that of their peers, they become more aware of their own writing tendencies and habits. This process thus gives them a window into areas of improvement in their own writing (Stellmack et al., 236).

Recent research by Kristi Lundstrom and Wendy Baker highlights the benefits of peer review not for the student being reviewed, but rather for the student doing the peer review. While the peer review process is intended primarily to help the student whose composition is being reviewed, there are additional learning benefits for the student who is serving as the peer reviewer (Nicol et al., 104). For one, the peer reviewer learns to make evaluative and reflective comments on another's work (Cho and Cho, 630). This type of critical thinking about another's work could transfer into thinking critically about the reviewer's own writing as well. In this way, students may engage in critical thinking as they "learn by explaining what makes peer texts good or bad, by identifying problems that exist in those peer texts, and then in devising ways in which those problems can be solved" (630).

Increased audience awareness is another benefit of the peer review process. Often, students write to an undefined audience; it can be difficult to move novice writers into the realm of writing to real audiences, but the peer review process provides one avenue for this shift. When students realize that one of their peers will be reading and commenting on their work, they begin to write differently. Lu and Bol found that students did, indeed, write more carefully when they knew other students would be reading and commenting on their work (101). In fact, students are compelled to imagine how others will view their writing and move out of their own realm to consider others' responses during the peer review process. As Cho and Cho state, "by reviewing peer drafts, student reviewers can develop a more accurate understanding of their readers" (631). Novice students may not have the ability to view their writing from a disembodied viewpoint, but the peer review process moves students toward this important shift by providing a much-needed alternative perspective (631).

The benefits of peer review have been well documented. In addition to the research of Stellmack et al., Nicol et al., and Cho and Cho, Philip Vickerman found that some students were able to "gain confidence in student-led discussion and independent learning" from the peer review process (227). Vickerman also found that student engagement increased through the peer review process as long as students' learning preferences and styles were taken into account. Loretto et al. noted that peer review was beneficial for students, especially when anonymity of peer reviewers was maintained. Yet, Yucel et al. concluded that

while the peer review process improved students' "self-assessment skills for judging the quality of their *own* writing in the future" (983, emphasis added), students often remained largely unaware of this benefit. In spite of some variance as to the benefits of the peer review process (depending on the expertise of the peer reviewer), Yucel et al. noted that "*giving* feedback to peers might benefit a student as much as *receiving* feedback" on their own writing (971). Melissa M. Patchun and Christian D. Schunn and Andrew Nobel likewise concluded that there are a range of benefits for the student conducting the peer review but that there are variances as to the scope of those benefits. Nonetheless, the benefits of the peer review process are proven.

One aspect of peer review that has received limited attention is the role that politeness plays in the process. In spite of this limited attention, the social dynamics of peer review should not be overlooked. When students engage in peer review, they are engaging not only with a piece of written text, but also with the author of that text, whether directly or indirectly. Thus a consideration of the social nuances of the peer review process is warranted. For the purposes of this research, the role of politeness during peer review is explored in order to illuminate this layer of the socially-grounded peer review process.

Politeness Theory and Peer Review

According to Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson, in all interactions, interlocutors have two particular wants or needs: the want to be unimpeded, referred to as negative face, and the want to be approved of in certain respects, referred to as positive face (58). These positive and negative face needs are addressed during social interactions as interlocutors respond to what they believe to be the face needs of their fellow interlocutors. However, it is inevitable that during social interactions, some actions will threaten the positive and negative face needs of the interlocutors—actions referred to as Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) (60). These FTAs are often mitigated through the use of politeness strategies referred to as positive or negative politeness.

Positive politeness, as the name indicates, is oriented toward the positive face needs of the hearer and thus "anoints" the positive face of the hearer (70). For instance, the speaker might say, "You are such a good writer. Would you mind helping me with my paper?" In this example, the speaker anoints the positive face of the hearer by acknowledging a positive quality that the hearer may claim for themselves. Negative politeness, on the other hand, is oriented toward the negative face of the hearer and as such is "avoidance-based" (70). Negative politeness often requires the speaker to acknowledge the imposition of the FTA through the use of apologies, self-effacement, deference, hedges, or implications of non-coercion (70). For instance, the speaker might say, "I know it's a lot to ask and you're terribly busy, but would you mind helping me

with my paper?" These types of face-to-face examples of positive and negative politeness also map onto written demonstrations of politeness during peer review. For instance, in a written peer review, the student providing feedback on a peer's text might say something along the lines of "You did a wonderful job in your introduction," thus anointing the positive face of the author. For negative politeness, the peer reviewer might hedge criticisms by writing statements like, "You might want to think about changing this word here, but it's your call." However, there is a significant difference between verbal and written feedback: Written feedback can be more intentional, because the author has time to consider their word choice before sharing the feedback with the author, whereas speakers rarely have much time to consider carefully what they say. Thus, due to the increased intentionality evident in the written peer review (and the extant textual record of the exchange), the use of politeness strategies can be more easily identified and analyzed. These moments of politeness strategy use, located and locatable in text, are called tokens.

Brown and Levinson offer a formula for computing the weightiness or seriousness of any given FTA, whether written or spoken, which in turn informs the choice and degree of politeness strategies required for that particular situation (76). The formula is:

$$Wx = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + Rx$$

In this equation, Wx represents the relative weight or seriousness of the imposition and is calculated by considering three factors: the social distance between the speaker and hearer, represented by D(S,H); the measure of the power the hearer has over the speaker, represented by P(H,S); and the degree to which the FTA is weighted as an imposition within a given culture, represented by Rx (76).

Thus, the weightiness of politeness strategies any interlocutor chooses arises from a confluence of factors. A savvy interlocutor weighs each of the factors present in a social situation and, almost subconsciously and instantaneously, choose the politeness strategies that are appropriate given the unique social circumstance situated in the specific culture and context. In the composition classroom, the task of writing compositions and engaging in the peer review process remains constant for all students; the expectations of the writing assignments are most likely regulated by the course instructor by way of assignment descriptions. Likewise, the power differential—between students qua students—remains mostly constant, as does the power differential between teacher and student. However, what does not remain constant in the composition classroom is the social distance. The social distance students feel typically changes over the course of the semester as students come to know

one another better. An examination of the social dynamics of peer review can reveal as-yet-unexplored layers to the peer review process, and politeness theory provides a meaningful framework for this examination. More specifically, the social distance aspect of politeness warrants careful consideration, especially in light of the ways students use positive and negative politeness tokens in the peer review process and what those politeness tokens might reveal about their comfort with the critique inherent in the peer review process.

Wolfson's Bulge Theory

Nessa Wolfson examined the interplay between politeness and social distance, and like Brown and Levinson, Wolfson provides a useful framework for analysis of peer review. Wolfson contended that we can examine speech acts to get at "the social strategies people in a given speech community use to accomplish their purposes—to gain cooperation, to form friendships, and to keep their world running smoothly" (31). Wolfson, using a middle-class American speech community, examined the differences in the kind and frequency with which interlocutors used politeness strategies. For her research, Wolfson focused on the social distance aspect of the weightiness formula offered by Brown and Levinson. In particular, she found that "the two extremes of social distance—minimum and maximum—seem to call forth very similar behavior, while relationships which are more toward the center showed marked differences" (32). Wolfson went on to say that, "the more status and social distance are seen as fixed, the easier it is for speakers to know what to expect of one another" (33). Furthermore, "what inequality of status and intimacy have in common is that in both situations, interlocutors know exactly where they stand with one another" (34). Based on these findings, Wolfson posited that people who are either intimates or strangers use fewer politeness strategies because their relationships are seen as fixed. On the other hand, people who are non-intimates and non-strangers tend to use more politeness strategies as they seek to solidify their relationship. Thus, Wolfson's Bulge Theory might be illustrated as in Figure 1. Of special note is Wolfson's finding—hearkening back to the research of Lynne D'Amico-Reisner—that "interlocutors who are in the Bulge almost never voice their disapproval of one another overtly" (35).

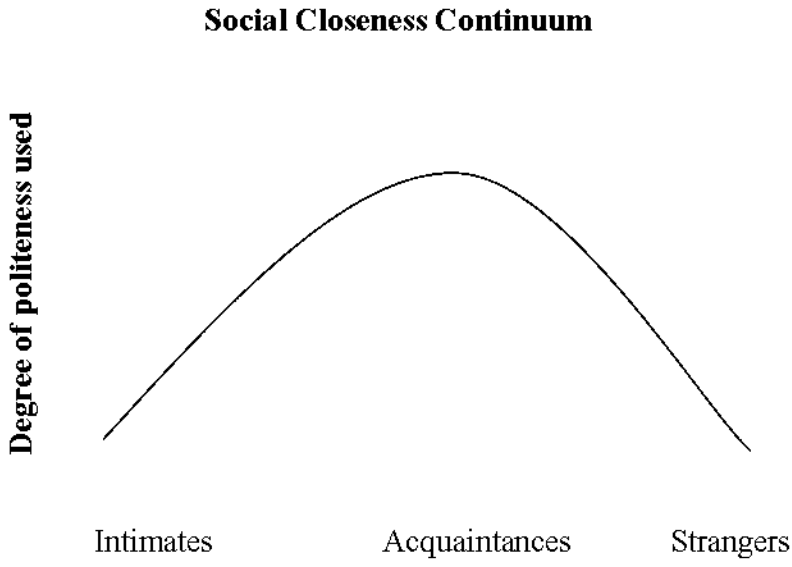

Figure 1.

Research on the interplay between peer review and politeness theory has appeared in a number contexts. Syavash Nabarany and Kellogg S. Booth examined the use of politeness strategies through an analysis of non-anonymous peer reviews of academic papers by science and technology scholars. They considered factors such as anonymity, experience, and expertise in the peer review process and found that criticisms were mitigated by at least one politeness strategy 85 percent of the time (1053) and that an area not typically mitigated by politeness was grammatical errors (1054). Donna Johnson and Duane H. Roen likewise explored politeness strategies during peer review and found that graduate students' use of politeness strategies (in the form of compliments) varied according to gender, with women offering more compliments than men (38). Lu and Bol, in their study of online anonymous versus identifiable peer review with college students, found that anonymity resulted in more candid and valuable feedback for the students (110). Each of these studies illuminated an important consideration for peer review using the lens of politeness theory.

What none of these studies considered, however, was how first-year college students engage in peer review. First-year college students have far less academic writing experience than graduate students and established scholars; they are likewise less acclimated to higher education and the crucial role peer review plays in forwarding academic knowledge. Thus, this study explores the non-anonymous peer review process of first-year college students using Brown

and Levinson's framework of linguistic politeness theory and Wolfson's bulge theory. This study analyzed the peer review letters of thirteen students in a first-year composition course, which revealed as-yet-unexamined aspects of the peer review process that may be applicable to other first-year composition classrooms.

Context and Methods

This IRB-approved study was conducted in a first-year composition course offered at a small, private, liberal arts university in the midwestern United States. First-year composition courses at this university are topic-centered, which means that each course focuses on a particular subject with students writing all their compositions about that subject. The courses are designed as discussion-focused classes that engage students in intellectual inquiry and develop students' ability to grapple with and evaluate competing ideas about the topic of the course. Additionally, the courses are writing intensive, so parallel goals include engaging students in all stages of the writing process, helping students identify various audiences and purposes for writing, giving students the opportunity to use writing as a means of discovery and invention, and giving students significant practice in writing both formally and informally. The topic of the course in this study was homelessness, so one aspect of the course was devoted to the study of homelessness while other aspects were focused on developing students' writing and critical thinking skills.

There were a number of unique characteristics of this particular group of students that warrant mention. First, of the thirteen students (six men and seven women), five men were part of the same athletic team and as such had arrived on campus one week before classes began to take part in pre-season practice. These student-athletes had the opportunity to form a type of in-group within the larger classroom group and had already begun to share some familiarity characteristics such as inside jokes and friendly teasing. Additionally, the entire class spent the first three days on campus traveling as a cohort from one orientation activity to the next, so by the time I met them for the first time, they were at least familiar with one another (if not somewhat cohesive as a group). Furthermore, these students were my first-year advisees, so I spent considerable time with them—one-on-one and as a group—as they navigated the course selection process and acclimated themselves to campus living. Finally, students who typically enroll at this small private university come from middle to upper-middle class families and have a history of academic success. All these factors contributed to the unique environment of this particular composition classroom and what transpired over the course of the semester.

The methods used in this study were drawn from qualitative research methods, including the self-study framework and content analysis. Self-study

is characterized by a "spiral of questioning, framing, revisiting of data, and reframing of a researcher's interpretations" (Samaras 11). Thus, self-study requires an open stance in which the teacher-researcher considers outside views, fresh possibilities, and a unique application of existing theoretical constructs. In self-study, the teacher-researcher discovers new knowledge through disciplined, systematic inquiry coupled with intentional reflection (14).

More specifically, self-study is focused on the unveiling of pedagogical nuances. It holds an "orientation toward one's practice. It is a questioning attitude toward the world, leading to inquiry conducted within a disciplined framework" (Freeman 8). Self-study is somewhat organic to the classroom in that, according to Samaras, "Research is what teachers do" (9). Teachers conduct research informally every day in the classroom as they try new strategies and attempt to understand better some aspect of their own unique practice in the classroom (9). Therefore, using the self-study framework, I examined my pedagogical decision to employ peer review in my first-year composition course and reconsidered my expectations of how this process should unfold.

Bolstering this self-study framework, I drew on content analysis as a complementary qualitative research method that allowed me to conduct an analysis of two sets of peer review letters students wrote for the course. As Steve Stemler describes, content analysis is a systematic technique for organizing many words in a text into specific categories for analysis (1). A robust content analysis goes far beyond a mere noting of the frequency of word choice and instead examines the context in which particular words or phrases are used. The process then enables the researcher to assign each word or phrase to specific and nuanced categories; from these categories, researchers can describe and discover trends in a given text from which inferences and conclusions can be made.

Students in this course were required to write four compositions, at least three of which were research papers, meaning the texts had to cite at least one academic source to support a claim. For all four compositions, students received audio recorded feedback on their drafts from me. On the second and third compositions, students participated in a peer review conference and received written peer review letters from two of their classmates. The peer review groups were randomly selected but in such a way as to assure that the peer review groups were different both times. To analyze the data for this study, I read through the first set of peer review letters to note whether any particular trends stood out to me. Then, using a content analysis framework, I developed a list of specific patterns that were emerging from the data. With politeness theory in mind, I began to look for evidence of any politeness strategies used by the students, noting examples of the use of positive politeness and negative politeness, broadly defined. When I found evidence of a student using a particular politeness strategy, I color-coded the strategy using a different color

for each broad category (e.g., positive politeness, negative politeness). I then conducted the same content analysis for the second set of peer review letters. In all, the first set of data included 26 peer review letters, each approximately one double-spaced page long. The entire data set equaled 6854 words. The second set of peer review letters likewise included 26 letters and 6673 words in all and was analyzed using the same codes. Once the politeness strategies were highlighted, I then conducted additional analyses to identify more specific trends that were emerging. Finally, I compiled all similar strategies into separate documents for further analysis, which revealed illuminating trends.

Three dimensions of the students' compositions are important for the context of politeness strategy analysis: the texts were multimodal; the texts addressed diverse aspects of the course topic; and many of the texts were quite personal. The genres and modes of each composition the students wrote over the course of the semester varied widely. Because writing in the real world is not always constrained and proscribed, a number of years ago I shifted from having all students write using the same genre and type of papers. Therefore, for the focus class in this study, I asked the students to define their own writing tasks by submitting a proposal for each composition in which they defined an audience for their composition and a purpose for their writing. After receiving instructor feedback and guidance on their proposals, students set about composing.

As might be expected, the resultant compositions were quite diverse. Among the topics students chose were the following: homelessness as a choice; preconceived ideas about homelessness; mental illness and its connection to homelessness; assistance available to the homeless; the omission of homeless women, specifically homeless mothers, from most texts about homelessness; the potentially negative effects of homeless shelters. But beyond the varied topics of the compositions, students also pursued a host of modes for their topics as they sought to align their topic with the most suitable genre. Some students wrote short stories and vignettes, while others chose multimedia genres such as websites and YouTube music videos. Perhaps the riskiest composition was a three-song series a student wrote, performed, recorded, and shared with the class, a project that reflected an encounter the student had with a homeless street musician when he was five years old.

Due to the personal nature of some of the compositions and especially because the students designed the writing tasks themselves, students aptly surmised that, during peer review, they were responding not only to a composition, but also—and perhaps more importantly—to their peers. In order to build and preserve cohesiveness and rapport, students responded to their peers' compositions tactfully and kindly as was evidenced in their peer review letters. Yet, at the same time, students were aware of the fact that the peer

review process was subject to the scrutiny of the instructor. For this course, I gave students course credit for the peer review letters they wrote to one another. These grades were holistic and served as an affirmation that each student participated fully in the peer review process.

Prior to writing their peer review letters, though, students offered face-to-face feedback to each other during peer review sessions in class. They met in small groups, asked one person to read the draft aloud, and then gave some preliminary feedback and suggestions. Only after the face-to-face sessions did peer reviewers take home a draft of the compositions and formalize their feedback in page-long peer review letters articulating suggestions for improvement. These suggestions, which were required in the written assignment description, presented opportunities for FTAs (e.g. offending their peers or implying that they lacked writing ability). This type of peer review assignment placed students in an uneasy conundrum: As Johnson and Yang note, "to be overly critical (during peer review) might offend a classmate, but not to be sufficiently critical would not meet the requirements of the assignment" (102). Thus, students often use caution when navigating social distance within this challenging rhetorical task. Rather than offend their peers, Jesnek noted that most students prioritize social acceptance and the protection of peer relationships over offering critical feedback during peer review (23), and Brammer and Rees found similar results in their research on the peer review process in that building rapport among classmates is crucial to productive peer review. Students rely on "a sense of shared community in order to develop dialogues of trust and to build confidence in their classroom peers" (81).

Results of Peer Review Letter Analysis

In the context of this course, my design of this embedded peer review task, and the multiple dynamics of student compositions, self-study and content analysis of the peer review letters yielded two trends in terms of politeness strategies used by students: (1) the use of exaggerated praise and (2) the use of hedging, specifically the minimization of imposition and expertise.

Exaggerated Praise

My own observations of students during peer review followed by an analysis of their peer review letters confirmed that students pushed back against my requirement that they respond critically to one another's compositions. Through my content analysis coding, I noted the frequency with which students used positive and negative politeness strategies and found that students were highly encouraging of one another not only face-to-face, but especially in their written peer review letters. They mentioned their appreciation for the writing of their peers, and they also exaggerated their praise by being far more

complimentary of one another than was warranted based on the quality of the compositions.

For instance, in response to a composition about mental illness and homelessness, a student wrote, "The way you describe homelessness is the perfect way to begin in my opinion." In responding to a composition using the found poem genre, a student wrote, "I really enjoyed your poem" and later, "I LOVE that final line you put in there about how at the end of the day, you're still a man. . . It's brilliant." To the student who wrote a three-song series, the peer reviewer commented, "I really love the idea of this piece. It's so original and something I myself never would have thought about doing. I really enjoyed the first song." This same student later wrote, "You can't even tell that you never really have written lyrics before. They flow well throughout your songs and none of them need changing." Another student who wrote a children's book about Hurricane Katrina's effect on New Orleans received this feedback: "First off, really great job! I really love your idea for the children's book." Responding to a student's poem, one peer reviewer wrote, "I loved the ending. It was really good. And I especially loved how you ended with the word period. I thought that was clever."

From these samples of exaggerated praise, I teased out specific words students used; among other things, I looked for words that fell into the category of superlatives. I looked for statements that indicated strongly-worded positive praise. The frequent use of the word "really" to intensify praise was also quite common in the peer review letters as was some effusive praise to indicate their "love" of their peers' compositions and their belief that aspects of the work were "perfect," and in one case, "brilliant." While the argument could be made that the frequent use of the word really was simply a characteristic of the writing style of that particular group of students, what is striking is that most peer review letters contained the word "really" to emphasize a positive comment, and all letters included intensified praise and lofty compliments. It seemed that students chose not to abide by the guidance of the assignment description, which urged them to ask questions, comment on the organization, and go beyond mere praise. While some students did delve into some more substantial critiques, few offered any negative comments at all. This suggests that students prioritized their peers' feelings about the peer review letters more than my preference that they offer more substantial and instructive feedback. The students' responses point to not only their use of politeness strategies, but also the ways in which they were attuned to social dynamics of the class.

Minimization of Imposition and Expertise

Another trend that emerged in the peer review letters was the recurring use of the word "just" and other wording that minimized the suggestions for fur-

ther work they recommended. I first noticed the pattern emerging from the peer review letters upon my initial reading of the letters. In response to the finding that students were hesitant to provide suggestions, I returned to the letters to look for examples of how students appeared to minimize their own feedback and authority; I found that nearly all students used the word "just" to accomplish this mitigation of imposition and authority. For instance, in response to a student-developed website focused on famous people who were once homeless, the peer reviewer wrote, "I would suggest just doing a real basic search on homeless people and seeing what facts come up and going off of those." In this case, the reviewer was minimizing the imposition of the suggestion through the use of the word "just." In a paper about legislation to protect homeless college students, the peer reviewer wrote, "There were just a couple of words and commas that I added." In this instance, the effort needed to correct the author's errors was minimized through the use of the word "just," which indicated that the revisions were small. Likewise, the revision imposition was minimized for a paper about Skid Row when the reviewer wrote, "I would just reread through your paper and make sure you're not being too repetitive with that." The reviewer later continued saying, "You're not obligated to use my corrections, they're just suggestions." Among the other comments added by peer reviewers were: "Also just a little thing: make sure you're putting your periods after your parenthetical references rather than at the end of the sentence" and "After reading your composition piece, I have just a couple of slight suggestions."

In their peer review letters, students were using words like "just" to minimize the work they were suggesting their peers do during revision. Perhaps students were reluctant to ask their classmates to significantly alter their work and thus wanted to make it sound as if very little needed to be done to make the compositions stronger. In contrast to Nabarany and Booth's finding that non-anonymous peer reviews did not hedge feedback on grammar errors, the students in this composition classroom did just that.

However, my analysis revealed that students used the word "just" and other hedges in a slightly different way in other parts of their peer review letters. In some instances, students used the word "just" to minimize their own authority or expertise. For example, in responding to a composition about children and homelessness, a peer reviewer used the word "just" along with the phrase "I'm not judging you or anything" to offer feedback. She wrote, "Also, just a side note, this last page is when it really starts to be evident that you're sleepy and still writing, so check that out. I'm not judging or anything, just letting you know." Another peer reviewer commented, "This is just my opinion. Feel free to leave the sentences the way they are if you like." Another example of the minimization of a student's expertise was offered on a paper about the causes

of homelessness: "Let me first say that any changes that I made in the paper were just ways that I thought would possibly make it flow a little more. You're not obligated to use my corrections. They're just suggestions." And finally, one peer reviewer repeatedly minimized their authority and expertise by saying, "Feel free to completely ignore these changes. They are just suggestions." These examples indicate that students were reluctant to exercise authority over their peers by implying that they had greater expertise—whether on subject matter, style, grammar, or other writing concerns— than their peers.

These examples show that students took great pains to use politeness strategies during the peer review process. In the first set of examples, students offered exaggerated praise to their peers and their peers' compositions, and in so doing, anointed their peers' positive face. While Brown and Levinson specifically caution against quantifying politeness strategies, it was nonetheless difficult to ignore the fact that students used many positive politeness intensifiers in their peer review letters. In all, for the first set of peer review letters on the first composition, students used 70 positive politeness phrases or sentences in 26 peer review letters. Additionally, students used the word "really" as a positive intensifier 18 times. Put simply, students used the word "really" to add emphasis to a positive statement addressed to their peer's positive face. Certainly, in some contexts the use of the word "really" was used as a colloquialism, but the ubiquitous use of the word to intensify positive politeness during peer review was difficult to dismiss outright.

In the second set of peer review letters, students used 139 positive politeness phrases and sentences in 26 letters. Additionally, they used the word "really" as a positive politeness intensifier 45 times. From the first peer review letter to the second, students nearly doubled their use of positive politeness phrases and sentences and more than doubled their use of the word "really" to emphasize their praise.

But students went beyond the use of positive politeness strategies; they also used negative politeness strategies. As previously noted, students made considerable use of the word "just," which can be categorized as a hedge. As Brown and Levinson state, "Normally, hedges are a feature of negative politeness . . . but some hedges can have this positive-politeness function as well, most notably (in English): sort of, kind of, like, in a way" (116). More specifically, hedges can be used to soften an FTA that involves a suggestion or criticism. These hedges are categorized as redressive actions: actions that give face to the addressee and that counteract potential face damage by highlighting the shared goals of the interlocutors (69-70). Additionally, these hedges acknowledge the negative face needs of the interlocutor and indicate a reluctance to impede the other's freedom of action.

The first way students used words like "just" was to minimize the FTA to the negative face of the peer. This was especially evident when students made suggestions for changes in their peers' compositions. Students sought to soften the blow of the imposition and to minimize the revision work they were suggesting. These kinds of comments are considered off-record comments and seek to minimize the imposition of the suggestion (Brown and Levinson 176, 214). A colloquial way of conceptualizing these types of comments is to think of them as the students' way of saying, "It's no big deal, but . . ." The suggestion that accompanies the use of this type of hedge is thus framed as only a minor revision requiring little of the writer.

Students also used the word "just" to signify their own reluctance to assert their authority over their peers' writing, perhaps to minimize their social distance from one another. This type of mitigation served to help students create a certain camaraderie, a cohesiveness amongst themselves that downplayed the differences in expertise between them. It may have allowed students to remain at the same social level and could be thought of as a self-deprecating move that served to align the reviewer and the reviewed. A colloquial way to conceptualize these types of comments is to think of them as a way for the student to say, "But hey, what do I know?" These mitigations fall under what Brown and Levinson might refer to as an "out" by making it clear that the peer reviewer does not expect the writer to follow the suggestion unless the writer wants to do so (72). Based on these trends, it appeared that students took my mandate of the critical peer review letter and shaped it into something that better met their needs in the social context of the classroom. As students sought to solidify their relationships as classmates, they took great pains to avoid offending their peers through the peer review process. According to Wolfson's Bulge Theory, students were not intimates nor were they strangers, and they acknowledged and navigated this liminal space by using a great many politeness strategies.

A serendipitous yet important finding from this study involved the ways students learned about genre from one another. One student created an informative video, and two additional students also did so after peer reviewing the original student's work. After seeing a newsletter one student created for a project about resources for homeless citizens, another student (who was a nursing major) created a magazine with a series of articles about health services for the homeless. Another student was impressed with his peer's website development and tried his hand at that genre for his next composition. In creating, sharing, and reviewing a wide range of genres and modes, students were exposed to new ideas about textual creation that they later tried out themselves. This phenomenon reflects an important and additional benefit of the peer review process.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

Based on these findings, I surmise that students used peer review to create a more secure, stable social environment in the composition classroom through the use of politeness strategies. Given that all peer review letters contained some examples of positive politeness and hedging, there is evidence of a consistent use of politeness strategies by all the students. In other words, students created a constellation of politeness strategies unique to the context and task at hand—a politeness profile of sorts. Drawing from a wide range of possibilities, most students landed on the same few strategies to respond to their peers' writing: they exaggerated their praise, they minimized the amount of work they were suggesting, and they downplayed their own authority or expertise. This particular politeness profile arose from the needs and goals of the students as they navigated FTAs in that particular writing context. Not only did students draw from many available politeness strategies, they used those strategies in varying degrees in order to support the risks they saw their classmates taking. Students attempted to support their peers' efforts as they engaged in risky writing tasks, tasks that their peers had designed and attempted to fulfill themselves. Thus, students recast the peer review as a social endeavor through their use of politeness strategies—a purpose all their own and, in some instances, contrary to the requirements of the assignment prompt.

If my students generated their own politeness profiles, it stands to reason that other students or groups of students will develop unique politeness profiles as well, a constellation of strategies that may differ from those evident in my classroom. An analysis of the types and frequency with which students use politeness strategies, contextualized by attention to specific dimensions of the writing examined like multimodality, topicality, and personal/affective investments, may help instructors align their expectations of the peer review process with what students will most likely do quite naturally. By attending to how students use politeness strategies in socially threatening environments such as the peer review, instructors are better positioned to support classroom cohesiveness and implement activities that strengthen the sense of safety and trust in the classroom.

As part of this self-study, I have reflected on my pedagogy and changed the way I design and conduct peer review to incorporate the study's insights into how students negotiate social distance, navigate politeness through FTAs, and encounter different modes and genres. Rather than require students to critique their peers' writing, I now ask the author of the composition to articulate the kind of feedback they want. The peer reviewer then shapes their feedback according to that request. And, more importantly, I tell students that the peer review process is designed to help not only the author, but also

the peer reviewer. Prompted by students' adoption of the modes and genres of their peers, I now ask students to look at their peers' writing and notice what the author is doing so that they can use some of the same ideas in their own work. More importantly, by allowing students the freedom to bolster one another, I can reframe the peer review process as an activity that is and should be at least as beneficial for those acting as the peer reviewer as for the one receiving the peer review.

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