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Relational Peer Review Practices in the Honors Research Methods Classroom: Toward a Scaffolded and Multidisciplinary Model

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Abstract: Peer review exercises are an essential part of many educational pedagogy models and have been shown to successfully provide undergraduate students with requisite active learning and critical reflection skills. Teaching the peer review process in an interdisciplinary honors research methods course, however, presents its own set of challenges. As students are exposed to new processes of editorial review, they are also tasked with evaluating material across subjects and discipline areas, making subjective components of editing more difficult. Authors describe a scaffolded model of peer review piloted in an interdisciplinary, upper-level honors research methods and ethics course and provide qualitative analyses of student reflections and assignment attributes to demonstrate the model's potential for student success. By presenting the peer review exercises as a series of sections that build incrementally in complexity and subjectivity (scaffolding) and dedicating class time for implementing peer-directed edits, authors provide an adaptable model that further strengthens research editing practices in honors education.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; peer review of students; group work in education; scaffolded instruction; University of Montana (MT)—Davidson Honors College

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In this qualitative analysis of in-class peer review practices, we outline a peer review model implemented in an upper-level honors research methods and ethics course at the Davidson Honors College (University of Montana) in the fall of 2021. The course, titled “Art of Inquiry,” was offered to honors

students across majors and introduced them to research methods, practices, and ethics across methodologies and disciplines in preparation for completion of their honors capstone project and additional research endeavors. The final product of course assignments was a lengthy research proposal containing a comprehensive literature review, methodologies, ethical considerations, introductory and conclusory material, and an extensive bibliography. Over a several-week period, students participated in peer review activities pertaining to their drafted bibliographies, literature reviews, methodologies, and introductions for their final research proposals. This scaffolded model guided students through steps of peer review that incrementally increased in complexity and subjectivity while allowing extensive class time for student implementation of their partner's suggested edits. Our overview of the model includes description of the scaffolded assignments, examples of language and instruction used in the peer review assignments, anecdotal examples of student reflection and feedback, and a preliminary analysis of course results, benefits to student writing quality, and possibilities for future adaptation and assessment.

Art of Inquiry is geared toward upper-level honors students and most frequently taught by the Davidson Honors College's visiting Postdoctoral Teaching, Research, and Mentoring (TRM) Fellow. As the current TRM fellow for the 2021–2023 period, I (Holly Riley, first listed author) had the opportunity to review prior instructors' syllabi and adapt the course to incorporate my own ideas and experiences as a scholar. Following implementation of the peer review pilot, I worked with my research assistant (Brenna Spurling, second listed author) to synthesize additional literature surrounding established and contemporary modes of peer review, and we collaborated to produce this qualitative report explaining the scaffolded peer review model, examples of student achievement and feedback, and potential directions for the future development and implementation of this model. This discussion draws from scholarship across fields of higher education, honors education, and college- or university-level teaching pedagogy to establish the significance of and necessity for peer review practices that allow honors college students to give and receive interdisciplinary, high-quality peer feedback that aids their overall success as researchers, learners, and writers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Traditional models of the peer review process include the foundational analysis conducted by Marcoulides and Simkin (1995), Topping's 1998

review regarding the process and outcomes of peer review, and Dochy et al.'s analysis (1999) of literature on self-, peer, and co-assessment processes in education as well as more modern models of peer review analysis (Wanner & Palmer, 2018) and framework (Adachi et al., 2018). These models generally combine objective and subjective methods of feedback into one peer review exercise. For example, students are instructed to provide feedback on grammar/mechanics, content, and scope simultaneously for one paper or section. Many existing studies in this area, including those by Geithner and Pollastro (2016), Rangachari (2010), Gunersel et al. (2008), and Guilford (2001), analyze peer review processes in subject-specific or major-specific classes, which offer the benefit of students sharing a topical understanding of their peer review partner's area of inquiry.

In an honors classroom, where interdisciplinary learning is often prioritized and even upper-level classes include students from across majors (Dunbar et al., 2013; Jones & Shufeldt, 2021; Klein, 1999), the peer review exercise proves more difficult in terms of content. Students in the final semesters of their honors education may be expected to sufficiently provide consistent feedback in areas of grammar and language conventions but are often less equipped to provide content-specific edits toward a topic from a different major or area of inquiry. As the instructor of an interdisciplinary research-based course, I moved beyond a singular peer review model toward a more scaffolded one, first providing students with instruction on how to grade more objective and straightforward grammar and formatting material, then moving directionally through more complex and subjective processes such as language, clarity, structure, and eventually overall content, argument, and scope. As Cho and Cho (2011) find, undergraduate students likely have adequate knowledge of the objective criteria relevant in peer review, so beginning with objective tasks may contribute to student confidence as the scaffolded approach moves toward more subjective criteria.

In his four-year analysis of peer review processes in his introductory psychology course, Stowell (2006) notes that students found grammar and formatting as the most frequent problems identified by students in the peer review process. It may be easier for students to point out objective errors like grammar and formatting because, as Barst et al. (2011) point out, students are not always confident in their ability to provide or accept negative feedback, especially in terms of content and other subjective measures. However, a scaffolded approach and the use of specific rubrics can help rectify this student uneasiness about their own ability and increase their confidence in grading

feedback reliability (Biango-Daniels & Sarvary, 2021; Cartney, 2010; Cho et al., 2006; Stowell, 2006).

The relationship between assessment or outcome evaluation of a student project and the process of learning is transitioning from a focus on “assessment as measurement” to “assessment for learning” in higher education (Cartney, 2010). Models that include subjective criteria for peer review follow trends of learning-based assessment by teaching peer review processes and progressively building on concepts rather than simply grading a final project or paper (Cho & Cho, 2011). Liu and Carless (2006) encourage shifting perspectives on peer review from seeing students as sharing the responsibility of grading, marking, or ranking with the teacher to seeing it as a communicative process in which students engage meaningfully in dialogue with peers about the standards and focus of assignments. This shift in focus has implications beyond a class grade and gives students the opportunity to engage more actively in and take more responsibility for their learning, understand their own values in regard to academic thought, and improve personal reflection abilities. These peer review processes are critical in developing skills that go beyond the classroom and prepare students for professional work (Wanner, 2018).

Given these existing models of peer review and the demonstrated need for continued shifts in approach, the goal of the proposed model is to allow students mastery over a scaffolded process of peer review tasks that includes significant class time and guided instruction for implementation. In the following sections, we outline this peer review process as it was implemented in the fall 2021 Art of Inquiry class, including specific examples of assignment instructions and student feedback. While this pilot application of the model does not include quantitative data regarding demonstrated change in student achievement, the initial positive feedback and assessment metrics from student work demonstrate aptitude for the success of this process and validate a need for continued research and assessment in this area.

COURSE STRUCTURE AND ASSIGNMENT PROGRESSION

Part 1: Peer Review Processes and Assignment Descriptions

Assignment 1: Bibliography

To provide a point of entry for the peer review process that was both objective in scope and easily accessible for all students, the first peer review assignment dealt primarily with students’ draft bibliographies, which contained a minimum of twenty secondary peer-reviewed sources relating to

their research topic and cited per their chosen style manual. Students reviewed their partner's draft bibliography of source materials and identified specific inconsistencies with the applied style manual via highlighting or other annotation. To the extent possible, students were assigned partners who were aligning their research with the same style manual as their own; however, out of 16 total students, there were two (paired together) who were pursuing different style manuals.

As an orientation to the peer review process, students were provided four clear goals for the overall process and four specific instances of inconsistencies to look for.

Goals for the Draft Bibliography Peer Review Process:

1. The reader “catches” anything the writer may have missed (the more glaringly obvious, the better!).
2. The reader takes significant time to review the written work in the context of the style manual; this involves directly checking these rules for each individual piece.
3. The reader asks questions that engage the writer's thought process.
4. The reader and writer undergo this process together in a way that allows the writer time to implement any and all of these changes.

Specific Inconsistencies to Look For:

1. Stuff that seems “basic” but actually isn't, like font, font size, italics, periods, spaces, etc.
2. Missing information (page numbers, volume numbers, URLs, publication cities, etc.)
3. Misspellings or lack of inclusion of special characters (such as é vs. e)
4. Anything else that isn't absolutely perfect! (Adapted from “Peer Review for Draft Bibliography,” HONR320E, Fall 2021, Dr. Holly Riley)

A critical component of this process and of all further peer review activities throughout the semester was the allowance of in-class time to implement the majority of identified edits. Students were instructed to spend the first half of their time (approximately thirty minutes) identifying errors or edits in their partner's bibliography and the second half implementing and fixing the changes identified by their partner. This strategy had multiple goals: first, to

prevent students from losing momentum or motivation for this often-tedious process; second, to allow students to ask their partner for clarification of any annotations in real-time; third, to allow the instructor to assist on any difficult tasks or questions; finally, to keep verbal guidance and newly learned knowledge in students' working memory for optimal implementation.

For the following week's assignment, students submitted fully reviewed and edited both their and their partner's bibliographies as well as a short reflection on the experience and effectiveness of this process. The reflection allowed me to make any necessary adjustments for future processes of peer review.

Assignment 2: Literature Review

Beyond the basic mechanics of checking a bibliography with its associated style manual and annotating errors, the peer review process often veers into treacherous waters with its innate subjectivity. Especially in a multi-disciplinary class consisting of students from entirely different majors, peer reviewers may not be familiar with their partner's chosen topic, which makes it difficult to assess the content and credibility of something like a literature review. Further, the balance of objective (e.g., grammar, punctuation, formatting) and subjective (accurate synthesis of resources, validity of research ideas, originality of thought) material present in a research paper can lead to a disorganized process of review with the student reviewer focusing heavily on certain areas and neglecting others.

To combat these obstacles, students were guided through a three-part checklist that separated the peer review process into overview, mechanics, and content components. To further provide structure for the more subjective components of the review, students were asked to copy and paste specific sections of their partner's work that satisfied required components of the literature review. For example, in the "overview" section, the first item in the checklist read as follows:

1. Is the topic of the project clearly defined in the literature review? If so, paste the section of the lit review that clearly defines the topic here. If not, note that here, and then work with your partner to come up with some phrasing that clearly defines the project topic and field. (Adapted from "Lit Review Peer Review Checklist", HONR320E, Fall 2021, Dr. Holly Riley)

This type of instruction provided accountability for both partners by requiring them to repost the section in question rather than simply answering "yes"

or “no.” Other topics included in the “overview” section included analyzing the organization of their partner’s literature review and identifying introductory and conclusory language that summarized the overall scope of the review.

The second section, “Mechanics,” dealt more directly with objectively identifiable issues relating to grammar, jargon, spelling, formality, and punctuation. Again, rather than simply verifying that they had checked these things, students were instructed to copy and paste these instances into the review assignment. For example, the first item in the “Mechanics” section read as follows:

4. Find three sentences that could be updated for clarity or grammar and paste them here. You may provide suggestions to your partner on how to improve them. (Adapted from “Lit Review Peer Review Checklist”, HONR320E, Fall 2021, Dr. Holly Riley)

The third and final section, titled “Content,” guided students through basic processes of reviewing their partner’s source syntheses for accuracy and relevancy. In previous class sessions leading up to this peer review, we talked in detail about “quick searches” to review previously unknown topics—a process that involved choosing key terms from their partner’s project, conducting library and database searches, skimming abstracts, reading book reviews (if available), reading introductions, and reading previous literature reviews in the field or area. Most of these skills were learned through hands-on exercises and examples in prior class sessions, but students also reviewed UM library guides and academic searching and editing worksheets (Labaree 2020; Cornish 2010) as further resources for this process.

One challenge for students reading their partner’s literature reviews for *content* was that they were unlikely to be familiar with the topic area. Rather than assigning the type of “fact-checking” that would involve reading virtually all of their partner’s reviewed literature, students were instructed to “spot-check,” reading one source in detail and then comparing a few more sections of literature with their partner’s (previously submitted) annotated bibliography for accuracy. Students were also instructed to do brief searches on their partner’s topic keywords and scan for major sources in the field that were not included in the literature review.

Approximately two hours of class time were slated for this process overall. Students spent 15–30 minutes per section reviewing their partner’s work and then 15–20 minutes implementing their partner’s suggestions. Following completion of the in-class portion of this assignment, students scheduled a 30-minute meeting with their partner (outside of class) to discuss

further implementation of edits and any other ideas or suggestions. Students uploaded the completed checklist, their own revised lit review, and their partner's revised lit review for the completed assignment.

Assignment 3: Methods and Introduction

The third and final assignment in the peer review process was a review of the introductory and methods sections of the final proposal. Like the “Literature Review Peer Review” assignment, the checklist for this assignment began with five questions geared toward objective review. The majority of these questions focused on first-person and subjective language, asking students to review their partner's project and highlight specific instances where this type of language occurred. Students were then asked to provide specific suggestions for improvement in a number of these cases. For example, the first two questions of the assignment checklist read as follows:

1. Go through your partner's entire methods/intros document and highlight every case of first-person language (me, my, I, etc.) you can find. (Note that these might not all need to be changed, but likely several of them will be!)
2. Pick five instances of first-person language that need to be revised and revise them to be third-person language similar to the examples we did in class. (See the lecture notes from last week [in Box] for those examples). Copy and paste the examples and the revised versions here. (Adapted from “Methods and Intro Peer Review Checklist,” HONR320E, Fall 2021, Dr. Holly Riley)

The following sections of this assignment dealt with more subjective types of review and focused on major components of the introduction and methodology sections of students' final research proposal assignments. Students answered “Yes/No/Somewhat” questions regarding the inclusion of important aspects of their partner's introduction and methodology and provided specific instructions for improvement in places where their sections did not meet all the necessary requirements. Following this process, students were provided time for open-ended editing, discussion, and revision with their partner on the content of these sections and the project as a whole.

By placing this open-ended feedback section toward the end of the peer review process, students were able to give subjective suggestions for improvement that were grounded in deep understanding of major components of the

project. Completing many of the “basics” of peer editing (such as grammar or formatting checks, identifying jargon or informal language, revising sentence clarity, etc.) in the initial stages of the peer review process allowed students mental space to then turn toward larger and more complex issues surrounding entire sections or even the paper as a whole.

Perhaps even more critical to the success of this project, however, was the framework directed toward implementation. In every section of this process, students were not simply instructed to implement their partner’s feedback—they were allowed time to do so, given specific instructions on how to implement this feedback, and instructed to submit their edited versions (with the implementation of feedback) rather than the initial drafts. This framework allowed for scaffolding of the peer review process as a whole, ensuring that students were not simply recommending the same changes over and over again. This implementation process also provided students with an understanding of the time commitment and mental processes necessary for making changes based on peer review comments.

Part 2: Student Reflections, Feedback, and Assessment

Detail, Formatting, and Complexity

Following each section of the peer review process, students completed a brief reflection (250–500 words) describing their experience with the process and the types of benefits they felt were achieved by working with their partner. Student feedback was overall positive and reflected significant growth in both the scope of implemented edits and the relationship and trust with their peer review partner. For the bibliography peer review, many students noted that they were initially apprehensive or unknowledgeable about the specific requirements for fully edited bibliographies, even as upper-level honors students:

I find myself getting defensive when I’m not perfect right away. That definitely applied when I was receiving feedback on my bibliography . . . now that that’s out of the way, I actually enjoyed the process. . . . There is a ton of stuff that goes into formatting a bibliography that I knew absolutely nothing about. I feel like all of my professors over the last three years have kind of passed over the bibliography so I never actually knew what I was doing when I was writing one.

—Student 1

A number of students highlighted specific misconceptions they had about the bibliography and citation progress and the collaborative steps they took with their partner to fix them:

My bibliography was a bit more problematic. I had not included page numbers in any of my citations because I was under the impression that I should cite only the pages I used, and I did not know which pages I would use yet. Instead, APA format includes the page numbers encompassing the entire journal. [My partner] was kind enough to go through and find the page numbers for many of my articles, and later I went through and finished the job.

—Student 2

Other students noted that even at this early point in the process, they learned important information about how to structure their initial research methodologies:

Overall talking things through with [my peer review partner] made me realize how interesting other topics are and that it is okay to start simple/general and work into more complex things at a slower rate when working with complex topics.

—Student 3

A majority of the students submitted peer reviewed bibliographies that were well edited and clearly aligned with their chosen style manual; this attention to detail continued as they added more sources to their working bibliography and implemented them in their research proposals over the course of the semester. In later class discussions, students further noted that this process of peer reviewing their partner's bibliographies helped them become more confident and familiar with their chosen style manual and that it made correctly formatting both their bibliography and the rest of their proposal less challenging.

Jargon, Organization, and Conversation

While students were not required to submit an open-ended reflection for the literature review peer review process, they did submit their three-part checklist with specific and open-ended feedback on their partner's written work. In many cases, students were able to quickly identify jargon in their partner's literature review as virtually every pair of students came from significantly different majors and thus were unfamiliar with each other's field-specific language.

After completing sections where they directly identified (and copy-pasted) their partner's introductory and conclusory language and outlined their partner's organizational structure, students were able to identify specific areas for improvement even without being deeply immersed in their partner's area of inquiry. For example, one student noted that their partner's conclusion for the overall literature review only pertained to one component of the project and provided direction for improvement:

Conclusion only pertains to the lit traps. This is a good conclusion for the last paragraph, but you should try to conclude the entire paper: These ideas may explain the higher capture rates of lit traps, but there is much more analysis needed to concretely be informed on the accuracy—and therefore lack of biases—in these new capture methods.

—Student 4

Students also noted in class discussions that having scheduled in-class time to complete these peer review sessions with their partners made the identification of jargon and other clarity issues much easier. Rather than taking the time to write out each instance where they had a question or were unsure of meaning, students could quickly converse with their partner in real time about any confusing language. In some cases, the jargon or field-specific language was appropriate for the student's intended proposal audience; however, students reflected that in many other instances, having dialogue with their partner in class allowed them to quickly identify and fix any unclear language or unnecessary jargon.

Growth, Analysis, and Development

In the final reflection following the methods and introduction peer review process, students discussed the challenges and benefits of working with their partner on more broad and open-ended topics. Two major themes emerged from these reflections: first, a notable increase in familiarity with and stated appreciation for their partner's assistance (as compared to the first peer review reflection several weeks prior) and, secondly, frequent discussions of suggested changes in “higher-order” topics such as overall paper tone, structure, and methods.

Having [my partner] available to comment on my paper was extremely helpful. I had a few instances of first-person and I'm glad we got to look over those and come up with some helpful ideas. Beyond that, there were cases of a lack of clarity. Getting that outside

perspective on the sentence structure allowed me to see what other people think of my writing, and will enable me to improve in my revisions. Having a chance to chat with [my partner] about ideas on what to focus on was the most helpful part of this whole process.

—Student 5

Having reviewed each other's work for several weeks now, going through the peer review process for the methods and introduction section with [my partner] was very useful. . . . We also discussed the ways in which I could expand my methodology section, including additional sources to uphold the methods used and why they are important, as well as further discussion on what may make my study unique to that of others. While in the beginning I felt my methodologies section would be simple in that I am just performing interviews, I realized the number of details that I could develop that I wasn't prepared for, from the interviews questions to being specific on the number of people interviewed and how they were chosen.

—Student 6

[My partner] had some wonderful insight for how to make my writing more objective. I hadn't considered simply citing multiple sources in my sentences to make them objective. This is something I can easily go in and add which will greatly improve these sections. . . . She also noted that I use the word "may" a lot in my writing. We talked about how this makes what I am saying weaker in that I am not firmly stating my ideas. I had not recognized this before, but once she mentioned it I was able to go back and remove all of the unnecessary may's. In most instances, I replaced the "may" with "can". This was a simple change that strengthened the sentences. Firmly stating certain concepts can be a bit nerve-racking, but I should not be afraid to do so. I am so glad [my partner] pointed out these problems in order to help me improve my work. . . . I have loved working with [my partner] on peer reviews. She is very kind and gives great constructive feedback that helps me improve my writing and feel more confident in my project, overall.

—Student 7

As demonstrated in these selected reflections, students continued to identify grammar and clarity issues in their own and their partner's work even at this closing point of the peer review process. However, these issues were supplemented by review of more large-scale and complex concepts such as

the structuring and methodology of sections, systemic issues in writing, and scholarly objectivity and writing tone. Many of these reflections included discussion of multiple sections of the entire proposal, indicating reviewers' growing understanding of their partner's project and concept as a whole and a desire to help improve the overall quality of the proposal. This notable growth in confidence and collaborative skills was further demonstrated through an overall improvement in students' academic writing and the quality of their final research proposals at the end of the semester.

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE QUESTIONS

As peer review practices remain prevalent in research and writing-intensive courses (Stowell, 2006), the refining of these systems is critical to providing students with opportunities to improve the quality of their work and to gain experience editing the work of others. This model worked successfully for students in this class and yielded overall positive feedback as well as high-quality, well-edited final research proposals from the overwhelming majority of students. Factors that may have posed challenges to peer review in an interdisciplinary research methods course like this—such as lack of inter-subject familiarity, difficulty editing a large and multi-faceted project, and lack of time to fully implement suggested changes—were overcome by this scaffolded model that guided students through stages of editing in different parts of the proposal process.

Future organized studies would be useful in contributing data-based (rather than anecdotal, as provided here) literature on the success of scaffolded models for peer review across the primary length of a course: studies like the one presented by Cho, Schunn, and Wilson (2006) as well as studies examining the efficacy of scheduled in-class implementation time for peer review suggestions rather than work assigned for outside of class. If such models demonstrate continued success, future iterations of this process may be adapted for faculty development and other types of teacher training, ideally resulting in easily adaptable resources to be used by instructors across a range of undergraduate courses.

One challenge that remains present in this peer review model is difference in student ability across research, writing, and editing tasks. Students submitted initial draft sections to their peer reviewer that varied greatly in quality, posing potentials for disparity in the difficulty and amount of editing required of the peer reviewer. Some students noted in their reflections or feedback forms that they struggled to identify an abundance of issues in

their partner's work; in some cases, this reflected the strength of their partner's writing and editing and in other cases suggested a lack of experience or attention to detail on the part of the reviewer. Solutions to this issue may include a continued adaptation of checklist-based instructional materials, more examples of what to look for, clear time requirements/limits on different parts of the process, and possibly a list of optional "go deeper" tasks for student reviewers who have quickly finished identifying initial problems (or lack thereof) in the allotted time.

In future iterations of this course, as well as in similar courses taught by the same instructor, this model will continue to be implemented with minor changes to instructional language for increased clarity and effectiveness. After gathering additional anecdotal data, we intend to expand this project by developing and implementing more detailed assessment metrics to measure the effectiveness of these peer review processes and to gain insight into sections in need of further revision. This model, supplemented by existing research on effective student peer review processes and the forthcoming assessment, will potentially lead to a useable and adaptable model for scaffolded, multi-disciplinary peer review that further strengthens research editing practices in honors education.

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