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The Politics of Peer Response

peer response post-process

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“[T]echnical things have political qualities. [. . . M]achines, structures, and systems of modern material culture can be accurately judged not only for their contributions of efficiency and productivity, not merely for their positive and negative environmental side effects, but also for the ways in which they can embody specific forms of power and authority.”

—Langdon Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?”

The use of peer groups to respond to student papers is a long-established practice in the composition classroom, so well entrenched, that we may sometimes employ peer response without thoroughly evaluating underlying assumptions and beliefs about how such groups operate. As a central tenet of the writing process movement, peer response was originally devised as part of a comprehensive, totalizing writing theory. Post-process theory demands that both the fundamental premises and the practice of peer response be reevaluated. This essay invites both experienced and novice writing teachers to (re)consider the ways we theorize peer response groups. It also proposes strategies for teaching peer response. Theorizing the uses of peer response is important because our underlying assumptions directly affect the ways we design peer response activities. In DiPardo and Freedman’s words, “[H]ow groups are framed serves as a powerful indicator of an [. . .] instructor’s theory of what it means to ‘teach the writing process’” (127). Since their 1988 article “Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretic Foundations and New Directions,” the very notion of *the* writing process, however, has been brought into question. In the current post-process classroom, there is no set of skills called “writing” that can be learned and then applied to all situations that use writing (Russell 59). Rather, writing is highly contextualized within communities of practice. It follows, then, that because the writer’s situatedness changes, so do writing processes. This understanding, in which writing is seen as a specific communicative interaction with others, for a specific purpose, at a specific moment in time, highlights the need to examine the context of peer response group work, along with its material consequences, or, put another way, to make explicit the highly developed and complex—though sometimes unconscious—understandings of peer response groups, to make theory *conscious* so that we may avoid turning this cornerstone of writing pedagogy into a mechanical routine. As George Hillocks puts it in *Teaching Writing as Reflective Practice*:

Active critical reflection is necessary in every aspect of our teaching, not only in front of the class. We must try to reevaluate our own values and experiences as they relate to our teaching. Our assumptions and theories about teaching composition must remain open to inspection, evaluation, and revision, a condition that requires an active inquiry paralleling the inquiry in which we engage our students. (217)

Critical reflection is needed if teachers are to use peer response groups effectively.

In “Do Artifacts Have Politics?” Langdon Winner claims that “[T]echnologies *in themselves* have political properties.” In other words, “machines, structures, and systems of modern material culture can be accurately judged not only for their contributions of efficiency and productivity, not merely for their positive and negative environmental side effects, but also for the ways in which they can embody specific forms of power and authority” (26). One example of technical or physical arrangements that contain explicit or implicit political purposes is the Moses overpasses on Long Island. According to Winner:

Robert Moses, the master builder of roads, parks, bridges, and other public works from the 1920s to the 1970s in New York, had [two hundred or so] overpasses built to specifications that would discourage the presence of buses on his parkways. [. . . T]he reasons reflect Moses’s social-class bias and racial prejudice. Automobile-owning whites of the “upper” and “comfortable middle” classes, as he called them, would be free to use the parkways for recreation and commuting. Poor people and blacks, who normally used public transit, were kept off the roads because the twelve-foot tall buses could not get through the overpasses. One consequence was to limit access of racial minorities and low-income groups to Jones Beach, Moses’s widely acclaimed public park. (28)

Winner’s example illustrates that artifacts do indeed have politics embedded in their design. The same might be argued of peer response activities in the writing classroom. Thinking of this as a “tool” or “artifact,” rather than simply an activity, may, at first, seem erroneous. But this framework for analysis highlights not only the *uses* or *functions* of peer response groups but also their constitutive properties.

Like the Moses overpasses on Long Island, peer response groups have political properties. What’s more, their politics are not merely contingent upon their *uses*; rather, *they are inherent in their design*. This analysis considers not only the classroom context, which determines how peer response is used, but also the tool itself and the arrangements of power and authority embedded in it. Rather than view peer response groups as neutral tools that can be used well or poorly, for good, ill, or something in between, a careful examination of the ways peer groups are designed reveals that they produce a set of consequences—power relationships in particular—*beyond* their immediate use. Kenneth Bruffee is perhaps best known for drawing our attention to power and authority in the creation of knowledge in the writing classroom. In *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*, he observes of peer responding:

[W]riting teachers seldom help students learn in a systematic way how to engage in the intellectually demanding, aesthetically sophisticated, and socially

delicate process of commenting helpfully on the work of peers. As a result, students understand that their comments on one another's work are not made primarily for the benefit of fellow students. They are a performance before an audience of one, the teacher. In these comments, students tend to become [. . .] sharks or teddy bears, alternately, providing cutting insult or effusive praise depending on their interpretation of "what the teacher wants." (66)

We assign peer response, but we don't *teach* it. Reflecting on the unexamined implications of peer response, then, is not enough. We must teach peer response by engaging with our students in the practices of reading, writing, and talking, rather than using peer response as a neutral tool. Instead of replicating school practices that invite students to guess and to give teachers what we want, Bruffee challenges us to reconsider teaching as "reacculturative" (73). Thinking of teaching this way leads us to frame peer response design as an opportunity to help students learn to talk in the discourses of the communities they wish to join, and thus become members of those communities of practice.

It is tempting, of course, to look outside my own classroom for examples of peer response designs to critique. But because my point is that we ought to reflect upon our own peer response group tasks, with some trepidation, then, I invite readers to examine the "Writing Assignment 1 Peer Response Sheet" (Figure A), which I use to guide responses to an early draft of an essay in my own first-year composition class. As you examine the design, consider the following:

Questions for Analyzing Peer Response Group Work Design

1. How are peer response groups theorized, and how are those theories instantiated in the assignment?
2. What values and assumptions about the teaching and learning of writing are embedded in the task?
3. What are the explicit—and implicit—goals, objectives, and expectations of peer response group work?
4. What is the teacher's level of involvement in the groups—and why?
5. What forms of rationality—or ways of thinking—are built into the fabric of the task?
6. How is the task designed? What meaning is suggested by that design? What is gained or lost by the particular arrangement of activities?
7. What barriers are built in?
8. Whose interests are served?

Writer: _____

Reader: _____

Writing Assignment 1 Peer Response Sheet

Directions: Put your name in the blank labeled "Writer." Give a peer response sheet and a copy of your essay to each of the readers in your group. They will put their names in the blank labeled "Reader." This sheet provides a place for readers to record their responses to

your essay. At the end of class, writers should take the responses home and consider this feedback as you revise. Do not turn in this sheet or your draft today; instead, turn them in later with your revised essay.

Readers: As you read, respond only to the items on this sheet. Do not hunt errors. Resist the temptation to mark and edit the paper as though it were yours. You may include additional responses directly on your classmate's paper.

Writer: In the space below, explain what you'd most like help with to develop and revise your essay.

Readers:

1. First, read your classmate's essay, and then respond to the concerns described above. Now reread the assignment for this essay. In your own words, briefly explain the goals of the assignment, and then describe the ways you think your classmate's essay successfully meets those goals.
2. Are there any parts of the assignment that the writer hasn't yet fully addressed? Any ideas you'd like to know more about? Describe at least 3 ways the writer could develop the essay further.
3. What do you think is the main point or controlling idea of the essay? Write it in the blank below. Now ask the writer to point out the focus and underline it. Do you and the writer agree? Look at the essay together, paragraph-by-paragraph. Jot down a rough sentence outline. Does each paragraph help to develop this main idea? If not, talk with the writer about clarifying the focus and developing a pattern of organization that will help to support it.

Writer: After you've gotten two sets of responses to your draft, study them carefully, then write a short note to yourself and me explaining what you've learned from your peer responses and what your priorities for revision are: What do you intend to do now, based on your reader responses?

Figure A.

Just as students come to first-year composition to develop knowledge of writing and their own writing processes, so peer response group work is an activity that, with practice, students may improve as the semester progresses. In other words, I don't expect students to be experts in responding when they begin the course. Because research in peer response group work suggests that students need direct training to respond effectively, before assigning students to small groups to read and respond to one another's drafts, we respond—as a whole class—to several papers first (see, for example, Barron; Benesch; Berg; Cahill; Danis; George; Grimm; Paton; Zhu). This practice teaches ways of thinking and talking about student writing. Modeling also helps students to learn not only *how* to do the work of peer response, but also that *what we're doing* is important enough to devote substantial class time to the task.

As you can see from my directions above on the “Writing Assignment 1 Peer Response Sheet,” I take nothing for granted, telling students even where to put their names on the sheet. The message seems clear: Students are expected to learn—from the ground up—how to respond to one another's writing. I begin by asking students to explain what they'd most like help with to develop and revise their essays. This assumes, among other things, that students already *know* what they need to work on. Usually they do have some ideas. Beginning with the writer's own concerns points to another important assumption behind my use of peer response groups: Students are capable of identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their own essays. In short, they come to first-year composition with valuable knowledge about the attributes of effective writing for particular contexts, which I invite them to share with each other.

Not only do I want students to gain practice responding to one another's texts, but also I think it's important to do so *in writing*. As Mara Holt shows in “The Value of Written Peer Criticism,” responses tend to be more carefully considered and more fully developed if they are written (392). With written responses writers don't have to rely solely on their memories as they revise. Beginning with the writer's own concerns emphasizes another important objective of my first-year writing course: To develop students' self-awareness and control of their own writing processes. According to Loretta Kasper in “Assessing the Metacognitive Growth of ESL Student Writers,” “[S]tudies show that increases in learning do follow direct instruction in metacognitive strategies” (par. 51). Asking writers to reflect on what they've learned from their peer responses is one attempt to help students develop critical reflection practices.

The first question for readers is designed to prompt them to engage in dialogue with the writer about his or her stated concerns. I intend to provide sufficient time to do that, sometimes as much as two 40-minute sessions, one for each response.

The three prompts for readers are intended to encourage students to focus, not on sentence-level errors, since this response is to an early draft of an assignment, but, instead, on global issues of content and development. One goal is to teach students that form follows function. Question one invites students to return to the assignment itself. If students have trouble understanding and fully answering the assignment, then responding to a classmate's essay may help them to clarify the goals of the assignment, not only for each other, but also for themselves. Since, in my experience, early drafts are often thinly

developed, question two asks readers to brainstorm ways to develop ideas. Question three asks readers to consider another global issue, organization, to identify how the essay is arranged and to comment on the effectiveness of that pattern.

On the surface, my peer response worksheet *seems* to accomplish my goals: Students are generally effective in responding to content and organization. Their responses are often detailed and insightful. But students generally engage very little in the sort of dialogue I intend. Rather than talk to each other, students spend most of their time dutifully—and silently—filling out my worksheet. According to my theory, peer response work is an opportunity for me to step back, to construct students in the roles of both teachers and learners, but though I may *intend* to be uninvolved in the peer response groups, I am very much present—perhaps too much present—in this worksheet.

A closer look at my peer response group activity suggests alternative ways of reading it. Telling college students where to write their names on the form, for example, could be seen as evidence that I don't think they are smart enough to figure that out for themselves. Likewise, the entire worksheet shows evidence—not of the liberating, student-centered pedagogy I intend—but of the worst sort of controlling and domesticating educational practice. As Carrie Leverenz points out in “Peer Response in the Multicultural Composition Classroom: Dissensus—A Dream (Deferred),” “The use of peer response in writing classes has long been touted as a means of granting students increased authority over their reading and writing. By instituting peer responding, the theory goes, that teacher gives up his or her place as the *only* authority in the classroom, allowing students to share authority in the evaluation of their own and peers' writing” (167). But if this power-sharing theory of peer response is matched with a design—as mine is—that privileges the teacher's control over the students, via a rigid heuristic, for instance, then the objectives of *sharing* authority and helping students develop independence as writers may be undermined. Because experience has taught me that accountability—or is it control?—is important, I use response sheets like the one above to keep track of who says what about which paper. Although well-intentioned, this demand for accountability could be perceived as surveilling students and their responses. What's more, knowledge, it seems, resides in students' written responses on the page, rather than, as Bruffee puts it in his oft-quoted formulation, “in the conversation that goes on among the members of a community of knowledgeable peers and in the ‘conversation of mankind’” (153).

My advice to readers, “Do not hunt errors. Resist the temptation to take the paper into your own hands, marking and editing it as though it were your own,” is similarly well-intentioned, yet because the instructions are cast in negative terms—in terms of what *not* to do—something may be lost. Perhaps more attention ought to be given to what students *should* do, rather than this finger-shaking admonition about what to avoid. This raises the question of who decides what students should do and why. As Lisa Cahill observes in “Reflection on Peer-Review Practices,” by supplying students with “the ‘right’ kinds of questions [. . .] I exempted them from a crucial part of the process—the development of a set of reading heuristics” (306). Perhaps, then, students should be invited to compose their own peer response questions.

Tangled together with the problem of teacher authority is a second related problem: the failure to consider genre when designing a peer response activity. As a result, the questions I include on my “Peer Response Sheet” are questionable. As a literacy specialist,

I understand that literacies are situated, located in particular times and places, or contexts. In *Learning and Teaching Genre*, Aviva Freedman and Peter Medway elaborate this recent conceptualization of genre:

Just as there has been a rethinking in composition studies, generally, so that pieces of writing are no longer abstracted from their contexts but rather understood as strategies for responding to particular readers within specific contexts, so too have genres come to be seen not just as text types but as typical rhetorical engagements with recurring situations. (3)

The decontextualization of peer response erases a consideration of the genre called for by the particular writing assignment and its specific rhetorical engagement. As David Russell puts it in “Activity Theory and Its Implications for Writing Instruction,” “there is no autonomous, generalizable skill or set of skills called ‘writing’ that can be learned and then applied to all genres or activities” (59). My questions, however, do not reflect this understanding of genre. They offer no clues regarding the particular context for writing. In their generality, my questions send the message that a set of writing skills may be carried, like items in a briefcase, from one context to another, divorced from ever-changing social circumstances and practices. In their generality, my questions suggest that all writing tasks are the same. In short, they may fit any assignment—and, therefore, none. Rather than ask a general “yes” or “no” question such as, “Are there any parts of the assignment that the writer hasn’t yet fully addressed?” perhaps a more effective context-based question might highlight some specific element of the particular assignment, which invites students, in this case, to apply analytical concepts from Susan Bordo’s “Hunger as Ideology” to food advertisements of their own: “What do you see the ads saying about men and women, their bodies, and their relationships to food? What alternative interpretations of the ads can you suggest?”

In addition to the writing assignment’s situatedness, genre theory leads us to consider the peer response sheet itself and the ways its recurring forms of language—its genre—reflect and reinforce dominant values and ideologies. Notice, for instance, the visual rhetoric of the sheet, with its own power-laden agenda. Questions are more or less evenly spaced, suggesting the rationality of efficiency. Readers are expected to offer their written feedback on this sheet, with all answers uniform in length. It seems neat and efficient, all right, but some students, privileging the rationality of social exchange and collaboration rather than efficiency, may need to spill over onto the back or additional sheets. Others, however, simply give themselves over to my control, striving for efficiency, filling in the blanks only so far as I’ve allowed, doing just what I’ve asked—but missing the point of constructing knowledge dialogically with their peers. One consequence of my design is that there is little of the extended conversation about writing that I hope for. As a space for the social construction of knowledge, my peer response group activity fails in important ways. Because my design privileges progress—getting the task done—and the individualism and isolation required to fill out the form, social exchange, reciprocal relationships, and collaboration happen, if at all, *in spite of* my design.

This may explain why I have been happy to see detailed, insightful responses to texts, but disappointed to find that many students fail to follow up on the advice of their classmates. Perhaps this result reflects that fact that students are still learning to engage in peer response. Maybe they are unsure what feedback to follow, what to ignore. Alternatively,

students may be so busy serving my interests in filling out the worksheet that peer response fails to meet their need to talk and to listen actively to each other about their writing. This brings to mind Leo Tolstoy's "On Teaching the Rudiments," in which he argues that "Every teacher must [. . .] by regarding every imperfection in the pupil's comprehension, not as a defect of the pupil, but as a defect of his own instruction, endeavor to develop in himself the ability of discovering new methods" (10). Perhaps the imperfections in my students' peer responses reflect a defect in my own construction of the peer response task.

I could go on analyzing my peer response sheet. And you may likely imagine more, better, different questions for analysis. But you get the point. And so I'd like to turn to another reference to the critical analysis of technology, which, like Langdon Winner's analysis of the politics of machines, structures, and systems of modern material culture, offers a useful way to think about the power and authority embedded in peer response group work. In *Science in Action*, Bruno Latour shows how an hypothesis or speculation either becomes a fact, or remains merely a curiosity. He calls *fact* "ready-made" science—as in "already-made": It is "black-boxed," Latour says, certain, unproblematic, and stable, and it provides a foundation for future work. He refers to *speculation* as "science in the making" or "science in action": It is, Latour tells us, "rich, confusing, ambiguous and fascinating," and its future is uncertain (15). Your computer is one example of *already-made* science: Its operations are taken for granted, certain (unless, of course, you have an ornery, unpredictable computer like mine). When you turn on a computer in the morning, you don't wonder *how* it works, or *why* this way and not some other way; instead, you simply rely on it to get your other "work-in-the-making" done. By contrast, speculation is "science in action," ideas that are not yet "black-boxed," fixed, and certain. Latour's idea of "black-boxing" is a useful way to think about analyzing peer feedback tasks. As I look at my response worksheet, I see the ways that, over time, I have stabilized and tamed response work, "black-boxing" it, using it as a taken-for-granted—and unquestionably positive—*routine*. Such mechanical practices need to come out the box to be examined more closely if we are to engage in what Donald Shon calls in *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* "reflection-in-action":

[W]hat distinguishes reflection-in-action from other kinds of reflection is its immediate significance for action. In reflection-in-action, the rethinking of some part of our knowing-in-action leads to on-the-spot experiment and further thinking that affects what we do—in the situation at hand and perhaps also in others. (29)

Peer response, however, because it is widely accepted as useful in the writing classroom, may seem like a problem that has already been solved.

While Cahill offers a thoughtful critique of her own approach in "Reflection on Peer-Review Practices," the paucity of research on peer response in recent years is striking. Such reflection as Cahill's is necessary, however, because, like other technologies, response designs may become less flexible over time. In Winner's words, "By far the greatest latitude of choice exists the very first time a particular instrument is introduced. Because choices tend to become strongly fixed in material equipment, economic investment, and social habit, the original flexibility vanishes for all practical purposes once the initial commitments are made" (30). By analogy, the design of peer response group work has important consequences for the form and quality of its outcomes. One implication, then, is that the

uses of peer response must be thoroughly and repeatedly theorized, if they are to remain open to “reflection-in-action.” In our enthusiasm for student-centered learning—or something that *appears* to be student centered—the uses of peer groups become, as Winner suggests, entrenched, inflexible. When that happens, we no longer examine this commonplace classroom practice critically. Instead, because peer groups are generally regarded as good, specific deployments of them may seem beyond question.

We need to learn more about how writing teachers theorize peer response work, what models they know and use, and upon what assumptions those designs are based. We need to study the ways teachers instantiate theories of peer response through classroom practice. And we need to examine the ways teachers negotiate their authority—and that of students—through the directions and modeling they offer.

Among other things, a post-process view of peer response work might lead us to complicate our thinking about pedagogical authority and de-centering of the composition classroom. Here I use the term “post process” with some hesitation, for as Paul Matsuda points out, “Post-process [. . .] is ultimately a misnomer, for it presupposes a certain conception of process and proclaims its end—after all, it literally means ‘after process.’” If this lens is to be a useful tool of analysis, then, we must be explicit about what we mean by “post-process.” In “Process and Post-Process: A Discursive History,” Matsuda warns against defining “post-process” as a complete rejection of all established process methodologies—*invention, drafting, providing feedback to a peer, revision, and so forth.* Rather than discard the term altogether, however, he proposes that “post-process might be more productively defined as the rejection of the dominance of process at the expense of other aspects of writing and writing instruction” (75). While Matsuda sees the post-process departure from process as a matter of emphasis, Bruce McComisky argues that post-process should be thought of, again, not as a denunciation of process pedagogy, but as an *extension* of its tenets. With a particular interest in the ways social institutions such as school, government, work, and the media promote certain cultural beliefs and assumptions over others—with profound consequences for our lives—McComisky proposes in *Teaching Composition as a Social Process* that a post-process perspective can extend our understanding of composing processes outward, beyond the individual writer’s consciousness, toward the inner workings of institutional socialization, toward the social construction of discursive acts (62). Thomas Kent’s anthology, *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*, explains that post-process theorists hold three key ideas about writing: First, as McComisky points out, writing is *always* a public interchange—even when we may think we are writing alone to our secret diaries. Second, writing is an interpretive act. When we write, we interpret the world around us, including texts, people, their possible reactions to what we write, the contexts for writing, available genres, and so forth. Third, writing is situated among a host of prior assumptions, beliefs, hopes, and expectations. Importantly, those beliefs are always—like Latour’s science in action—“in the making.” I may, for example, write a business letter today, requesting some product information. Next month, when I draft a similar letter, I may make some of the same rhetorical choices. Or, in the meantime, my understanding of effective business communication may have altered. Or I may follow a writing process that has worked well in the past, only to see it fail in the present, as a result of a myriad of reasons. In short, rather than a single, stable, “Writing Process,” all we have are what Kent calls “passing theories,” or “hermeneutic guesses,” about what rhetorical strategies might work (6).

This notion that there is no longer any Big Theory of “The Writing Process” suggests that we reconsider the value of peer response groups in the composition classroom. If writing is, in fact, a highly situated practice, an interpretive, public interchange, then how we design the interchanges that take place in peer response groups is particularly important. Design and implementation require reflection, not only on the part of teachers, but also students, upon *what actually takes place* in the public interchanges of peer response, which is, like writing, an interpretive act in which we strive to make sense of other writers, not just as writers, but as people who bring with them their own set of prior beliefs and “passing theories” about writing, writing processes, and response.

Examination of our uses of peer response, however, is not enough. Taking—and keeping—peer response tasks out of the “black box” to critically examine their political properties is only a first step. We must also teach students the practice of peer response. In his “alternative genealogy” of peer response, Kory Ching complicates Anne Gere’s oft-cited *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications*, proposing that classroom peer response activities have origins not only in self-sponsored literary societies and self-improvement groups, but also in the nineteenth-century pedagogical model of recitation and correction (303). Gere’s history serves as evidence in support of the student-centered process pedagogy championed in the 1980s. By contrast, Ching’s account suggests is that peer response may have emerged not so much out of a desire on the part of teachers to de-center classroom authority but in response to deteriorating working conditions, which led teachers to displace some of the burden of response onto students. While Gere envisions an idealized writing group unfettered by the stifling authority of teachers, Ching cautions against writing teachers out of peer response:

What is important in this alternative genealogy, then, is not the recitation/correction model itself but rather the view of learning as coparticipation that it illustrates. From this perspective, successful learning does not hinge on the nonparticipation of teachers. In fact, it suggests that collaboration between students and teachers can be a powerful context for learning. When students work alongside teachers, the classroom becomes a kind of Vygotskian “zone of proximal development” in which the learning of those with less experience (the students) takes place in collaboration with a more experienced other (a teacher). Rather than squelching the learning processes of students, such student/teacher collaboration can promote learning through dialogic exchange among all members of a classroom. (314)

To promote dialogic exchange, I teach peer response through a variety of guided classroom activities, what Hillocks calls “gateway activities,” or “strategies of inquiry and ways of generating discourse features” (149). Such activities, Hillocks explains, “engage students in using difficult production strategies with varying levels of support and lead eventually to independence” (150). Gateway activities are based upon the assumption that telling is not teaching. Telling students how to respond—even modeling for them—is not teaching. Learning to respond requires that students discover for themselves the discourse features of productive response, and then practice them.

For example, in one gateway activity I begin by inviting students to reflect upon their past experiences giving and getting responses to writing, both inside and outside the classroom, in order to distinguish useful feedback from unproductive. Based on these experiences, we

compile a tentative list of do's and don'ts. For instance, an effective peer response, the class may determine, is honest. Perhaps it begins by noting at least one thing the writer did well. Or students may complain that feedback—from peers and teachers alike—is vague. “Needs more detail,” doesn't tell a writer *why*, or *what kind* of detail, or *for what purpose*. Students may agree, then, to add to the characteristics of effective feedback, as one class put it, “Responses are specific. If readers make a judgment, then they explain why. Readers point to evidence from the text to back their views. They offer specific revision suggestions with reasons to support them.” Students then use this list to hold not only one another accountable for critique and advice that forwards revision, but also me. This conversation about what kinds of feedback students find useful provides an opportunity to discuss my own response strategies, and to invite students into dialogue, not only about peer response, but also about my comments on their written work.

A second gateway activity moves from general characteristics of response to specific feedback strategies for a particular assignment at a specific stage in the writing process. Using examples from the class, I demonstrate how I would respond, depending on the context, from selecting a topic to polishing a final draft. Students contribute their feedback. I draw attention to points of agreement and points of departure among us. I invite writers to tell us, given the assignment requirements and where they are in the drafting process, what they need from us. Writers talk back, question our responses, assess their usefulness, and speculate about plans for revision. This whole-class peer response draws attention to the dialogic nature of response. Students develop and practice using language for talking about writing.

A third gateway activity directs students, after exchanging feedback on their drafts, to return to their list of characteristics of effective response. Students reconsider these features in light of their experience. They suggest additions, deletions, and revisions. By reflecting together on their experiences giving and getting feedback, students further develop and refine their response strategies and their language for discussing writing.

As with learning to write, steps in the process of learning to respond, which build one on another, prepare students for and reinforce a range of strategies required by the task. At the same time, these gateway activities come with a caveat. They must remain flexible and open to revision. They must avoid becoming another “black-boxed” routine. Just as my peer response worksheet above formalizes and thereby conceals its inherent politics, so prescribing any procedure invites its unreflective use and unintended—sometimes-counterproductive—consequences. Used reflectively, however, such gateways to peer response cultivate not only student agency and success, but also further student/teacher collaboration and innovation.

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