

PEER RESPONSE THAT WORKS

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For the first fifteen years of my career I had my students do as many varieties of peer response and revision as I could find. They formed circles and read papers coded with numbers for privacy, agreeing on the best one of each batch and sharing their reactions with their classmates. They read and discussed each other's drafts in semester-long read-around groups, praising strengths and suggesting areas for improvement. They filled in checklists about classmates' papers to identify patterns of weakness to avoid in the future.

These activities produced a wide range of reactions—from moments of appreciation, to anxiety, and even outright fear. Unfortunately, most of these reactions produced no substantial growth in my students' writing. After every English teacher conference where I learned yet another approach to teaching writing, I would try it with the hope that this new thing would work. But my frustration only grew as my students continued to make the same mistakes and write the same uninspired and uninspiring prose time after time. I wanted a content-oriented peer response, one that would help students expand and elaborate on their thinking; what I got was students making comments like "Great essay, John" because they did not want to hurt the other person's feelings.

All that changed ten years ago when I began using a peer response technique described in Michael Flanigan and Diane Menendez's article "Perception and Change: Teaching Revision." The authors had developed a process where their college students, following a series of directions, described what they saw in each other's essays to help their partner understand what needed clarifying, elaborating, and omitting. Impressed with the process that Flanigan and Menendez outlined, I decided to experiment with having my students work in pairs, responding

in writing to each other's drafts. The experiment worked well, and its use has spread to other teachers in my department.

The approach is predicated upon having students write down questions about their partner's papers while a partner is writing questions about theirs. After the peer responses are handed back, students use them to improve the content of their essays. We tried unsuccessfully to let students make comments instead of asking questions, but the responses were vague and ineffective. Partners wrote, "You need to be careful not to jump from one subject to another" or "The concluding sentence is confusing." Everyone agreed that such comments did not help writers revise effectively. Questions, however, spur writers to substantial revision and improvement. They provide a ready-made springboard for invention and elaboration that the statement format does not.

When students are ready to learn about peer response, we teach the techniques in a four-day sequence. On the first day, we take one period to do a sample peer response with the class using a first-draft essay from a volunteer or an essay from our files. Students need to see what an A-quality peer response looks like; they have never done one like this, and having a model has turned out to be an essential guide. Everyone has a copy of the sample, and the instructors act as that writer's partner to demonstrate the technique.

Here is an example of a student paper and the peer response questions we wrote about it. Simon, a ninth-grader, produced this one-draft paper as a timed writing on the topic: "Discuss how a character changes in the course of a work you have studied this year":

Juliet is only 14, but by meeting Romeo, she virtually becomes an adult. Her attitude changes dramatically as does her outward appearance.

Through the start of Shakespeare's play "Romeo and Juliet" Juliet is constantly being pressured by others to get married and find the right person for herself. She doesn't know what to do about the unwanted pressure because she hasn't really found the right man and she doesn't want to be forced into anything.

When she meets Romeo, her attitude shifts toward him. She can never stop thinking of him. This change brought about happiness, because her search for him had ended, yet it also brought about misfortune,

because it was apparent that there would be trouble with them being in different families. Juliet eventually becomes so obsessed with his presence, that she is willing to do anything to stay with him, even kill herself. This was the very sad part of her change. She was unable to control it, and her love for Romeo backfired.

Juliet's change was an important one. It gave "Romeo and Juliet," happiness, theme, and tragedy.

The class reads the essay and we model the kinds of questions we want about anything that is puzzling, unclear, confusing, or illogical. We specifically avoid "yes/no" questions because they usually do not elicit new content. And so, by the end of the class period, our list of peer response questions might look like the following:

Paragraph #1:

1. Who are Juliet and Romeo?
2. Where do they live?
3. Why and how does she become an adult by meeting Romeo?
4. What was her attitude before? after?
5. What was her outward appearance before? after?

Paragraph #2:

1. Who is pressuring Juliet to get married?
2. Why is she being forced to marry?
3. Why is she getting married so young?

Paragraph #3

1. How does her attitude shift?
2. What examples from the story show she can't stop thinking of him?
3. What is the change that brought about happiness?
4. What misfortune happened?
5. Why would there be trouble because they were in different families?
6. Did they get married or not?
7. What wasn't she able to control?

Paragraph #4:

1. Why was the change an important one?
2. What themes did it give "Romeo and Juliet"?
3. What tragedy took place?
4. How did the change give people happiness?

As we write these peer response questions on the board, the class copies them down to use for reference when they write their own peer responses. To earn an A on this assignment, they must write at least ten *valid* and *helpful* questions about their partner's paper. Our samples often include more than the required ten, and we encourage our classes to address all the issues that occur to them as they read.

On day two, students are ready for actual peer response on each other's papers. We prefer to assign pairs ourselves because this eliminates students' fear of not being picked by a classmate. Sometimes we redistribute papers by walking around the room and handing them out randomly. Our goal in pairing is to avoid the dread that students often associate with peer response. They worry about having someone else read their work at all or getting a hurtful reaction from a classmate. Anything we can do to lessen their anxiety is essential and appreciated by the students.

Students then begin writing their questions on a separate sheet of paper. At the top they write, "My name is _____, and my partner's name is _____" to eliminate confusion later when papers are being passed back. Students do not write on the actual first draft because we encountered problems when the second partner read the same draft the next day. It often happened that the second reader said, "I had the same questions as partner #1 did yesterday" and did not offer new questions or insights of his or her own. This is not how peer response works—some questions overlap, but many do not—and so we now have the students record their thoughts on a separate page that the second partner does not see.

Some students finish early and can work on another assignment; others need the whole class period. We have tried squeezing two peer responses into one hour, but that has not worked. At the end of the hour, we collect both first drafts and peer responses and grade the peer responses that night.

Day three is the second peer response on the same first draft. Before class begins, we talk individually to any students

who did not earn an A on their peer response questions the day before because they had written one or more questions that were not “valid and helpful.” For example, one student wrote “Why did you start your introduction in such a boring way?,” “Can you drop the word *and* in your first sentence?,” and “Does your last sentence fit?” None of these questions leads to substantial new content that improves the paper. At most, we see one or two students who need to correct their questioning techniques; usually, everyone has done the assignment correctly. The day we spent modeling the process has shown the class what to do.

We then distribute the same first drafts to new partners. Students again write their questions on a separate sheet of paper. At the end of class, we once again collect first drafts and peer responses from partner #2 and grade them that night. The same criteria apply; rarely does anyone earn less than an A for the second round.

On the fourth day we return first drafts to students along with the peer responses that go with them. The students read and consider all the questions raised by their partners. At this point, students often made comments like the following: “Four questions from partner #1 and four from partner #2 are the same. What does that mean?” We tell them that since these four areas were especially confusing to two independent readers, these “overlapping questions” should be addressed first.

Beyond that, the day’s assignment is to choose at least five questions (from the twenty or more) to address in the next draft. Students must decide which questions make sense—those that might lead to a richer, fuller paper—and which ones to disregard. Their goal is to use these questions to clarify and elaborate on their ideas or, as one student asked “Do you mean ‘say more stuff’?” This “translation” of our intent makes sense to many students.

Some classes need an extra step between choosing questions to address and adding new content to their first draft, so in this case we add one optional activity to the fourth day. On a sheet of paper folded lengthwise, students copy the five questions they have chosen on the left-hand side; on the right, they answer each question. Then they look again at their first draft and put an asterisk where each addition will go. Students who do not follow this step tend to throw in their additions haphazardly, at the end of a paragraph or at a point that doesn’t fit. We check these placements before students begin writing their next drafts.

Students perform thoughtful and thorough revisions when they have good questions to consider and time to reflect. Carol, a junior, wrote a first draft comparing Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* to Ginny Cook in *A Thousand Acres*. Her introduction and first body paragraph follow below:

Just as Edna Pontellier does in *The Awakening*, Ginny Cook in *A Thousand Acres* sets out on a quest of self-discovery and independence. Though Edna is searching for women's rights, and Ginny aspires to become a stronger and more assertive individual, both share the common struggle of leaving their families and old customs.

Both women want to rid themselves of their passive wife roles and gain the freedom to become a respected individual. Edna is bored with her meaningless life as a wife and mother. She feels her days are filled with trivial tasks and years to feel useful and important. Her husband who feels women are created to have babies and serve their husbands does not support Edna in her search for self-sufficiency. Ginny's husband Ty is quiet and passive, and like Edna's husband, believes women should keep their opinions to themselves. He is angered by Ginny's new aggressive stand that she takes against her father and does not think it is appropriate for her to act in such a way. Also, like Edna's husband, Ty does not support Ginny in her quest for self-discovery and independence. Though both women long for the freedom to be an individual, neither receives any help or support from her husband.

Carol traded papers with Susan (partner #1), and Susan wrote the following questions about Carol's paragraphs:

Introduction

1. Does either one of the women succeed in her quest?
2. What is it about Edna's family that binds her? What is it about Ginny's?
3. What old customs must Edna leave? Which ones must Ginny leave?

First body paragraph

1. What type of “respected individual” does Edna strive to become? What type does Ginny strive for?
2. What sort of things does Edna do to make herself feel important? Are these the same or different from what Ginny does?
3. What “trivial tasks” do Edna and Ginny resent so much?
4. Though their husbands are not supportive of their liberation, is society?
5. Does either woman resent her husband for his attitude and/or lack of support?

The next day, Carol traded papers with Erik (partner #2), and he wrote the following questions about Carol’s paragraphs:

Introductory paragraph

1. What brings about their self-realizations?
2. What are some of the old customs each leaves?
3. Why do they feel they have to leave their families and memories? Why do they feel trapped?

First body paragraph

1. Why is Edna so bored?
2. What are the trivial tasks that she does every day?
3. What would have made Edna feel useful and important?
4. What is the relationship like between Edna and her husband? Is it love or just convenience?
5. Does the relationship between Ginny and Ty change? Why? When?

Carol then read all the questions written by Susan and Erik and revised her first draft, incorporating new content that responded to some of the questions they had raised. Her revised introduction and first body paragraph reveal careful consideration of the question.

Both Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* and Ginny Cook in *A Thousand Acres* realize through the influence of their adulterers that life as a housewife does not bring

satisfaction or contentment. Yearning for self-identity and respect as individuals, each sets out on a quest for self-discovery and freedom. Though Edna is searching for women's rights and Ginny aspires to become a stronger and more assertive woman, both share the common struggle of escaping the grasp of a husband who binds them to their dismal lives, unsympathetic to their feelings and needs.

Both women want to rid themselves of their roles as passive wives and gain the freedom to become women respected for themselves instead of identified as the husband's faithful spouse. Edna is bored with her meaningless life as a wife and mother. She feels her days are filled going to the beach, entertaining Robert, and acquiescing to her husband's demands, and she yearns to feel useful and important. Edna's marriage is one of convenience, not love. She and her husband never really spend time together; her husband goes off on his own, knowing that when he returns home, his obedient wife will be waiting. He thinks Edna is insane and stubborn when she expresses her unhappiness with her life and her desire for independence. Her husband thinks women are created to have babies and serve their husbands and so does not support Edna in her search for self-sufficiency. Ginny's husband Ty is quiet and passive and, like Edna's spouse, believes women should keep their opinions to themselves. Not one to be assertive himself, he is angered by the new, aggressive stand Ginny takes against her father and does not see it as appropriate behavior. Ty's philosophy of life is to remain uninvolved in disputes and keep the peace. He believes in following the rules and not breaking with tradition and so does not empathize with Ginny's dissatisfaction with her role as a farm wife. He does not understand why she wants to break away from farm life and does not support her quest. Though both women long for freedom and recognition, neither receives any encouragement from her husband.

Carol's revisions reflect what we have come to expect with this technique: our students think hard about writing and take each other's work seriously. They read actively and with purpose. With training and practice, they learn to see nearly

everything that we as teachers do in first drafts. They have come a long way from "I don't want anyone to read what I wrote" and "I was scared about what the other person would think." They realize the value and power of feedback.

One student said, "With peer response, you get insight into what readers are thinking as they read your paper. As a writer, you want your reader to be thinking a certain way as they follow your ideas, and peer response shows you whether or not you are successful." Another commented, "Peer response points out where your connections and assumptions went wrong and highlights problems so you don't do them again in the next essay. Before I learned how to do peer response, I would jump to a conclusion that was logical in my own mind, but I lost my reader. This way I can see where the holes are in my drafts and can fill in the missing links." A third student reflected, "Reading my partner's questions helps me take the first step in revision. Otherwise, I would just stare at my essay and think, 'This is so good!' or 'I hate this but don't know what to do with it.'" What began as our desire to find a successful approach to peer response has led to a sense of competence and preparedness in our students that surpasses our greatest expectations. From teacher to teacher, this method is peer response that works.

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