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STUDENT-CONSULTANT CONTINUUM:
INCORPORATING WRITING CENTER TECHNIQUES
OF PEER REVIEW INTO THE
COMPOSITION CLASSROOM

A Thesis Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Maria Lynn Soriano
2010

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ABSTRACT

Peer collaboration about writing often functions as a required step in the writing processes of first-year writing students. Within the composition classroom, students read and respond to the writing of their peers, sometimes obtaining useful feedback, and sometimes just getting “You did a good job” as an evaluation. Outside of the classroom, the Writing Center exists as a space where students can work with a trained consultant to receive helpful suggestions and a thorough evaluation of their writing. Though the first-year writing classroom and the Writing Center exist as physically separate places, both rely on principles of collaboration and conversation between peers with the objective of creating better writers.

Composition scholars like Stephen M. North, Muriel Harris, and Kenneth Bruffee wrote foundational essays that support collaborative pedagogy for its social benefits, which encourage learning between two peer equals. The scholarship that follows these landmark essays further develops the exclusive benefits of collaboration in the Writing Center and the composition classroom. Despite the fact that both spaces rely on some of the same theories and practices, they remain distanced.

This thesis examines the benefits of a style of peer review that takes place within first-year writing classrooms and replicates the procedures of Writing Center consultations. Based on my experiences as a Graduate Assistant—which placed me in both locations at the same time—I found that a Writing Center style of peer review encourages first-year writing students to read, talk about, and learn about writing with one other person, and is more productive than large group work. The thesis begins with a literature review that discusses key essays within the composition field. Then, I explain my procedures for peer review and my methods of gathering student feedback. I also take into consideration the college where I teach and its students. Also

discussed are the objections and ethical considerations associated with this style of peer review. The thesis concludes with a discussion of students' positive and negative responses to peer review, and an affirmation that incorporating Writing Center techniques of peer review into the first-year writing classroom bridges the gap between the two collaboration-focused locations.

Jordan, a quiet, shy baseball player, entered my Composition and Rhetoric I course during Fall Semester of 2009 exhibiting distaste for reading and an even stronger dislike of writing. His first essays lacked organization and argument, relying heavily on incomplete sentences to try to present readers with his ideas. I encouraged him to bring his drafts to me during my office hours and my hours in the Writing Center, hoping, through conversation and collaboration, to coax his ideas and to incorporate them into his writing through conversation. Jordan did come to see me—in fact, he brought every essay to me during Fall Semester *and* later in the Spring Semester, when he enrolled in my Composition and Rhetoric II course. During these collaborative sessions, I consistently began by reading his essay out loud to him, much like consultants do in the Writing Center. Here, I would point out weaknesses and strengths in his writing, discussing with Jordan how he could improve. More often than not, I found myself dominating the conversation, providing explanations and sharing suggestions. At first, Jordan would silently listen to my suggestions and write down everything that I said. Now, almost seven months later, Jordan actively responds to his own writing as I read it out loud to him; he expresses his dissatisfaction with the way sentences or words sound—and hardly needs me to help him reinvent his ideas.

Indeed, some of the most fulfilling moments for Writing Center consultants, as evidenced by my story about Jordan, occur when student writers react with “light bulb” moments after hearing their writing read to them. This moment occurred during the transition from my dominating the conversation in order to “teach” Jordan to his acquired ability to critique his own writing. These collaborative sessions outside the classroom show how beneficial peer tutoring can be for any student, especially one in first-year composition. Composition scholars who support collaborative pedagogy identify the Writing Center as an ideal place outside of the

composition classroom to achieve Stephen M. North's initiative to produce better *writers*, not better *writing*—an axiom that he fully explicates in his essay, "The Idea of a Writing Center." In his essay, North addresses his colleagues with the intent to clarify common misunderstandings about the Writing Center. He discusses the central goal of consultations in the Writing Center, which is ensuring that the conversation between consultant and consultee helps the consultee become a better writer. Similarly, Muriel Harris reinforces North's argument and compares North's vision of the Writing Center to peer response groups in her essay, "Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups." Harris regards collaboration as a powerful learning tool in both settings, identifying it as an opportunity for two students to sit down together and help each other learn. Finally, Kenneth Bruffee, in his essay, "Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind," focuses specifically on the benefits of what he calls a natural, social-based form of learning that encourages the development of a stronger class community.

The scholarship that follows the essays of North, Harris, and Bruffee follows the same trends of exploring the exclusive benefits of collaboration in the Writing Center or the composition classroom. Because my responsibilities as a Graduate Assistant placed me in both locations at the same time, I began to note theories, practices, and even language that carried over between the two. Students often worked in groups in the composition classroom to discuss readings or critique each other's essays. Similarly, students visited the Writing Center to review and talk about assignments; essentially, they were engaging in another form of peer review that also takes place in the composition classroom. The problem, however, is that these two locations for peer review exist in separate spaces.

Away from the teacher and the composition classroom, the Writing Center provides a

space for students to discuss their writing with a trained peer. The consultations in the Center allow these two students to sit down together as social equals and develop an individualized conversation that specifically focuses on the needs of the writer and his or her text. Many methods of peer review that I observed in the composition classroom, on the other hand, grouped three or four students together, requiring them each to read and respond to multiple texts in a very short time. Their comments to each other were vague and unhelpful: “It’s really good,” or “You need a better conclusion.” These bland comments are rarely heard in the Writing Center. Consultants contribute *explanations* to their comments to writers, and the writers leave with a complete understanding of *why* changes should be made. As I observed these very different types of collaboration at the same time, I began to construct a new idea for peer review.

Based on the format of Writing Center consultations, the style that I developed has first-year writing students work in pairs. They switch papers and take turns reading each other’s essays out loud, followed by discussion. In addition to the verbal evaluation, I added a written evaluation component, which encourages students to articulate reasons *why* particular aspects of an essay work or need work. This format allows students to become more deeply involved in each other’s texts, creating more of an opportunity for them to learn from one another—and possibly become better writers.

North’s axiom and the studies of many other scholars clearly establish the Writing Center and the composition classroom as two unique places for collaborative discussion. Students certainly benefit from both locations; but yet, there remains a gap (in physical proximity and mental perception) between the two places. In response, I borrowed what I argue are the best practices in the Writing Center and implemented them into peer review. With careful consideration and planning to restructure the traditional expectations and training, I have used

this style of peer review in the Composition and Rhetoric I and II courses that I have taught over the past three semesters at John Carroll University. To monitor its success and learn what my students identified as beneficial, I occasionally sought their feedback through questionnaires, freewriting, and personal conversation. Their comments reinforce my argument about my format for peer review.

In my essay, I will argue that the style of peer review that I developed ultimately benefits first-year writers in the same ways that Writing Center consultations do. Working with one other person encourages feedback that is detailed and helpful, and students exchange ideas and techniques about writing. Hearing their writing read out loud puts their words into a new, unfamiliar context, challenging them to pay close attention and respond accordingly. When they assume the role of consultant, reading and evaluating another student's paper, they also learn to become better readers. Finally, my essay suggests that implementing methods of peer response used in the Writing Center helps to close the gap that currently exists—on college campuses and even in scholarly research—between the first-year writing classroom and the Writing Center.

Start With Where We Are: A Literature Review

Though Writing Centers and composition classrooms have existed for some time, the trends of redefining their theories and practices began after the Dartmouth seminar of 1966. At this seminar, British and American educators brought their differing teaching methods together; these conflicts and contradictions encouraged English teachers and scholars to reevaluate their understanding of the discipline. The seminar sparked a shift from viewing English as something you *do* to something you *learn about*. Contemporary Writing Center theory also followed this shift, but it wasn't until 1984 that Stephen M. North published his landmark essay on Writing Centers.

In “The Idea of a Writing Center,” North addresses his colleagues with the aim of clarifying the theories and practices of college Writing Centers. Frustrated, North pinpoints the “ignorance” that many people in his profession exhibited about the Writing Center, its services, and its mission (63). Concurrent with the redefinition of English from the Dartmouth seminar, North argues that the Writing Center exists as more than a place where students go to get essays corrected—the inaccurate view of the Center as a “skills center, a fix-it shop” for ailing writers (66). He redefines the Center as a place for students to share ideas and learn about writing: “in a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction. In axiom form it goes like this: *our job is to produce better writers, not better writing*” (69, emphasis added). Though Writing Center consultants work to help students become better writers, the primary responsibility for producing better writers belongs to first-year writing teachers. The Writing Center and the composition classroom share the same goal—yet they remain physically separate.

Besides working toward common initiatives, the Writing Center and the composition classroom also utilize similar collaborative practices. Accordingly, I believe that peer review within the composition classroom provides an environment focused on student-centered discussion, where students can work on their essays just as easily as a Writing Center consultant and consultee. Ultimately, North asserts that Writing Centers must be accepted as “places whose primary responsibility, whose only reason for being, is to talk to writers” (78). His description of the Writing Center directly correlates it and the composition classroom as places to talk *to* writers. In response to North’s assertions about Writing Centers (which he later revisits), I find that modeling peer review after Writing Center consultations refocuses the conversation to *writers talking with writers*.

The ideas that North presented remain central to the studies of many compositionists, including Muriel Harris, who reinforces North's assertions about collaborative learning and compares Writing Center tutorials to peer review in her essay, "Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center Tutorials vs. Peer-Response Groups." She identifies some similarities between the two types of collaboration: "Both tutoring and response groups rely on collaboration as a powerful learning tool—to promote interaction between reader and writer, to promote dialogue and negotiation, and to heighten writers' sense of audience" (272). Similar to North's definition, Harris views tutoring in writing as a collaborative effort where one consultant or student listens to, questions, and offers advice about a peer's writing with the goal of helping the writer improve.

These same benefits carry over into peer review, which engages students in "collaborative learning about writing" (Harris 272). As opposed to focusing on *one* writer's text during Writing Center consultations, students in the composition classroom read, question, and offer feedback about *each other's* writing during peer review. Harris further writes, "In the response group, there is *back-and-forth* conversation intended to offer *mutual* help as writing groups work together in a *give-and-take* relationship" (276-7, emphasis added). This vocabulary of collaboration corresponds with the expectations of Writing Center consultations and peer review, especially if peer review relies on Writing Center techniques. Students learn about themselves and their peers as writers when they sit down as social equals to talk about writing. Though differences exist in underlying perspectives, assumptions, and goals, much of Harris's discussion about collaboration in the Writing Center relates to peer review in the composition classroom.

While Harris focuses mostly on the theories and practices of collaboration in these two

settings, Kenneth Bruffee specifically discusses the conversation that teachers encourage in the composition classroom—that which occurs more naturally in the Writing Center—in his essay, “Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind.” He focuses on the connections between writing and talking to characterize conversation-based learning as natural. The task for Writing Center consultants and composition teachers, he says, “must involve engaging students in conversation at as many points in the writing process as possible” (210). Peer tutoring—whether in the Writing Center or the composition classroom—permits students to come together as “status equals, or peers” (211) to talk about writing, collectively forming “a community of knowledgeable peers” (212). The communal aspects of peer review as he discusses it show how sitting down to talk about writing brings students closer together.

Bruffee’s ideas are significant here because a student-centered style of peer review that utilizes Writing Center techniques accomplishes these same initiatives within the composition classroom. As teachers, we encourage the development of a class community between the ten, twenty, or even fifty students in our classrooms. Large class discussion and small group work contributes to the construction of one *large* community of knowledgeable peers. If students work in pairs during peer review, they form their own discourse communities, sharing knowledge and talking about writing, much like Writing Center consultations. Therefore, the larger community of knowledgeable peers in a composition classroom consists of many smaller communities as a result of this peer review format.

Also similar to Writing Center consultations, these smaller learning communities do not include the teacher—at least as a primary member. Alice M. Gillam makes this point, supporting and reiterating Bruffee’s research in her essay, “Collaborative Learning Theory and Peer Tutoring Practice.” Students benefit so much from peer tutoring because they form emotional

bonds, which social psychologists call “*identification*” (Gillam 42). Undergraduate students sit in our classrooms as knowledge-receivers, sharing the experience of learning together. Rather than voicing concerns to teachers, students feel more comfortable turning to other students to share knowledge, whether in the classroom or in the Writing Center. Gillam writes, “Because peer tutors do not have grade-giving power over the writers they tutor and because they presumably have many experiences in common and ‘speak the same language,’ they offer more suitable conversational partners than do classroom teachers” (43). Peer review, she believes, relaxes the social context for learning—as does the Writing Center.

In accordance with Gillam’s explanations about the social benefits of collaboration for students, Julie Aipperspach Anderson and Susan Wolff Murphy also find that working in groups decenters the teacher’s authority, focusing on the students as sharers of knowledge. Anderson and Murphy also discuss the multiple levels of learning enhanced by peer response groups: “Peer response groups allow in-class time for students to practice their critical thinking strategies in conversation prior to putting them in writing” (48). Peer review permits students to practice their critical thinking and evaluating strategies about writing that has *already been done* as a step prior to written revision. By working in pairs, reading each others’ papers out loud, and discussing writing, peer response in the composition classroom *and* in the Writing Center takes the form of verbal revision. The students sit down together to *hear* their writing verbalized, talk about it, and go home individually to transfer that conversation and abstract thought into concrete writing—without the explicit direction of the teacher.

Implied by Anderson and Murphy, Sallyanne H. Fitzgerald details elements of whole language theory in her essay, “Collaborative Learning and Whole Language Theory.” Whole language theory, she explains, “asserts that reading, speaking, writing, and listening, when used

simultaneously, will assist each other so that students will more readily achieve success in communication acts” (12-3). The conversation-based, student-centered consultations of the Writing Center incorporate all of these aspects when consultants read students’ drafts out loud and examine and discuss the written text with the student. By replicating these procedures during peer review, whole language theory from the Writing Center carries its benefits into composition classrooms.

Research published up to this point explicates the purposes and benefits of the Writing Center, illustrating it as a space *outside* of the composition classroom where students can go to talk and learn about writing. North’s axiom pinpoints the aim of these spaces as helping students become better writers. Collaborative learning theory describes two students coming together to share knowledge and ideas as a more casual meeting between socially equal peers. Harris aligns Writing Center tutorials and peer response groups to explore their similarities; though her resulting discussion brings these two types of collaborative learning very close together, Writing Center consultations and peer response groups ultimately take place in physically separate spaces.

Many essays discuss the benefits unique to peer response groups and Writing Center consultations, heralding them for the individual practices and theories they invoke, even though they share some of the same goals. My version of peer review, in response to the gap in the research discussed above, stresses that these exclusive benefits can merge into a single physical space. Encouraging first-year writing students to sit down together and evaluate each other’s essays in the format of a Writing Center consultation brings that student-centered, peer-focused environment directly into the composition classroom. By enjamming the ideas of Stephen North,

Muriel Harris, and other compositionists within one space, I believe that this style of peer review helps bridge the gap between the composition classroom and the Writing Center.

Just the Facts: Methodology

In order to begin incorporating the idea that I developed after studying the theories of North, Harris, Bruffee, and many others, I took the college setting, the courses and their assignments, and the students into consideration. As a Graduate Assistant at John Carroll University, I am responsible for teaching Composition and Rhetoric I and II courses. Composed mostly of freshmen, these courses teach students the basic rhetorical moves in academic writing, beginning with analyzing argumentative essays and cultural texts in Composition and Rhetoric I and moving to short fiction, poetry, and drama in Composition and Rhetoric II. The four or five major assignments of each course provoke students to think critically and creatively about the texts they study, demonstrating comprehension and argument.

Before these assignments are submitted for grading, I hold in-class peer review sessions to allow students to share their work with each other. In order to give them more time to focus on their texts, they work in pairs. In a class of 16 to 20 students, working with one other peer creates a manageable number of individual discourse communities spread comfortably across the classroom. Similar to the format of a Writing Center consultation, the students become consultants and consultees; the consultant reads the consultee's essay out loud, offering suggestions and engaging in conversation. Then, the students switch roles to work on the other student's essay. To monitor the effectiveness of a style of peer review that I devised specifically with my students in mind, I enlisted their help.

The feedback that I sought fell into two categories: written and verbal. Written responses were gathered through freewriting, where I would verbally pose a question and they would

develop their answers on notebook paper. When I had multiple questions, or questions that were complex, I typed and copied questionnaires to pass out and have the students fill out in class. These written forms of feedback were very helpful because asking objective questions allowed students to provide elaborate, thoughtful answers. The data also allowed me to examine their written responses verbatim. I planned to incorporate their comments into my essay, so gathering feedback through freewriting and questionnaires was the best method. I also gained some useful ideas through personal conversation, where students made passing remarks specifically about peer review. Though I had not planned to gather verbal feedback, their comments were poignant and affective.

The responses that I gathered from my students allowed me to gauge the strengths and weaknesses of a Writing Center-based style of peer review. I could read the lessons they felt they were learning from the experience, and I had the ability to pose specific questions based on aspects of my research. Verbal comments especially raised some objections to the applications of peer review, and these seemingly insignificant quips often stayed in my mind the longest as I thought about how to respond to and counteract them.

Overall, the feedback that I frequently sought from my students provided support for many facets of my argument. Though a few disliked peer review and did not benefit from it as much as others, the majority affirmed its benefits. My format allowed them to immerse themselves in the ideas and style of one partner, and they learned how to evaluate another's writing and discuss it. As consultees, they also benefitted from listening to their writing read aloud, and the feedback they received from the consultant—verbal and written—was detailed and specific. Based on the responses gathered from the three Composition and Rhetoric courses

that I have taught, students see how this style of peer review suits the first-year writing classrooms of John Carroll University.

Blueprinting the Bridge

Before implementing a style of peer review where first-year writers assume the roles and responsibilities of Writing Center consultants, I had to consider several local, institutional factors about the college where I teach. John Carroll University is a private, liberal arts, Jesuit-affiliated, 4-year college located 20 minutes east of Cleveland, Ohio. Many of the students that attend are local, but some come from as far away as Florida or Colorado. During the 2008-2009 school year, there were 3,069 undergraduate students and 709 graduate students enrolled, though class sizes are decreasing (“About John Carroll University” 1). Shrinking class sizes mean that the capacity for some courses, like first-year writing, can remain between 16 and 22. Such low numbers also create the ideal environment for a peer review structure where students work in pairs.

John Carroll’s first-year writing sequence consists of three tracks, and students’ placement is derived from test scores, grade point average, and their feedback. Traditionally, most students enroll in Composition and Rhetoric I during Fall Semester, where they learn to view writing “as a means of critical inquiry, stressing the centrality of writing to intellectual life” (“First Year Composition”). Through four or five major units and corresponding assignments throughout the semester, students analyze and respond to the written and visual arguments of others, evaluating methods and audience appeals. In the process, they learn how to “enter the conversation” with their own arguments, appealing to specific audiences ethically and effectively. This course also begins to help students become more aware of themselves as writers. Students traditionally enroll into Composition and Rhetoric II during Spring Semester,

where they continue to develop their analysis and argument skills. In this course, however, these skills are cultivated through the study of fiction, poetry, and drama. Both Composition and Rhetoric I and II rely on peer review as a required step in the writing process. Because the students in these courses are first-year writers, peer review provides them with the opportunity to help each other with their writing—an experience enhanced by working in pairs and becoming consultants and consultees.

The class sizes for most sections of composition are maintained between 16 and 22, which enhances the efficiency of a style of peer review where students work in pairs. Most of the students that take composition are freshmen, but classes will occasionally have sophomores or juniors. When the majority of students in the first-year writing classroom are freshmen, an environment that allows them to socialize and work closely together helps them become more comfortable. They can identify with each other and have a lot more to talk about. Encouraging them to learn about each other and learn about writing in a smaller learning community makes this style of peer review more beneficial and ideal for the composition classroom.

As a Graduate Assistant for the English department, specifically for the composition program, I have spent the past two years in the Writing Center and the composition classroom. Being in both places at the same time greatly affected my teaching and allowed me to observe the practices and benefits of both physically separate spaces. During Fall Semester of 2008, I observed a Composition and Rhetoric I class and tutored 10 hours a week in the Writing Center. During Spring Semester, I taught one Composition and Rhetoric II class and tutored 5 hours a week. Many of my students visited the Writing Center to discuss their essays with me, and the students of other Graduate Assistants did the same. While reviewing and talking about the papers of my students *outside* the composition classroom and *inside* the Writing Center, I began

to consider the possibility of moving these peer-centered conversations back into the composition classroom through peer review.

The benefits of collaborative conversation that Harris and Bruffee discuss reinforce the reasons that so many first-year writing instructors incorporate peer review into their classrooms. I believe that student-focused Writing Center techniques enhance a central part of composition students' writing processes, which is why I borrowed them from the Writing Center—another physical space on campus where collaboration takes place. The procedures that Writing Center consultants follow encourage the conversation that composition teachers lead during class sessions. Individualized discussions created in peer review channel the whole language theory that Fitzgerald defined; by reading each other's essays out loud, students borrow the techniques of the Writing Center to make their writing abstract, verbal, and auditory. In the same way that the Writing Center changes the social context for learning, I believe that this style of peer review shifts the focus off of the teacher and onto the students.

If students work in pairs during peer review and assume the roles of consultants and consultees, the time spent on each essay is increased and enhanced. Working with just two texts for 50 or 60 minutes of class time allows students to delve deeply into each other's essays, examining form, organization, and content. By immersing themselves in their partners' essays, students learn new techniques, phrases, and even words that they can later incorporate into their own essays. Peer review in consultation format arguably *enhances* the procedures of the Writing Center because *two* writers come together to discuss *two* texts, and *both* of them leave the session with feedback and ideas that they can apply to their essays.

After anticipating the benefits of incorporating Writing Center techniques into peer review, I decided to transfer the collaborative process that I observed in the Writing Center

directly into my classroom. I knew that there would be objections to techniques and expectations, and I discuss those objections below to show how I worked to counteract them in the next section of my essay. Though this style of peer review does not represent a solution that would bridge the gap between the Writing Center and the composition classroom at every university, my students' feedback affirms my argument that it benefits the first-year writing courses at John Carroll University.

Anticipating Objections, Negotiating Challenges

While few may object to my enhancement of peer review, a crucial part of the writing process, I anticipate a few related to ethics. During my planning process prior to teaching my first Composition and Rhetoric II course during Spring Semester of 2009, I examined the fairness of the expectations I would have for my students as they reviewed each other's essays. I also incorporated verbal and written explanations about peer review into my lessons in order to "train" the students how to do peer review and why it is necessary. Most of my students have responded positively to the format that I devised, indicating in their feedback that they gained the objectives I hoped for. On the other hand, two students expressed objections to applications of peer review: one mentioned a frustration with peer review in general, another disliked reading out loud. These challenges were not ones I had foreseen, yet I understood where the remarks were coming from. In response, I worked to negotiate these small, but significant, challenges.

The most important ethical consideration that I anticipated questions whether or not it is fair to have first-year writing students, many in their first and second semesters of college, assume the role of "consultants." The title of "consultant" usually describes upperclass students, graduate students, and even adults who are chosen and trained for Writing Center work, as opposed to students of all areas of study entering their first or second semesters of college.

Many consultants are English majors and minors, and others have completed two composition courses and at least one or two literature courses, which indicates familiarity and experience with the conventions of college writing.

On the other hand, first-year writing students in a composition course often represent a fair cross-sample of the university when it comes to area of study. Of my eighteen students this semester, for example, five are Biology majors. Three are pursuing Accounting, two are interested in Marketing, one wants to study Music Production, and another is double-majoring in Adolescent/Young Adult Education and English. One student is a junior who transferred from another college, and one is a sophomore who could not fit composition into his schedule last year. Since Composition and Rhetoric courses are prerequisites for all other English courses, none of them have taken any upper-level English courses at this point. However, they complete writing assignments ranging from research papers for Genetics to persuasive speeches in Public Speaking. As a composition teacher, much of the responsibility to familiarize these first-year writers with the conventions of academic writing falls on my shoulders.

Expecting first-year writing students who have limited experience with college-level writing and little to no exposure to peer review to assume the role of consultants raises some understandable objections to my student-centered format. After acknowledging these, I will explain how I have adapted the traditional qualifications for consultants and processes to suit my students and my classroom. With detailed planning, handouts, and explanation, I prepare my students to evaluate and discuss each other's essays during peer review. We spend time in class talking about the procedures for peer review and its importance as a part of the writing process, contextualizing the reasons for its usefulness in a first-year writing course. The students then approach peer review with the understanding that it is done for their benefit, and they are

partially responsible for its success.

Their “training” begins at our first peer review session of the semester, where I detail the procedures verbally and distribute a handout that outlines the responsibilities of the consultant and the consultee. The first section specifically addresses the reader/consultant, providing reminders to read the paper out loud as it appears on the page and allow the writer to mark in corrections. Following the instructions, I include a list of questions for the consultant to keep in mind, evaluating global and individual aspects of the essay: focused paragraphs, a detailed thesis statement, logical organization, and adequate response to the prompt. These questions represent concerns that trained Writing Center consultants with experience in English courses commonly evaluate. These questions guide the first-year writers’ responses and give them a manageable amount of text to evaluate so that they do not feel overwhelmed with responsibility.

The second half of the handout addresses the listener/consultee and first provides instructions for that role: listening attentively to the text as the consultant reads it, noting the places that the consultant specifically questions, and engaging in the consultation, stopping the consultant to write in changes and discuss certain points. Consultees also have a list of questions to consider as well, alerting them to run-on sentences, incomplete sentences, or wordiness that the consultants may stumble over. By internalizing these questions and listening actively, consultees learn to step outside and away from the texts they already produced to try and become a critical listening audience to their own essays—an objective that Writing Center consultants also strive for.

As I review the procedures and explain the objectives of each aspect of peer review, I specifically mention to the students that consultations in the Writing Center resemble the way I conduct peer review in my classroom. By creating this verbal link between the two spaces, I am

identifying the origin of these procedures and bringing the theories and practices of the Writing Center into my classroom. Assuming the roles of consultants and consultees encourages students to have the types of conversations that typically take place in the Writing Center within the composition classroom. Thus, the Writing Center becomes a significant part of the classroom.

After reviewing the handout together, I demonstrate the procedures of peer review and the framework of a typical conversation. The students then see how the consultant and consultee interact, therefore becoming familiar with how conversations in the Writing Center develop. I first incorporated a demonstration into the “training” during Spring Semester of 2010 as an experiment to see if it aided the students’ understanding of peer review. I enlisted the help of Jeff, a sophomore Biology major, whom I also had as a student in Composition and Rhetoric I. Prior to class, Jeff and I wrote mock introductions for our essays. We purposely added typos and incorrect words, and also wrote vague thesis statements and provided too much general information (writing weaknesses that we had already discussed in class). In front of the class, with our paragraphs shown on the overhead, Jeff and I recreated a Writing Center consultation: we sat next to each other, switched papers, and took turns reading each other’s paragraphs out loud. We interjected small comments as we read, then addressed larger issues when we finished. The other students watched and listened to our conversation, and then we discussed methods of commentary as a class.

In this situation, Jeff and I were having a conversation typically reserved for the Writing Center—only here, we were not in the Writing Center. We were in the composition classroom; Jeff and I were coming together as two first-year writing students bringing our first drafts in for peer review. Though we were not formally trained as Writing Center consultants, we were going to follow the procedures outlined for us in order to successfully evaluate each other’s papers.

The demonstration also served to reassure students that they could contribute helpful feedback and suggestions on the essays of their peers. To provoke, guide, and develop this constructive conversation, I provided them with a written evaluation to complete.

Unlike Writing Center consultations, I require my students to answer questions about their partners' essays after they have finished reading and discussing the texts. The evaluation breaks down the commonly included sections of an essay, so students assess introductions, thesis statements, individual body paragraphs, textual evidence, and conclusions. Besides "training" the students to examine the effectiveness of each part of an essay individually before reflecting on the essay as a whole, the students learn the function and importance of these sections. I revise the questions with each assignment to reflect class discussions on various aspects of writing or specific content that I will evaluate.

These questions require thought-out, explanatory answers beyond simply "yes" or "no," asking for justification and the articulation of reasons *why* a section is successful or *how* it could be improved, therefore eliminating the possibility of bland answers like "Your essay is really good." During their conversations, the students have the opportunity to teach each other, explain what they meant by a sentence, or talk about the ways they understand the assignment. They collaboratively form meanings and reinforce each other's knowledge. My act of writing out specific questions and presenting a verbal demonstration, combined with the students' verbal discussion and written evaluation of each others' essays, invoke the same aspects of whole language theory that Fitzgerald described and that Writing Center consultations draw from. Within the composition classroom, students assume the roles of consultants, but are guided by specific lines of thought and written questions. My careful planning and the addition of written and verbal components alleviate the ethical concern of giving students too much responsibility.

Though peer review's central requirement is detailed conversation between students, Christina Murphy cites an ethical objection from Donald C. Stewart; he argues that "collaborative learning privileges extroverts, those who work well in groups, who are intellectually stimulated by talking their ideas out with others before beginning a project, and who enjoy making writing sound like talking" (qtd. in Murphy 28). Stewart's implication suggests that collaborative learning favors students who like to talk in class or the Writing Center, as if it actively excludes the students who are uncomfortable participating in discussion. A comment that Jordan made to me once illustrates a shy student's response to the requirements of peer review. He told me that he did not enjoy this style of peer review because he "doesn't like reading out loud." Though I tried to explain the reasons he *should* do it, he is not an outgoing, vocal student during class discussion; though peer review allows students to talk only with each other, it does not ease his discomfort. However, contrary to Stewart's argument, Jordan does not feel *excluded* from the class and the benefits of peer review; though he does not talk a lot, peer review helps him become a better writer.

Students who talk very little and dislike hearing their own voices also visit the Writing Center and remain just as quiet, despite the casual environment. I have worked with students who talk more than I do, asking me so many questions about their essays that I feel like I am being interviewed. On the other hand, I have also worked with students that barely talk while I lead the session, answering only when they have to. The same continuum of conversation exists during peer review in the composition classroom. Some pairs talk to each other so long that they scramble to fill out their peer review sheets before class ends. On the opposite end of the spectrum, other pairs read each other's essays, exchange a few words, fill out their evaluation sheets, and finish with 20 minutes of class left.

In relation to the student-centered conversations of Writing Center consultations and peer review, Stewart makes a fair assertion, especially in light of Jordan's discomfort with reading aloud. However, I challenge Stewart's word choice of "privilege," because that makes collaborative learning—whether between 2 people or 20—actively favor certain students, and his argument suggests that introverted students are denied *any* benefits of collaborative learning. Some students remain quiet in a teacher-led classroom setting, interacting more comfortably with a small group of their peers or a Writing Center consultant. Following a Writing Center format and having students work with one other student during peer review alleviates some of the stress and tension caused by collaboration. Students converse quietly amongst themselves, and the 8 to 10 individualized learning communities formed during peer review create a casual atmosphere dominated by conversation.

Since first-year writing students are not as fluent in talking about writing as Writing Center consultants, letting them choose their own partners helps the conversation develop more comfortably. At the beginning of the semester, they choose people from their dorms, their other classes, or the people sitting next to them. I encourage them to work with someone different for every peer review session. The objectives of this practice are first, subjecting them to the writing styles and ideas of many of their peers, and second, to help them get to know each other and become friends. By the end of the semester, they call across the room for partners and need no formal introductions.

Another ethical consideration about Peer Review examines the students' comfort with sharing criticism and comments on the papers of their peers, whether the students are friends or not. Unlike the Writing Center, where consultants have completed composition courses and have studied and practiced ways of responding to student writing, first-year writing students are

still learning the conventions of college writing and what makes it successful. Lauren, a quiet girl and a skilled writer, responded in a freewriting assignment, “sometimes I feel a little bit awkward making corrections because I sometimes don’t know if my suggestions are correct or make sense.” Her concern represents a lack of confidence in whether the ideas she offers her partner are “right” and will “fix” the essay, even though she and the other students know that I do not expect perfection.

Like North’s assumption about what the Writing Center does *not* provide for writers—a one-stop fix-it shop, or a place where “sick” writers come to be “healed”—students should know that the objective of peer review is not just to correct every missing comma or typo, nor do I expect them to catch every mistake or point out every weakness in their partner’s essay. I *do* expect them to read each other’s essays and have a conversation about the content; they share what they like about the thesis or interpretation, and they question and discuss the sections that seem weak or unclear. I provide them with a written evaluation to help them focus their conversation, narrowing the conversation to specific sections of the essay. Finally, I explain the objectives of peer review with the intent to assure the students that they are not expected to transform weak first drafts into polished final drafts. All of these carefully-planned elements decrease the pressure of peer review and ensure that first-year writing students can handle assuming the roles and responsibilities of Writing Center consultants.

By discussing as a class how to give feedback and why it is important, students will be more comfortable talking about their writing with each other. In his questionnaire response, Jeff acknowledges the discomfort some students feel with conversation, but also shows that he understands why they must take place. He writes, “Although many students feel rude when closely critiquing another student’s paper, I feel this is the only way to make the most dramatic

improvements to one's essay." Having conversations with another student gives the writer a chance to receive feedback from an audience *before* the teacher receives the essay—the same function and purpose of the Writing Center consultant. Incorporating the Writing Center into peer review allows students within the same composition classroom to collaborate and evaluate each other's essays—the good and the not-quite-good—in detail.

Anticipating ethical considerations during my planning process allowed me to ensure that I could address and counteract them. Though some may object to specific applications of peer review, like Jordan, such situations can be negotiated to make sure that students still benefit from peer review. By establishing fair, clear expectations for first-year writing students and “training” them with demonstrations, handouts, and written evaluations, a Writing Center style of peer review provides students with the experience of closely examining and responding to each other's texts. As a result, they become accustomed to having conversations about writing with one other peer in the comfort zone of the composition classroom. When they visit the Writing Center, they have a more clear understanding of the dialogue and questions to expect. With proper planning, the Writing Center can successfully be incorporated into peer review in the composition classroom, encouraging socialization and friendship amongst first-year writers and closing the distance between the two spaces.

The Students Respond

Since I developed this style of peer review with my students in mind, I planned to incorporate their comments and feedback into my essay. Asking them to complete questionnaires and freewriting would allow me to see what they were gaining from peer review and what they were learning about themselves as readers and writers. I also hoped to gauge the success of a style of peer review that follows the Writing Center format from their thoughts. In

addition to the written feedback I gathered, I unexpectedly heard some very poignant comments during personal conversations with students. Many of their written comments showed that they were gaining from peer review what proponents of collaborative pedagogy like North, Harris, and Bruffee have already heralded. Some made me step back and think, reevaluating my initial thoughts and ideas. Out of all of the data I collected, the most poignant response was a verbal comment that a student made in passing.

Josh, a creative thinker with a friendly personality, posed the greatest challenge to my ideas about peer review—in particular, to the practice of having students choose their own partners. During a conversation in my office, he expressed his greatest frustration about peer review: “I just don’t think it helps *unless you find the right person.*” Knowing how hard he worked on his papers, striving for perfection in presenting his ideas, I could tell that Josh desired the type of peer feedback that would provoke and improve his writing. His comment stuck in my mind for months, and I realized how I both completely agreed with him and wanted to find a solution for his distress. Though I struggled with the idea of pairing students myself—which felt judgmental—I finally came up with a trial idea that went against the practices I had been following and involved pairing Josh with another student, Lisa.

Lisa is an Adolescent/Young Adult and English double major and a very strong writer. Though social and a leader in group work, she is relatively quiet during class discussion. She and Josh were students in my Composition and Rhetoric I course, which was advantageous to me as I searched for a partner for Josh. The two students know each other from being in the same small group in class, but are not part of the same social group outside the classroom. Because of their strong writing abilities and peer relationship, I decided to have them work as partners in our first peer review session of Spring Semester, and contacted them to explain my idea and

rationale.

Josh and Lisa agreed to the trial arrangement and paired up to evaluate and discuss each other's essays. During the first peer review session, not only did they work on each other's papers for the whole hour, they continued discussing Josh's essay—in search of a solution for the organization—for almost an hour *after* class ended. Their dedication to each other's essays and their desire to work together for the rest of the semester showed that my arrangement has helped both of them grow as writers. In their responses on a freewriting questionnaire, both Josh and Lisa specifically mention the positive results of the arrangement and reinforce my argument about the benefits of having students work in pairs rather than groups. Lisa writes, "I feel like working with Josh has been the most beneficial to me and has made me a better writer this semester." She indicates that Josh's feedback in particular improved her writing. Similarly, Josh writes, "Working with Lisa was a good idea because she knows how I write now and that helps her help me." Helping Josh find his "right person" allowed *two* writers become familiar with each other's writing styles and, as Josh wrote, helped them help each other. One of the advantages of organizing peer review so that students work in pairs is that it ensures that they obtain detailed feedback.

Another advantage of incorporating this style of peer review into the composition classroom is that it increases the probability of finding the "right person," a search that also occurs in the Writing Center. Students walking in without appointments work with the first available consultant during that hour. Since most students visit the Center on a random basis, finding a "right" consultant—if they even want to—could take weeks, months, or even years. The composition classroom, however, provides an ideal social context for working with many different people or the same person over the course of the semester. Students spend significant

amounts of time together a few times a week, getting to know each other through class discussion, small group work, and paired collaboration during peer review. They collaborate with the same knowledge about the assignments and material, but bring uniquely-formulated ideas about and interpretations of the readings. Their student-centered conversations bring them closer together as social equals, a feature of peer tutoring mentioned by Bruffee.

After Josh's comment led to new considerations for my peer review techniques, I turned to my students for additional feedback. I specifically asked them if they would prefer working with the same partner or different partner all semester, and hypothesized a fairly equal number of votes for each option. Of the students who indicated a preference, seven said that they would like to work with the same partner all semester, and seven said that they would rather work with someone different every time. In the Writing Center, most students work with different consultants every time, but quite a few return to the same consultant—because they are friends, because the consultant is the student's teacher, or simply because of the success of a previous consultation. Structuring peer review in the composition classroom like the Writing Center provides the students with a larger selection of partners to choose from

Students who support working with the same person all semester—like Josh and Lisa—indicated that partners could become accustomed to each other's writing voices. Lauren writes in a freewriting response, "Working with the same person all semester would allow the partners to get to know each other's writing styles. This makes it easier to review because the person would already have a feeling for the other person's writing style." Working with the same partner means that the consultant's feedback would be specific to the writer's needs, since the consultant is familiar with his or her partner's writing style. Similarly, Gina, a bright and bubbly Biology major, affirms Lauren's statements, adding, "This way I can also inquire as to if they see

improvement from my previous paper. Working with just one person will allow someone *other than the teacher* to become familiar with how I write.” Gina’s point suggests that students’ writing should be shared with people *other* than the teacher, expanding the audience beyond the grading teacher and into the other members of the conversation. In the composition classroom, where first-year writers share the experience of learning the conventions of academic writing, peer review brings the invoked audience to life, and students receive detailed feedback from one audience member during Writing Center-modeled consultations.

For the many arguments that support working with the same partner every time, an equal number of counterarguments address working with a different partner for each peer review session. The most common benefit that students cited for working with a different person is that it exposes them to a variety of writing styles. Chad, a football player who writes well when he works hard, says that working with different partners “gives us the opportunity to get different opinions on each paper, and some of the tips I pick up from different people are used in writing future papers.” His point invokes North’s assertion about collaborative writing and the Writing Center—an aim to produce better *writers*, as well as helping students become better readers of their own writing.

Replicating the procedures of the Writing Center during peer review also emphasizes the importance of critically reading a text. As opposed to silent skimming, consultants learn to slow down and read every word, sentence, and paragraph of their partner’s essay as it appears on the page. They pick apart and digest specific elements of the essay and respond to those sections in writing—a return to whole language theory, which equalizes the importance of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Through reading the essays of other writers and talking about ideas with their audience, students obtain suggestions and new ideas that they can immediately incorporate

into their essays. These ideas are also significant because they are from a peer—someone who is not evaluating and grading their work. Working with a different person every time maximizes the new ideas and responses each student can collect, and adds to the benefit of working with one person in a Writing Center format.

Whether the students choose a friend or the person sitting next to them as their peer review partner, replicating the procedures of a Writing Center consultation fosters a more personal and equal opportunity for socialization. This type of environment encourages first-year writing students who are in their first or second semesters of college to socialize and develop friendships. Through collaborative efforts, the students learn to trust each other and share ideas about writing while discovering each other's interests and what dorms they live in. The successful growth of peer relationships and a class community marks a return to Gillam, who cited the social psychological principle of identification. Through socialization and peer review, the students come to know each other as writers, classmates, and friends; working more closely with one student at a time allows for intimate conversation, about writing and about each other.

I did not anticipate the importance the students place on this social aspect of peer review until I read their feedback. Mike, a talkative student with a love for sports, writes that "Having peer review in the classroom is cool because you get to see other peoples [sic] work *and make new friends.*" Developing relationships with other students in the classroom fosters a more relaxed and respectful class community. Away from the classroom, the Writing Center also allows students to sit down, switch papers, and have a one-on-one conversation where they exchange ideas about writing and learn about each other at the same time. However, first-year writers gain more because they benefit academically and socially from working closely together through peer review in the composition classroom.

Mike's specification about doing peer review "in the classroom" returns the focus to physical spaces. The composition classroom, like the Writing Center, constructs a small environment where writing is the primary focus of conversation. In both locations, as Harris describes, students assume a variety of roles: questioner, listener, reader, and responder. In the Writing Center, the consultant has more experience writing and revising, but usually is not the consultee's classmate and is not working on the same assignment. By incorporating Writing Center techniques directly into peer review in the composition classroom, students who are working on the same assignment and have been in class together assume roles that span the continuum between consultant and consultee, and learn to negotiate different positions on that continuum. They take apart, question, and discuss each other's essays, and *both* students leave the session with feedback and ideas that they can immediately implement into their essays.

In addition to enjoying their roles as Writing Center consultants, the students find it helpful to hear the immediate reactions of the text's specified audience. Writing for that real audience enhances the sense that the writer has something to say to someone, ensuring that he or she clearly communicates those thoughts and ideas. In a questionnaire, Lisa writes, "I gained a lot of helpful insight as to what makes sense for the audience or readers of the paper." Her response invokes whole language theory and describes what Fitzgerald calls a "truly collaborative tutoring session" (12). Students bring to peer review (and the Writing Center) written essays responding to reading they have already done. During peer review and Writing Center consultations, they collaborate with a selected student-consultant-audience, to whom they verbalize specific concerns about their writing. Their partners read the paper aloud, and the writing becomes visual and auditory. As they read and listen together, they discuss the writing.

From this peer review session, *both* of the participants take away useful techniques and

suggestions that they can apply to their own papers immediately and in the future. In the Writing Center, on the other hand, two students collaborate on a single text with the aim to make *one* person a better writer. Implementing practices where first-year writing students become consultants in the composition classroom, questioning and evaluating another student's text (with guidance from handouts and written responses), encourages the growth of a context for mutual exchange and invention. The goal for this style of peer review within the composition classroom becomes creating *two* better writers who produce better writing as a result of working together, which enhances North's Writing Center axiom.

Creating an environment centered on students allows them to share ideas and verbally work through difficulties with each other before revising. Though I am present during peer review, I keep myself out of their consultations and only talk with them if they seek my help. Peer review then becomes a stepping-stone between student-developed first draft and teacher-aimed final draft. The Writing Center also provides this link between drafts—but does so outside the classroom. Gary Olson believes that the Writing Center functions to “make room, provide space and time for students to talk about ideas, to explore meaning, and to freely engage in the trial and error of putting their thoughts into writing” (qtd. in Farrell-Childers 111). A composition classroom can also operate this way, especially with the addition of a peer review format based on Writing Center techniques. As opposed to a space and time that already exists—the Writing Center—peer review days create that space and time within the traditional context of the composition classroom.

On peer review days, I clear my lesson plans. The students and I physically and mentally “make room” for it, rearranging the desks and preparing to read and discuss each others' writing. They know the requirements and procedures, and once I complete my reminders and

introductory conversation, they take over. I walk around and check in with each group to answer questions, but we all regard peer review as the students' time. Alternating between consultant and consultee ensures equal time for leadership and feedback, guaranteeing that each student will assume both roles. Each pair forms its own learning environment where the discussion centers on the questions and concerns specific to *their* essays. These same individualized conversations are constructed every half hour in the Writing Center.

These student-centered conversations in consultation also allow the students to study the writing of others. Short of plagiarizing others' sentences, I encourage students to experiment with styles, vocabulary, and organization that they see in the papers of their partners. For a recent paper, Julie, a volleyball player and Marketing major, found an idea that Mike—her peer review partner—had eloquently expressed in his paper. “He said it the way I had wanted to,” she told me. “Can I quote him in my essay to help support my point?” Julie's request marked the first time one of my students has ever quoted another student, and demonstrated both the benefits of a consultation format of peer review and the respect it develops between students.

Working closely in a classroom setting and even closer during peer review encourages students to help and support each other, which poses a challenge in a half-hour consultation between a junior or senior consultant and a freshman consultee who may never work together again. Writing Center consultants seldom hear the results of sessions with students, outside of grateful responses from professors. In the composition classroom, the students know that they will see their classmates regularly. They develop relationships with each other through class meetings and discussions, entering peer review with the desire for their partners to help them. Accordingly, they understand that their partners want the same feedback from them. In response to my question about what he gained from his peers' feedback, Brendan, a quiet but hard-

working student, writes, “I gained the trust and concern from them. All of them fixed my essays with care, and truly wanted to help me.” Not only did Brendan appreciate the help of his peers, he trusted their feedback as honest and constructive. In return, he wanted to share his ideas with them.

Examining the comments that my students have provided gives insight into the lessons they have learned about collaboration and writing through peer review. When planned properly, the students feel comfortable assuming responsibilities that are similar to Writing Center consultants. They extract more specific ideas from closely analyzing the text of one partner than they do by skimming three or four essays and responding with general, empty comments. The ideas of others become more relevant and helpful, especially when coming from a classmate they have known all semester. Based on the responses of my students, incorporating Writing Center techniques into peer review has been successful and has shaped them into better readers *and* writers, thereby fulfilling North’s axiom about the Writing Center *inside* the composition classroom and bridging the gap between the two locations.

Review: What We Know, Where We’ll Go

In a composition classroom where the students and teacher share the responsibility for constructing knowledge and making meaning, collaboration and conversation are key elements. We center our conversation on writing, but we also learn about each other through our discussions and collaboration sessions. Since peer review is a common element in composition classrooms, viewing it as a regular opportunity for the students to teach each other and start the conversation defines its purposes and objectives as part of the writing process. The teacher as knowledge-giver steps back during student-focused peer review, entering the conversation only when necessary. Outside of the classroom, the Writing Center exists as an important resource

where students can discuss their writing with a trained consultant, and the two can review and talk about the student's paper in a less tense, informal setting.

North's fundamental essay outlines the idea of the Writing Center and its objectives as a place where students become better writers—not surprisingly, his notable axiom correlates with the goals of the composition classroom. In response, Harris shows how overlaps and similarities exist between peer response groups and Writing Center consultations, but stops short of exploring the two separate locations *inside each other*. And, although Kenneth Bruffee focuses more specifically on the type of conversation that exists during peer tutoring, he simply heralds the social community that it creates. Many scholars align the theories and practices of these two spaces right next to each other, but the bottom line is that in the research that exists up to this point, the Writing Center and the composition classroom still exist separately. I propose a strategy of peer review that merges two locations that separately work toward the same goals: a consultation-modeled format where first-year writing students assume the responsibilities of producing *and* critiquing texts. When planned and explained fully, the students will develop professional and social bonds, learning about each other as they talk about writing.

Constructing fair guidelines and expectations for first-year writing students who assume roles traditionally held by upperclass and graduate Writing Center consultants creates a place where the comfortable, social aspects of Writing Center consultations can meld with the structure and community of a composition classroom. Peer review provides an ideal opportunity for first-year writing students (freshman, senior, or nontraditional) to become consultants, bringing writers' audiences to life and sharing immediate responses and ideas. At the same time, students also have their essays examined and read aloud by their partners, giving them the unique chance to hear their writing and talk about it in-depth. By modeling peer review after the techniques

followed in the Writing Center, students will gain an understanding of how the Writing Center can help them, and may feel more comfortable visiting because they know what to expect.

Though my method is not a blanket solution, it suits the students and classrooms of John Carroll University. I believe that the first-year writing classroom is an ideal setting for creating a direct link with the Writing Center, closing the gap one peer review session at a time.

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