Peer Response:
Teaching Specific Revision Suggestions

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> I liked your story about the principal. I think you should add a little more detail and you should change the end two sentences so it will sound better.

Sound familiar? This student response to a peer's draft is all too typical of the way untrained secondary students give feedback on each other's drafts during response groups. In a national survey of 560 otherwise successful secondary teachers of writing and 715 of their students, Sarah W. Freedman (1985, *The Role of Response in Acquisition of Written Language,* Berkeley: California UP) found that many teachers grieved over the use of peer-response groups because they had difficulty getting students to respond effectively to one another's writing. Vague comments such as the one at the beginning of this piece proliferate. The students, too, complained about the writing responses, saying that their peers rarely offered substantial help with their writing. The result is that such vague comments rarely translate into effective revision, and this is unfortunate because when students receive concrete suggestions for revision, they do revise with the suggestions in mind (Nina D. Ziv, 1983, "Peer Groups in the Composition Classroom: A Case Study," Conference on College Composition and Communication, Detroit, March 17-19).

Focusing Peer Response

For several years, in other settings with high-school and college students, each of us had been using an organizational technique with our peer-response groups called PQP—Praise-Question-Polish (Gloria A. Neubert and Sally J. McNelis, 1986, "Improving Writing in the Disciplines," *Educational Leadership* 43.7: 54-58). We found

that this technique helps students focus on the task at hand as well as maintain a positive attitude toward the critique process.

This PQP technique requires group members (usually two to five per group) to take a turn reading their drafts aloud as the other students follow along with copies. This oral reading helps the writer to hear the piece in another voice and to independently identify possible changes. The responders then react to the piece by writing comments on the PQP form.

Praise

What is good about the writing? What should not be changed? Why is it good?

> *Example:* "Your first two reasons for voting for Bush were very convincing reasons. They made sense to me and you gave 2 or 3 examples for each reason."

Question

As a reader, what do you not understand?

> *Example:* "Why did you say you might choose Dukakis if you were older? What does age have to do with your choice?"

Polish

What specific suggestions for improvement can you make?

> *Example:* "The last reason you gave for voting for Bush was that you agreed with his international policy, but you only mentioned Russia. Discuss his policy and at least one other country, or just say his policy toward Russia?"

Responders then share their reactions with the writer in order to initiate discussion. At the conclusion of the discussion, the PQP forms are given to the writer for use during revision.

This PQP process was introduced to our middle-school students through a "fish-bowl" technique; that is, Sally and three students rehearsed and then role-played a PQP session while the remainder of the class watched and noted the process. We discussed the steps in the procedure, and then students practiced writing PQP statements.

To focus further the response of group members, we always gave students one or more focus questions which grew out of the instruction that had preceded the drafting of the piece. For example, if students were defending their choice in the last presidential election, they might be instructed to include at least three substantial reasons for their choice. Then, during peer-response groups, their focus question would be, "Has the writer included three convincing reasons for his/her voting choice?"

As we began our study of response groups with a high-average section of sixth-grade students, we found that the combination of the focus questions and PQP format did indeed keep the students on task, but as we listened to audiotapes of each group, we recognized a preponderance of vague PQP responses. We then did a more systematic analysis of the students' comments. Using transcripts of the audiotapes, we capitalized on our collaborative arrangement by first independently categorizing each student response as "vague," "general but useful," or "specific."

Vague

Comments that are full of generalities, providing little or no specific direction for revision or for transfer through praise.

> *Example:* "Try to revise the entire second page," or "I liked this piece."

General, but Useful

Comments that are still too general but provide some direction for revision.

> *Example:* "Describe Anna better."

Specific

Comments that provide the writer specific direction for revision.

> *Example:* "I still can't get a picture of Anna. What kind of clothes does she wear, and what do her hair and face look like?"

We then compared our categorizations and reached

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                        Types of Response

Comment/Response                    Usefulness?        Reason

1. Oh, your story is OK.

2. I thought the part about
   your brother throwing the
   spinach was funny.

3. How old was your brother
   when that happened?

4. You wrote a lot about your
   sister. You should try not
   to. The composition is about
   your brother, not your sister.
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Figure 1.

consensus on those for which we had initially disagreed. Our results revealed that 28% of our students' comments were "specific" comments, 53% were "general but useful," and 19% were "vague." Convinced that we did not want to settle for this degree of "general but useful" and "vague" comments—those which give little or no revision direction—we set out to teach students to give more specific comments.

Generating Specific Response

Initial instruction on generating specific comments within groups was accomplished through a series of class, small-group, and independent activities, with periodic follow-up activities.

Total Class Activity

Four sample responses given by our students in class during a previous peer-response session were displayed on the overhead projector. (See Figure 1.) Sally led the class in a discussion of each response, asking volunteers to decide how useful each response was and to explain the evaluation. Through this inductive process, the students were led to generalize that the first response was the least useful and the last response was the most useful to the writer because useful responses are *specific*—that is, they give the write a specific direction for revision—and tell *why* the revision is necessary. (In the case of praise, the response should tell why the specific is effective, thereby implying that it should be kept in the writing.)

Response number 1, above, does not say anything specific about the story nor tell why the story was "OK," while number 4 focuses on a specific—too much attention given to the sister—and tells why—because the writing is about the brother. Responses 2 and 3 are specific—throwing spinach and age of brother—but they do not tell why being funny contributed to the story and, thus, should be kept.

Small-Group Activity

Students were then placed in small groups of three or four (pre-planned according to achievement, gender, and personality) and given the following worksheet. Students were to explain why each

response was "effective" or "not effective" in light of generalizations derived from the previous class activity. (See Figure 2.)

Students worked in groups with an appointed leader who kept the discussion progressing and a recorder who wrote the agreed-upon responses. An entire-class discussion then was initiated by Sally so that consensus was reached. (See Figure 1.)

Individual Work

The final activity to teach specific responses during peer groups required each student to select any three ineffective responses from the group activity sheet and to compose a specific response that would make each comment useful to the writer. For example, instead of writing, "Good word choice, detail, and facts," an effective responder might write, "I especially like the way you described your parents as real-life take-offs of Roseanne and John Barr. You told me how they fought over the charge cards and how John always had to do what he considered to be more than his share of the housework. He also took care of the car and the yard without anyone helping him. My parents fight about these things sometimes, too, and that part of your story was really clear to me." Students received the original drafts to use in writing their comments. These revised comments were then shared and evaluated by the entire class.

Follow-up

After this initial introduction to specific responses, which took one class session, we followed up the next day by asking this question: "What are the keys to writing specific response statements for my writing-response group members? (Be specific; tell why.)" Freshly reminded of this information, students were ready for a collaborative peer-response session.

Another peer-response session was used approximately three weeks later on a new piece of writing. Again, prior to the beginning of the groups, Sally began the class with a drill, which required the students to analyze comments for effectiveness, rewrite less-than-effective ones, and list characteristics of effective responses. Again, comments were taken from the previous writing-response groups PQP sheet or from the audiotapes.

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                    Sample Response Group Comments

Read each of the following comments and evaluate the effectiveness
of each.

Response/Comment          This is effective      This is not effective
                          because . . .          because . . .

You need to give the
readers more information
to convince them. Why is
it better in North Carolina
than Maryland?

First sentence is too
short. A few words are
misplaced.

I liked your story, but you
began practically every
sentence with "but" or
"so."

Try to shorten your first
sentence; it is a good topic
but too long.

Exactly why did your teacher
pick on you?

What happened when you made
smart remarks back? After you
accepted defeat? More specific
detail is needed to get the
whole story.

Good word choice, detail, and
facts. Sentence structure is
not too good in some places.

Your topic sentence needs
work. I don't take French
and anyone who does not
wouldn't understand.

Good description of your
feelings when you lost
your cat.
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Figure 2.

Drill

Choose any 3 student responses found on the worksheet on your desk. In your learning log, analyze each. Describe in specific language why you consider the response to be effective or ineffective. Then, make a list of things you think are important to remember when writing a response for a writer's draft.

Results of Instruction

Recall that prior to this instruction on giving specific comments in response groups, 19% of the comments generated by students were "vague," 53% were "general but somewhat useful," and only 28% were "specific." After the instruction, which included the class activity, small-group activity, independent practice in writing specific comments, and the drill immediately prior to the peer-group session, the "specific" comments rose to 42% of the "comments, "vague" comments dropped to 14%, and "general but somewhat useful" to 44%. (This change was a statistically significant one: .05 level.) After the next writing-response session, which had only a drill activity precede it, "specific" comments were up to 60%, "general but somewhat useful" down to 34%, and "vague" comments down to only 6%. (This change was also statistically significant—at the .01 level.) We derived these percentages from our independent, then collaborative analysis of audiotapes of the response groups. The percentages continued to be relatively consistent for follow-up response groups.

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