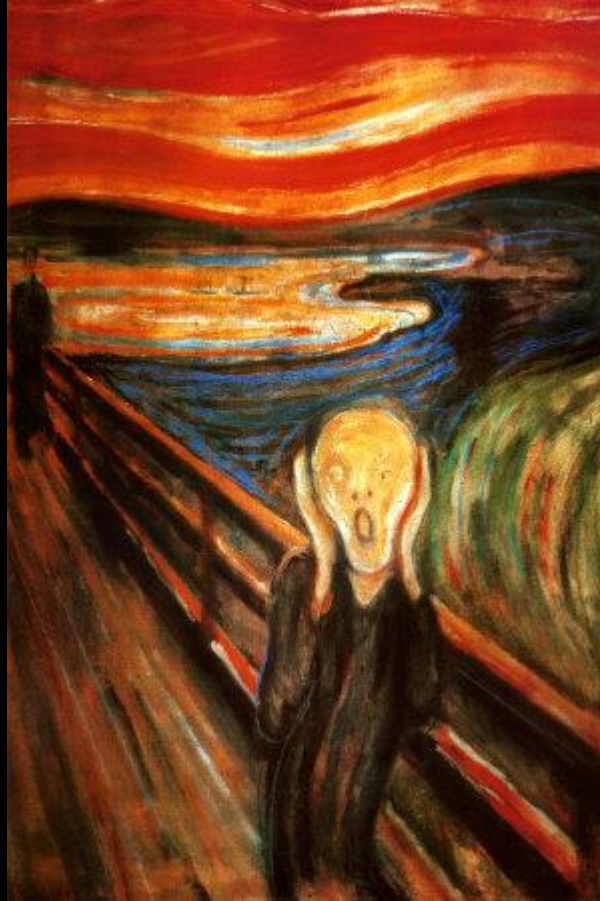


Peer Review in a Writing Intensive English Course

Catherine Craft-Fairchild
University of St. Thomas

- A *Writing Intensive* course in English must fulfill the following guidelines: “to offer students substantive and direct instruction in the writing process, as a complement to specialized disciplinary content....Such courses employ pedagogical approaches attuned to student skill levels and designed to emphasize writing as a process, a practice, and a product.”

Peer-Editing Problems



- Michael Graner, in his article “Revision Workshops: An Alternative to Peer Editing Groups” (*The English Journal* 76.3 [March 1987]), outlines the “limitations of peer editing,” citing four areas of significant difficulty:
 - 1. “The first limitation is that student writers lack the skill to make effective evaluations....Critics...complain that peer editing is nothing more than the blind leading the blind with unskilled editors guiding inexperienced writers in a process neither understands well.”

- 2. “These critics cite a related problem; students often feel uncomfortable making negative criticisms of peers' work, and editing sessions can degenerate into recitations of mutual compliments, unsupported by content.”

- 3. “Another drawback of peer editing is a practical consideration; students may come to class unprepared or uncommitted. If students do not prepare initial drafts or do so carelessly, the peer review session will be valueless.”

- 4. “Since exchanging information is the basis of peer editing, several conversations are occurring simultaneously, and it is virtually impossible for the teacher to guarantee that these discussions do not become small talk or social chit-chat.”

Dr. Chris Anson

University
Distinguished
Professor

Professor of
English

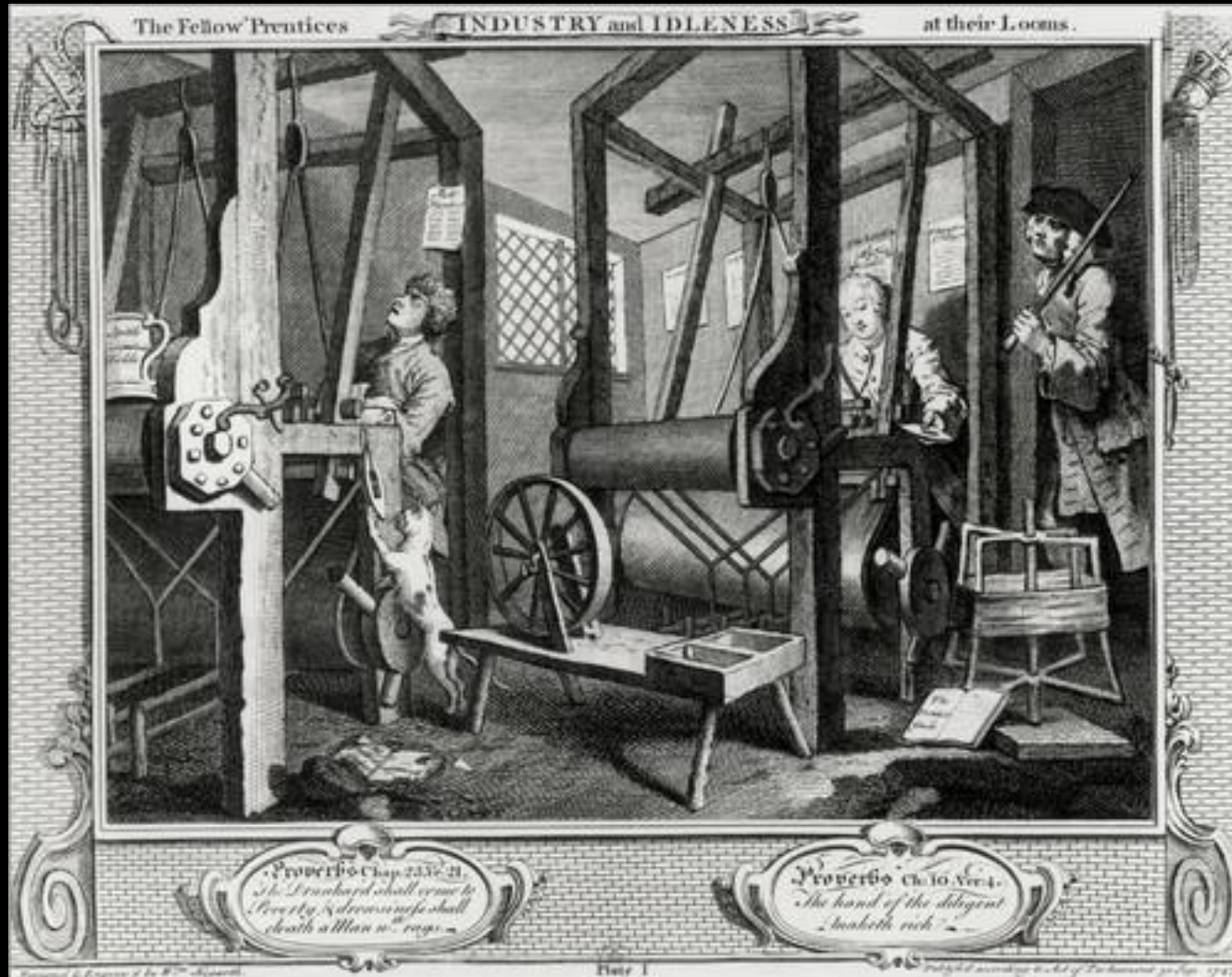
Director of the
Campus Writing
and Speaking
Program at North
Carolina State
University



Writing Across the Curriculum Workshop

- “Many teachers try peer response and revision groups only to abandon them because they don’t think the students use the time wisely and/or because they don’t see sufficient evidence of improvements in the students’ revised drafts. These problems with peer revision groups come not from limitations of the method but from how they’re set up, orchestrated, and evaluated.”

Peer-Editing Process



English 203 Peer-Editing Process

- 1. During the class period before the writing groups meet, students bring in one copy of their **rough draft** for each member of their writing group.
- Along with each draft, each student must include a brief “**writer’s memo**” that indicates to group members perceived strengths (“those parts of the draft that you are confident about”) and writer’s concerns (those parts of the draft you would particularly like readers to focus on; “let your readers know exactly what kind of help you want from them....[I]ndicating your concerns tells readers that it is safe to discuss them with you” –Cheryl Glenn, Robert Keith Miller, Suzanne Strobeck Webb, and Loretta Gray, *Writer’s Harbrace Handbook*, 2nd ed. [Thomson, 2005], p. 93).
- Students collect one rough draft from each member to take home themselves.

- 2. At home: After carefully reading each draft, students fill out one **peer-response worksheet** for each writer.
- They are instructed to “try to keep in mind that your primary task is not to *grade* the paper in front of you but is, instead, to offer *information* to the writer about your reactions to his/her writing. Providing useful information means going into some detail—try to be specific by drawing attention to passages in the paper that illustrate what you mean. As in other areas of life, the golden rule applies here: treat the author as you would wish to be treated! Try to give direct, thoughtful feedback worded tactfully!”

- 3. On the day that the writing groups meet: Students bring in **the peer-response worksheets to give to each writer!** The next step is for the group to have a productive conversation about each writer's paper. Since students have read each other's work carefully in order to fill out the worksheets, they usually have additional things to say that they didn't have time to explain in writing.
- They are instructed to "begin with one person's draft, focusing on the elements that work well, then moving on to those that do not work so well. The group members should push each other to be as detailed as possible (e.g. "*Why* were you confused there?); the author should be sure to stress the questions/issues that he or she is concerned about. Try to pace yourselves so that each paper receives roughly equal time."

- 4. Each writer now faces the challenge of revising his or her draft in light of the feedback received: “After your reviewers have finished...you are responsible for evaluating the responses you received—rejecting those that would take you in a direction you do not want to pursue and honoring those that would help you to fulfill your purpose. Remind yourself that you are the author of the draft in question and that you get the final say about whatever goes into an essay with your name on it. And it’s a rare writer who pleases everyone” (*Writer’s Harbrace Handbook*, p. 94).

- **Revision memo** (Please attach a revision memo to your final draft!)

Name:

Essay title:

- 1. Summarize the comments and suggestions your peers made about your first draft. Was the feedback helpful? Do you have suggestions for your team that might improve their feedback for you? (e.g. it would have been helpful if s/he had done the following....)
- 2. What did you change in moving from the first draft to the final draft? Which changes were prompted by the feedback from your writing group? Which were ones you made using your own judgment?”
- 3. If you had the time to revise your paper again, what elements would you work on?
- 4. What do you think the strongest aspect of your writing in this paper? What insights about your writing or process of writing resulted from working on this assignment?
- 5. Do you have any questions for me? Is there anything I haven't



- Mary-Catherine wrote: “[My group feedback was] all very helpful and specific without being nitpicky or overbearing. I made the slight alterations and clarifications suggested, and then looked into restructuring the order of paragraphs. This proved to be difficult, but also extremely valuable to my paper, as it led me to meet with my professor and to narrow and strengthen my thesis and topic....I now know that I can usually make a topic narrower than I think I can.”

- Abby commented, “Alyssa spoke mainly about finding a connection between my ideas on the two separate texts....I changed my thesis, tried to focus my main connection point...[and] chose to include...a transition paragraph to help find the commonality....Most of the changes were based on Alyssa’s feedback, but the transition paragraph was my idea....This was the most I have had to rework a paper all year, but I came to accept the fact that sometimes major changes do need to be made.”



Revision Process



- Students may, if they wish, rewrite their “final” draft. This is an option; it is not mandatory (except in cases where a paper was unsatisfactory). Anyone who wishes to may revise; even a student who earned an A- or A-/B+ may, if she/he wishes, perfect a very strong paper.
- **Students receiving any grade lower than B are required to work with a peer or graduate tutor in the Writing Center .**
- **After redrafting, students are required to meet with me briefly to talk about the revision and perhaps discuss additional strategies.**

Students are asked, “How will the revisions you plan to make improve the content of the paper? In other words, how will the revisions you propose address key issues that I tried to get at in my comments on your draft? Changing merely a few sentences or making grammatical emendations does not address content issues—these kinds of alterations come under the heading of editing. (Editing alone will not result in a change of grade on the assignment.) Revision means really to rethink and rewrite significant portions of the draft. **As a visual record for us both, please use a highlighter on your revised draft to mark any changes that you made, any passages that you rewrote.** In a successful revision, large amounts of the draft will be highlighted, since revising means really rethinking and rewriting significant portions of the paper.”

Advantages and Disadvantages



Pros

- Accountability at every stage
- Psychological elements
- Instructor feedback given or available at every stage
- Grade improvement incentives to encourage revision

Cons

- Accountability at every stage
- Psychological elements
- Final revision not mandatory
- Grade improvement incentives to encourage revision

“Perhaps the single most important element in successful peer revision sessions is what you have the students *do*. Left to their own devices, they may hunt for errors, provide only disingenuous praise, or not think critically about the papers at all. Intervention in the form of a set of questions or foci is crucial....Accountability is crucial....”—Dr. Chris Anson