BASIC WRITERS AS CRITICAL READERS: THE ART OF ONLINE PEER REVIEW

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Although peer review as an instructional strategy has a long history in the practice of teachers of writing, the effect it has on student performance has been difficult for researchers to gauge (van Zundert et al. 270). Yet most research shows that composition instructors see it as a beneficial classroom exercise, even if many believe it also has drawbacks—drawbacks that include, for example, peers' tendency to mark sentence-level errors that do little to help writers recognize how their ideas are understood (Cho and Schunn 412; McConlogue 3) and thereby fail to help writers revise their own writing for clarity, logic, or the deeper examination of ideas. Revision thus gets reduced to proofreading for surface correctness. This is an especially important issue in basic writing classes where one of the most important goals of instruction is to help students understand writing as primarily an act of thinking, and revision as primarily a process of re-thinking. But, as Mina Shaughnessy asserts, "So absolute is the importance of error in the minds of many [basic] writers that 'good writing' to them means 'correct writing,' nothing more" (8). And since basic writers overly care about "correct writing," any emphasis on surface-level errors tends to perpetuate their stubborn belief that correcting surface errors is what revision is all about. Yet despite the danger that peer review might encourage rather than reduce attention to surface level correctness, many basic writing instructors continue to incorporate peer review into their classes because they see peer review as a "best practice" for knowledgeable professionals and as an exercise that logically "ought to" help students learn to evaluate

other students' writing, while concomitantly learning how to revise their own writing based upon peer comments.

While the logic for most uses of peer review in basic writing classes may be superficial or faulty, peer review may actually have important benefits for students who are basic writers because it is a process that is inevitably less about writing than it is about reading. When peer review is used during the early and constructive revision stage of writing (as opposed to the late editing and proofreading stage), the peer review process can focus on getting students to analyze or try to follow the thinking of a peer review partner, which demands that peer reviewers must give their attention primarily to understanding the text under review. Most peer review research examines the value (or pitfalls) of peer review in relation to instruction in the writing process, yet very few scholars emphasize the role of reading in the peer review process. Virginia Crank is one exception: She discusses the reader-response peer reviews that her basic writing students gave each other on personal narratives. Since these papers were not based on course-assigned readings, peer reviewers were able to devote their attention strictly to the student text in front of them and not to its adequacy as an interpretation or evaluation of a text students were asked to write about. In other words, each peer reviewer could focus only on what the text under review was saying about an experience on which the writer and not the reader was the expert.

Crank's observation about how to keep peer reviewers focused as readers of the authoritative text in front of them—rather than on that text in relation to another, more authoritative text—invites us to think about how we can help students focus as readers of student writing that is usually produced in the service of illuminating or interrogating some prior academic text. That, after all, is the kind of writing that is most characteristically produced or explicitly identified as the eventual goal of writing instruction in a college basic writing class. This is precisely the task I undertook to address in a set of experiments I conducted with my own basic writing students in a class where I happened

also to be experimenting with online peer review.[1] And what I discovered and will elaborate on in this essay is how productive and instructive the peer review process can be for students who are basic writers when peer review is conceived and conducted primarily as an exercise in critical reading, rather than writing, and when it is conducted in an online rather than in a face-to-face environment.

Peer Review as a Reading Event

Before looking at peer review as a reading exercise best conducted online, let me first explore what typically makes basic writers basic readers of college-level texts. For years basic writing scholars have argued that many of the academic problems basic writers face are in large part the result of the difficulty they have in reading and interpreting texts. As early as 1976, Marilyn Sternglass brought to our attention how composition instructors are also reading instructors since so much of what students write about is based on what they are assigned to read in the texts of others (382). More recently, basic writing scholars have argued that the writing of basic writing students is limited by their struggle to read critically the texts they are usually assigned to write about (Goen and Gillotte-Tropp 91). So the first step instructors need to take to help students become college-level writers is to help them become college-level readers (Sullivan 233). And this needs to apply to their own written texts in progress as well as the texts they are asked to write about.

In order for students to read at the college level, they must first develop the behaviors and dispositions that research and theory have identified as the marks of effective and successful readers. First and foremost, students must learn to embrace the confusion that comes with reading difficult texts (Blau 221)—from those rhetorically complex texts instructors assign in their classes to the texts students create on their own. (Granted, the level of difficulty between instructor-assigned and student texts is disparate, but nonetheless equally challenging to emerging scholars.) When students do learn to embrace the confusion that

comes with reading *all* difficult texts, they can learn the value of the reading process—a process that often calls upon students to exercise persistence and the intensive allocation of attentional resources in the interest of producing a coherent and adequate interpretation of a text. If basic writers are to become college-level readers, they will need to understand that the reading of difficult texts will require their own active and engaged participation—something they struggle to do.

As I have argued elsewhere, basic writers typically exhibit counterproductive reading habits that can prevent them from fully engaging in a reading activity. First, they are prone to succumb to their counterproductive belief and attitude that texts can be too difficult for them to understand. Second, and perhaps not unrelated to the first, they tend to defer their interpretations to that of their instructor and/or students whose opinion they feel is most valued by the instructor. In both cases, these students do little more than speedily decode words on a page in the hope and expectation that their instructor or "smarter" students will tell them in class what they should have learned from their reading of the assigned text. These students who defer their interpretations to others often approach any reading task as a superficial exercise, almost certainly ensuring their failure to engage with sufficient intensity or persistence in the difficult task of making meaning of a truly complex and challenging text. A third counterproductive reading habit occurs when students read as miners of existing meanings they think reside *in* texts instead of reading to make meaning *with* texts (Smith). This "mining" of texts can also occur when students read their own work and the work of their peers because they often attempt to find what their teacher is looking for instead of engaging with their or their peers' writing in meaningful and productive ways, leading to a passive rather than an active reading process. Students need to recognize that peer review, like all reading tasks, requires their active participation and willingness to work through difficult texts. As Louise Rosenblatt argues, "Every reading act is an event," whereby the reader and text "are two aspects of a total dynamic situation" in

which both are equally necessary for any meaning-making process to occur (1063). Since peer review qualifies as a "reading event," students need to learn how to become participants rather than sideliners at this reading event.

Compounding the reading behaviors that ineffective readers exhibit is their heightened anxiety in the peer-review process—an anxiety, I might add, that is in addition to the angst they may already feel by virtue of their performance on an English placement exam that "failed" them into their basic writing class in the first place. I've been teaching basic writers for seventeen years now—the past eight at a community college in a large urban area—and in every class, students often resist peer review because, by their own admission, they aren't comfortable with others *judging* their writing—a scary prospect for any writer, not to mention writers who are already convinced of their own inadequacy and fearful of the inevitability of their failure. (See, for example, Shaughnessy, Mike Rose, and Sondra Perl.) So instead of being a productive reading event, peer review can become that meaningless exercise that students *get through* rather than *learn from*, where they do little more than decode text in order to provide answers that they feel their instructors are looking for.

How then do we incorporate peer review into a basic writing class that is, by definition, filled with students who don't yet have the ability to produce serviceable academic writing, largely because they struggle with reading difficult texts? How can struggling readers qualify to participate in a meaningful process of reviewing one another's work? A certain logic presents itself here that if instructors can remove from peer review the counter-productive elements that the exercise can induce, students can learn to sustain and focus their attention on their peers' writing instead of on their own insecurities, turning peer review into an engaging and productive reading event. And I believe the best way to do this is to conduct peer review online.

The Value of Online Peer Review

In general, online learning can be beneficial for students because it "promotes the kinds of high-level learning activities that support active learning and deep, reflective thinking about authentic tasks"; "puts the students in control of the learning environment"; and "levels the playing field for students who may be discriminated against in face-to-face classrooms because of appearance, ethnicity, gender, handicap, and other potential stigmatizing factors" (Stine "Basically" 133). Students who benefit from online learning are usually those students who are aware of themselves as learners and who know how to take control of their own learning. Basic writers, though, often don't experience these online benefits, in part because of academic underpreparedness and counterproductive behaviors towards learning (Stine 133-134). However, if instructors put peer review assignments online, they can turn peer review into an effective reading event. In essence, the online medium of peer review provides students with two essential conditions—the luxury of time and the advantage of anonymity—that "[promote]…active learning," "[put] the student in control of the learning environment," and "[level] the playing field" (Stine 133), all necessary conditions for success with basic writers.

First, the issue of time: In a basic writing class, students must be allowed ample time to review a peer's paper, often more time than a face-to-face class will allow (Adler-Kassner and Reynolds, 174; Crank 148; Stine "Best" 55). As stated above, basic writers need to read slowly and deliberately if they are ever to learn how to read a text closely and actively—including reading and reviewing a peer's paper. Certainly in my own classes, I could devote a large amount of time to face-to-face peer review, but to do so would take away valuable time that I could otherwise devote to critical reading/writing instruction that is crucial for students as they develop the necessary skills to become effective readers and writers of complex course texts. And the truth is that no matter how much time instructors provide for peer review, students read at different speeds, and, as evidenced by my own

students, slower readers often feel self-conscious and, therefore, inadequate in comparison to faster (and, in their eyes, stronger) readers. For course-assigned texts, students are able to read at their own pace at home before class, so they are not subject to the anxiety of a first-read situation in front of their peers. But the conditions of face-to-face peer review almost certainly demand a first reading in class, thereby creating adverse circumstances that often feed basic writers' insecurities. By allowing students to review their peers' papers online, instructors can help students take "control of the learning environment" (Stine "Basically" 133) by taking as much time as they need to read, without having to feel rushed, watched, or judged as slow readers.

The second essential condition—anonymity—adds to the authenticity of the responses, which is beneficial for both the peer reviewer and the peer. When students conduct peer reviews in traditional face-to-face classroom settings, they know whose paper they are reading, and, more importantly, they know who is reading their paper, leading them to accept or reject comments largely based upon what students know about their peers (McConlogue 9-10). Students also tend to be anxious and distracted during the face-to-face peer review process because they often pay more attention to the peer marking their paper than they do to the paper they are supposed to be reviewing, especially if they perceive that peer to be a more effective and successful student. I have often seen students who, after exchanging papers with a peer, have one eye fixed on their own paper as they watch their peer write comments on it. As a result, students disengage from reading their peer's paper, turn to the peer, ask, "What did you just write down?" and then try to explain—and justify—what they had written. Clearly, their anxiety about someone else "evaluating" their paper prevents them from fully engaging in the peer-review task, and their inattention can render the exercise meaningless. This is not to say that in anonymous situations, students won't experience anxiety as they review a peer or receive peer comments, but at least the anxiety isn't magnified as it is in the face-to-face real-time setting where it

can immediately and simultaneously distract from the task at hand. In fact, some scholars have demonstrated that in asynchronous email peer reviews, where students could still see each other's names, the online component gave students the illusion of anonymity, which helped them develop more thoughtful responses to their peers (Adler-Kassner and Reynolds 174; Crank 149). In a truly anonymous online peer review process, that anxiety goes down even further since they really don't know the identity of the writer or the reviewer, allowing them the opportunity to engage actively in the reading of their peer's work while preventing them from making comments based upon their perceived worth of the other student.

When students go through an anonymous online peer-review process, they can also see other interpretations of the academic texts that are the subjects of the very papers they are reviewing, without knowing whose interpretation they are reading. In so doing, students can learn from each other as they revise their interpretations of the texts instructors assign. After all, since they won't know whose paper they are reading and, therefore, how the instructor/other students value that student's thoughts, they won't know who is providing the interpretation in front of them, and they won't know whether they should defer their own interpretation to the one they are reading. Instead, they must learn to evaluate interpretations and the evidence that supports those interpretations strictly on the merit of the argument and the writing, even if, and especially if, some of those interpretations differ from their own. Therefore, if instructors remove the identity of the writer, students can then validate, challenge, and refine their own ideas and interpretations as they engage in active learning that leads to "deep, reflective thinking about authentic tasks" (Stine "Basically" 133), such as recognizing multiple and warranted interpretations of texts, making intertextual connections, finding subtleties in texts, and questioning/validating their own interpretation of texts based upon the interpretations of others. To this end, the anonymity of peer review is crucial so

students can learn to trust their own interpretations as they evaluate the interpretations of others.

Not only is the anonymity of peer review beneficial for students as they are conducting the review, but also when they must evaluate the comments they receive at the end of the peer review process. Just as students often try to justify their writing in face-to-face peer review situations, so too do they try to ask for clarification about comments they receive from their peers. However, by asking for clarification, they abdicate their role as critical readers of their own texts and rely on the thinking of their peer. In anonymous peer review, students must instead learn to evaluate the comments they receive in relation to their own writing and be discerning about how to act upon those comments. That is to say, students must base their decisions for revision on their careful examination of the merit of the comments instead of the perceived merit of the peer making the comment. In some ways, the comments they receive are less important than the process students go through to analyze them.

Peer Review in Practice

To demonstrate one case where peer review acted as a reading event, I offer the experience of my first online peer review assignment, which students used for their second round of revision during the writing process of their second paper. All of my basic writing classes of late have been "linked" in a learning community with an art history class; therefore, all of my writing assignments in some way incorporate an aspect of art or art history.

For the essay they peer review online, my students read Ovid's "The Story of Pygmalion" (the story of a sculptor who creates and falls in love with a statue of his ideal woman, who, thanks to Venus, slowly turns into a human being while Pygmalion is caressing her) before they study Jean-Léon Gérõme's painting *Pygmalion and Galatea* (which depicts the very moment the statue is coming alive). They then read an article titled "Love in 2-D," wherein Lisa Katayama describes the phenomenon of Japanese

men who fall in love with pre-pubescent 2-D animated girls, illustrated in a style known as *manga*, and who carry around body-sized pillows with the image of these 2-D girls. The prompt for this essay essentially asks students to compare the painting with the Katayama essay and explain the feelings and ideas that the essay and the painting evoke.

All of my classes are reading/writing integrated, so I spend a lot of time on how to closely read the texts I assign. For Ovid's "The Story of Pygmalion," students read the poem at home before coming to class and, working in pairs, slowly read the poem out loud line-by-line, making sure they understand all the nuances in each line and discussing how one line influences or is influenced by another. Most importantly, I ask them to pay attention to what confuses them and to write down any questions they have about the poem. (I focus on their questions and confusion because I want students to become comfortable with uncertainty and, therefore, their own abilities as they encounter and confront difficult texts.) As students move through this poem, I sit with each pair and try to push their thinking. After they finish the poem, we discuss it as a class, trying to make sense of what they still don't understand. Next, I introduce the painting and ask them to actively "read" the painting in much the same way they just read the poem, again looking deeply for what they don't understand or have questions about. Finally, students read "Love in 2-D" at home before they come to class, and then they interrogate the text in small groups, where they individually write their responses to open-ended questions about their experience of reading the text before they discuss those responses with their group. During this exercise, students constantly reread and revise their interpretations each time they read, which helps them to discover the value of their own interpretations to the thinking of other readers, value alternative interpretations to their own thinking, and shift the focus to what confuses them instead of focusing on a single answer that they think they're supposed to find. It also shows them that they are capable readers who can support their interpretations of texts with evidence from those texts. (For more on this activity,

see Smith.) I spend two weeks (approximately eight hours) on the readings for this unit, in addition to the two weeks I spend on a difficult art history text students write about for their first paper. Thus, by the time students write their Pygmalion essays, they have had considerable instruction in how to read texts closely and actively.

For the first drafts of this paper, I asked students to read their own papers slowly and deliberately, with the same focused attention as they gave to Ovid, Gérõme, and Katayama. For the second draft, the one they would submit online to be peer reviewed, I asked them to read their peer's papers as closely as they wanted their peer to read theirs. The students submitted their essays (sans their names) to an online peer review program, where only I would know their identities. Once the students submitted their essays, I randomly assigned students to peer review. They had one week to review each other's work, which in the end was ample time.

As I did in my previous face-to-face peer review workshops, in this online peer review "workshop," I provided students with questions that I wanted them to answer, questions to steer their comments away from the editing components of grammar and style. My peer review assignments are always low-stakes; thus, many of the peer review comments were written in basic-writingese. To have students worry about correctness and/or error would have placed their focus back on their own writing errors, which would have only increased their anxiety about writing for this assignment.

The peer review feature in the program I use mirrors the instructor-student feature I had already used to comment on drafts of their first paper. Both the instructor and peer features allow reviewers to make comments directly in the student's paper when they want to address a particular portion of the text. So in addition to requiring students to answer my specific questions, I encourage them to use this feature when peer reviewing. Since students in this class had already received online feedback from me on previous drafts of their first paper, they knew how this

feature worked, and many tried to impersonate me and make the kinds of comments they thought I might make if I were the one commenting on the student's paper. Below are the questions I asked students to answer as they reviewed each other's papers; the questions were based upon discussions we had in class:

1. Did the writer incorporate all "texts" into his/her response to show how they were all related? Explain.
2. Did the writer sufficiently summarize/describe all "texts" for this assignment? Explain.
3. Did the writer answer all that the essay prompt asked? Explain.
4. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being high), how do you rate this writer's response to the prompt?
5. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being high), how effectively do you think the writer was able to interweave the texts into his/her response?

Almost all students took the assignment seriously, and to my surprise (and delight), they were much more thorough with their own comments than I ever imagined they would be. Below are examples of peer review comments that came from a class of nineteen students and represent as a whole the degree to which students engaged with this assignment. They essentially completed the assignment in one of two ways: (1) by answering my questions thoroughly and adding a few individual comments directly on the paper or (2) by minimally answering my questions and providing several individual comments within the actual paper.

Metamorphosis of Critical Readers

About two thirds of the class wrote reviews that more thoroughly answered my guiding questions and minimally provided individual comments. Amadou[2] was one of those students. Here are the comments that Amadou made on Vance's paper:

1. Did the writer incorporate all "texts" into his/her response to show how they were all related? Explain.

The writer used the various pieces of some of the texts given, but tended to elaborate more on the painting of "Pygmalion and Galetea" more than the article "love in 2-D". It was a good attempt at incorporating the different texts in his or her response to the prompt. The description of the painting and the things in the painting was well done but the description of the article was not as effectively used. The use of the story of "Pygmalion" by Ovid would have helped more in this situation. The effectiveness of the examples from the texts given in the essay was good but a bit more could have been said about the texts.[3]

2. Did the writer sufficiently summarize/describe all "texts" for this assignment? Explain.

The writer summarized some of the texts for the assignment but not all. The effective summary of the painting "Pygmalion and Galetea" which was a much more comprehensive summary in contrast with the summary of the article "Love in 2-D" which was a more general summary and did not explain very much the way in which the two pieces were related. The use of details in the summary or description of the painting was effective in that specific examples of the image was given but in the summary of the article it was lacking and in the summary of the story of "Pygmalion" was missing.

3. Did the writer answer all that the essay prompt asked? Explain.

The writer answered the essay prompt because the prompt was asking to relate the two pieces and the writer had some ideas even through those ideas may have been lacking in clarity the general theme of the assignment was attained. The essay response to the prompt was not developed despite having some good ideas and

points in the essay did not elaborate on them enough. In terms of compare and contrast there was not much and this was the main part of the essay thus the length. The essay ended too abruptly and caused the reader to ask many questions which the essay should not have instead it should have answered any questions the reader had.

4. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being high), how do you rate this writer's response to the prompt?

3 of 5

5. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being high), how effectively do you think the writer was able to interweave the texts into his/her response?

2 of 5

And below are four of the eight specific comments Amadou wrote in Vance's paper. The places in the text that received comments are identified in superscript numerals.

In the painting Pygmalion[1]*:* and Galatea Pygmalion stands embracing the statue he carve[2] name Galatea the painting also show a cupid aiming a arrow at Pygmalion and his work of art as he embraces it his action made me realize that he is a man who knows what he wants,[3] the work of art he created was so beautiful that he fell in love with it, it is just the ideal woman he wanted in life. The story love in 2-D by Lisa Katayama is about Japanese men that falls[4] in love with video game character no matter the age of the character which is known as 2d love. There's a few similarities between those two as in both the man's falls in love with something that his unable to love them back , but major differences the painting I can understand it as a man that fell in love with his art as for the Japanese man are falling in love with a character someone else made

Comments:

1 *Shouldn't the name of the painting be in " "*

2 *What tense sholud this be in? Check throughout writing.*

3 *how do you know this? explain*

4 *Men fall not men falls. Check your subject verb agreement throught the essay.*

Amadou's answers to my specific questions demonstrate a thoughtful and close reading of Vance's writing. Amadou was able to explain to Vance that his essay was not developed, in part because Vance did not adequately summarize the texts, nor sufficiently answer the prompt given that he had not made an effective comparison. Only three of Amadou's individual comments (38%) were content-related, but the totality of Amadou's peer review demonstrates that he was critically reading Vance's paper.

The second way students completed the peer review was to quickly move through my questions and devote a significant amount of time on slowly reading the peer's essay and inserting comments throughout. Peter's comments on Casey's paper are an example of the focused thinking some students did as they read through their peer's papers. Here are Peter's answers to my questions:

1. Did the writer incorporate all "texts" into his/her response to show how they were all related? Explain.

yes the writer also included the written material for pygmoalin and galatea

2. Did the writer sufficiently summarize/describe all "texts" for this assignment? Explain.

needs to work on explain one story at a time then later on explain how they fall into place as a conclusion....also neeeds an effevtive thesis

3. Did the writer answer all that the essay prompt asked? Explain.

yes the write included both story how how they connect to each other

4. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being high), how do you rate this writer's response to the prompt?

3 of 5

5. On a scale from 1 to 5 (with 5 being high), how effectively do you think the writer was able to interweave the texts into his/her response?

3 of 5

And then Peter peppered Casey's two-and-a-half-page paper with twenty-five individual comments. About a third of the students wrote extensive individual comments while only minimally answering my questions, with eleven as the average number for all students' individual comments. Below is an example of the individual comments Peter made in Casey's paper:

Katayama captures the different extents[9] of obsession with Love in 2-D. She explains different situations with the Japanese men known as 2-D lovers that have fantasies and an imaginations that effects their entire lives.[10] One particular male, 38yr old Nisan who fell in love with the virtual teenage character named Nemutan from a video game now walks around with a stuffed pillow case with her picture on it. Nisan has replacement pillow cases at work in case he

does over time, takes her out to karaoke and even to eat at restaurants. Katayama explains that he treats what he calls "his girlfriend" like a regular human being as if she were 3-D. This man found affection[11] in virtual character and tried to bring her to life by using 3-D materials because of his deep love for it. After being dumped, Nisan moved on to 2-D.[12] "She has really changed my life" is what Nisan says and it really has since he probably isn't considered normal to others expect for fellow 2-D lovers. What so ever makes him happy is what matters.

The composition in the painting "Pygmalion and Galatea" created by Gerome depicts something similar to the article from Katayama especially[13] when it came to trying to humanize something that isn't real. The painting shows the artist Pygmalion holding and kissing the statue he created which is holding and kissing him back. That showed that this statue it something he would want to show him love[14] and affection also if possible. The story passage to the painting from Ovid expresses the love between the Pygmalion and his art work. After living alone, this probably gave Pygmalion the reason for being so eager to find someone to love. An example, Ovid states "Only too often, choose to be alone".[15] He is desperate to maybe one day find someone like his "If you can give all things, O God, I pray my wife may be – One like my ivory girl" which Pygmalion is referring to the statue. He wished that his wife would be exactly[16] like the piece of art. After it actually comes to life, the excitement Ovid expressed that Pygmalion had showed how much he was in love with this non-living object. "Over and over, touches the body with his hand. It is a body!" This finally bought him happiness from something he created.

Comments:
[9] *katayama is falling in love with a 2d girlfriend?*
[10] *how does it effect there lives be sure to use exaples*

[11] *we know a regualr girl is 3d lets be more specific about the message you are sending to your readers*

[12] *this sentence connects to your thesis ,the thesis must explain the rest of the story*

[13] *is katayama the person humanzing , try not to confuse the audience*

[14] *go over pinctiation to seperate fragments of a sentence this way the readers not puzzled*

[15] *need to be specific with quote evalute it*

[16] *exactly read back in the preivious sentence and make sure*

It's important to note that only five of Peter's twenty-five comments (20%) focused on sentence-level errors, a surprisingly small percentage given the number of comments he provided. And the twenty content-related comments, placed directly in the paper where they were relevant, shows the same kind of focused, critical reading that Amadou performed for Vance. As with Amadou's comments to Vance, not all of Peter's comments were accurate or even clearly suggested what he thought Casey should do, but the comments did provide feedback that Casey could analyze to determine how her reader was reading her essay. In that regard, Peter's comments should have made Casey think about what she was trying to say, why Peter made the comment in the first place, and whether or not she should address or reject the advice.

Amadou's and Peter's responses are representative examples of the two types of reviews most students wrote, and their responses should have led their peers towards meaningful revisions. However, not all peer reviews were as useful as Amadou's and Peter's. As stated earlier, peer review can be ineffectual when students receive surface-level feedback or when students accept or reject comments based upon what they know about their peers. Yet there is another kind of ineffective peer review: The review that uncritically praises peers' work so there are no useful suggestions for writers to analyze, throwing them back on their own resources as readers of their own work. Aramis, who wrote

an underdeveloped rough draft, received such a review from Manuel. Like Amadou, Manuel answered my questions in great detail, but offered such faint praise as *"the writer made sure the reader know what he was trying to explain in his writing"* or *"shows how the writer pay attention to the assignment in hand, also the writer summarized all he need to complete this work"* or *"the writer also showed that the prompt got his interest and that he also put his all in the writing."* On the two questions that asked the peer to rate the writer's response to the prompt and the writer's effective use of texts, Manuel gave Aramis 4/5. Manuel also gave Aramis four individual comments, 75% of which were, alas, sentence-level suggestions, with 25% praise:

> . . . Relating to this is "Love in 2-D", where Lisa Katayama reports that men are attracted to fictional characters that are practically not real. Yet, their love for their characters is real, like Pygmalion's.[1] How does her story relate to that of Pygmalion?[2]
>
> Pygmalion, in the beginning, did[3] not like the women of his time, since they were always busy with themselves, having nothing to do with romance or true love. . . .
>
> The only thing that gives love its true form is when a couple solidifies their commitment to each other by expressing to each other in terms of love. How this can be fake to other people- that, I[4] don't understand.
>
> Comments:
> [1] *too many comma's in this paragraph just end the sentence and start a new one*
> [2] *great paragraph though and cool way to end the paragraph too*
> [3] *he*
> [4] *erase the I*

Throughout the entire peer review, Manuel didn't specifically suggest anything for Aramis to revise, except for three (incorrect)

editing suggestions. Yet Manuel also did not give Aramis 5/5 on either of the last two questions—most likely because he knew a draft should not be perfect. Surprisingly, when I asked Aramis if he found his peer's comments helpful, he replied, *"Yes, I had found the comments very helpful,"* and when I asked him about peer review in general, Aramis said, *"I think that peer review is practically useful— people have many viewpoints and ideas, so it's a really good thing to let other people see your own work."* Perhaps Manuel's praise built Aramis's confidence and did help Aramis make some revisions, even if those revisions were not as significant as they could and should have been for this draft. Manuel's peer review might suggest that he didn't profit from this peer review assignment, but Manuel's thoroughness in his response—even though it was mostly praise—suggests that he probably *did* benefit from this assignment by reading and responding to another's text—even if that reading was not as close as I would have hoped. I simply don't know how or to what extent Manuel learned from this assignment.

One suggestion to counteract instances of uncritical praise in peer reviews would be to have students peer review more than one paper for each assignment. By doing so, not only are they able to see the different ways their fellow students are interpreting and responding to texts, but they also have more than one peer review on which to base their own revisions, which is especially valuable if one is entirely uncritical. Kwangsu Cho and Christian Schunn add that multiple peer responses can help students develop a better sense of their audience, avoid "blind spots and omissions" from any one review, avoid "the negative impact of incorrect feedback," and make revision decisions when feedback overlaps (418). While I recognize the pedagogical benefit of assigning multiple peer reviews, I also know that if I assigned multiple reviews, my students would probably not devote the kind of focused attention to any one review that I would hope they would. My students typically mirror the very-diverse urban population of Brooklyn and are full-time students, yet often work full-time or at least several hours part-time, traveling between

one-to-two hours one-way by public transportation. As a result, most don't have the time (or probably the inclination) to challenge themselves on multiple peer reviews.

I want to point out that regardless of the effectiveness of the peer reviews, all three of these students whose performance and experience I studied most closely identified themselves in their reviews as *readers*: Amadou clearly identified himself as the "reader" during his review of Vance: *"The essay ended too abruptly and caused the reader to ask many questions which the essay should not have instead it should have answered any questions the reader had."* As did Peter in his review of Casey*: "we know a regular girl is 3d lets be more specific about the message you are sending to your readers."* Even Manuel understood his role as "reader" in his comments to Aramis: *"the writer made sure the reader know what he was trying to explain in his writing."* Although my students were not asked to talk about their roles as readers, all three did so, as did almost all students in the class. Their identity as a "reader" is an important one. Ed Jones demonstrates that basic writers are more successful when they have "self-belief" in their abilities to perform academic tasks (229-230), and part of having confidence in their abilities is to adopt an identity of a skillful student. If, through exercises like online peer review, students can learn to identify as *readers* who have the ability to analyze texts, then they have a strong chance of also identifying as *writers* of proficient prose.

Paving the Academic Way

The students in my class demonstrated that online peer review can be a critical-reading exercise that leads students to read actively and deliberately. Peer review is first a reading exercise before it organically morphs into a reading *and* writing exercise: After students have closely and actively read/analyzed a peer's paper, they can then turn their attention to the revision of their own writing—a stage in the writing process that is fundamentally another reading event. A logical next-step research study is to evaluate the role online peer review has in helping students

transfer the critical reading skills they develop in the review of their peer's paper to their reading and revising of their own work.

Fortunately, I did ask students to reflect upon their revision process for this paper, asking them, "How does what you revised in your paper help you better understand the attention you need to pay to revision so that your thinking comes across as clearly as it possibly can?" Yesenia included peer review in her response and best demonstrates that the online peer review process did, in fact, transfer to the revising of her own work, showing that she needed to closely read and analyze her own writing so that her readers could understand her thinking:

> *What I noticed when [revising my paper], when I got to see the comments [my peer] made and also when I myself even re-read my paper is that I saw many small errors and things that I would have liked to have changed. There was things even that the person whom marked my paper made no suggestions upon but I myself did not feel that I expressed myself how I would have liked to. I not only took note of what was said by the student whom graded my paper…but I also made some changes that I felt would have perhaps bettered my paper.*
>
> *What I feel that when revising my own paper I learned that even by me if I would have perhaps re-read the paper to myself before submitting it, I would have seen many of the small things that I did not noticed before…I now take into mind when writing a paper that I should really pay more attention to small details such as wording, because when things are not worded in a way that the reader can understand they might not get what I the writer was trying to point out. I saw that something's I wrote in my head made sense, but to someone else it most likely wouldn't. So detailing of how I word things really does play a role and I found that error to play a big part in my essay.*

Yesenia received a review that was a combination of the one Amadou gave to Vance and Manuel gave to Aramis, with extended answers to my three questions and nine specific comments in the

actual paper, some of which were praise. However, only two of those nine comments referred to surface-level issues, which means Yesenia was reflecting mostly about content-level changes. After revising her paper for this assignment, Yesenia understood that she needed to read and analyze her own work so that her reader wouldn't need to guess at her thoughts. Her reflection demonstrates that by analyzing her peer's comments about her paper, she was able to identify reading strategies she could then incorporate into future reading/writing assignments.

In the end, I learned that my students were very much like Pygmalion and Galatea: They entered my class believing that "revision" meant "editing," in that they thought they were supposed to "fix" all the surface-level errors instead of analyzing the content, development, and organization of their or their peer's paper. They learned to embrace confusion (Blau) and work through the frustration of analyzing their own work and the work of others. In other words, by the time they left my class, they had transformed into discerning readers and writers who began to value and believe in their abilities to perform complex academic tasks. As the story goes, Galatea never reverted back to a statue, and I believe that online peer review contributed to the transformation these students made in their identities as readers— and as learners. I am in no way implying that online peer review was the only contributor to their metamorphosis, but I am suggesting that there is a certain art to online peer review that helped form their identities as readers in a writing class, and that's a crucial step towards becoming more effective college-level writers.

Notes

[1] All my basic writing students are first-semester students who test directly into a developmental class that is one level below first-year composition. I do not teach L2 students, which is not to say I don't have any, but they don't identify as such.
[2] All student names in this article are pseudonyms, and student work is used with permission.
[3] Student answers have not been edited from the original.

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