PEER RESPONSE AND THE REVISION GAP

A Thesis

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PEER RESPONSE AND THE REVISION GAP

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Practitioners use peer response as a tool in the collaborative composition classroom for a variety of reasons. A key component of the peer response group is to teach students about revising and re-seeing their work through a varied audience. There are many different ways in which instructors implement peer response in their courses. One such method is to use teacher facilitator workshop scripts in order to encourage students to focus on the content and organization of a draft as opposed to lower order concerns such as grammar and mechanics. In this paper, I have studied and analyzed the teacher facilitated workshop method and the ways in which this type of tool influences students’ revision practices. I studied two different groups of 25 students over a period of two semesters in my first year composition course. I tape recorded conversations in the peer response groups, collected workshop scripts as well as the first and second drafts for three formal paper assignments. Students also completed a questionnaire at the end of the semester discussing how they felt the workshop scripts influenced their revision practices. While the majority of the students responded positively in the questionnaire to the useful practice of using workshop scripts to encourage revision, most of the students do not necessarily revise their work. When these students revise, they tend to focus on
lower order concerns as opposed to the suggestions of their peers pertaining to content and organization on the workshop scripts. As a result, I do not suggest discarding the peer response group as a way to teach revision nor do I suggest completely getting rid of the teacher-facilitated workshop script. I do suggest however that perhaps incorporating a variety of response types, both teacher-facilitated and student-directed, may more effectively encourage revision. I also encourage instructors to study their own methods and discuss these practices with students to understand whether or not the activities in the classroom are effectively teaching students to become better readers and writers of texts.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

I began the Master’s Program at California State University, Sacramento with a goal to teach composition at a junior college after graduation. A course I took as an undergraduate at California State University, Chico introduced me to composition theory. Since then I have been fascinated by the ways in which writing is theorized and how this communicatory act is put into pedagogical practice. The ability to read and write in a rhetorically sophisticated manner is one of the most vital skills students need to learn in order to succeed inside as well as outside of the university. The responsibilities of a writing teacher are great and so very important. Teaching writing not only helps students develop analytical skills but also leads to self discovery. As students become more self-aware, they can realize the different strategies they already use to communicate and adapt to the world around them. For this reason, I teach my students about the many discourse communities they belong to and the ways in which they can learn how to adapt to the academic discourse community. Understanding how language works can also help students think more meta-cognitively about the ways in which language influences culture, ideology and their experiences with the world.

My goal to teach at a community college relates directly to my own positive experience. When I began college, I had no idea which field I wanted to study and needed some guidance in my general education courses. The instructors at the junior college and the smaller class sizes helped me to discover my talents and explore my interests. When I initially decided to major in English, I thought I would teach high
school. However, as I spent time in the English high school classroom it appeared to be a chaotic mess of teaching literature and very little time was spent focusing on writing. It wasn’t until I took my first composition course in college that I decided to major in English, so I realized it wasn’t my high school experience but my college experience that influenced my decision. Therefore, it made sense to pursue a career in teaching at a junior college as opposed to high school.

As a graduate student, I had the opportunity for several semesters to teach first year composition and understand more about the ways in which students write. Most of the practices I used in my classroom were inspired by previous experiences that I had as an English student and Kenneth Bruffee’s article, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’” In this article Bruffee theorizes about writing as a socially constructed act and how English instructors need to be proactive about appropriately facilitating collaborative learning in the composition classroom as this type of learning is not only how knowledge and meaning are created inside the classroom but on the job as well.

And now, reflecting on my own thinking/writing process, I realize that collaboration is a vital component to the ways in which I learn about and view the world around me. For this reason, discussion as opposed to lecture is vital when teaching. I recall my own experiences as an undergraduate where I not only participated in class discussions but continued the conversation in class with my roommate at home. Our conversation extended to paper assignments as well. My roommate and I always discussed one another’s paper topics and then provided feedback during the revision
process. Her questions and comments helped me better understand my own argument and the ways in which I could re-see my work. I continue to consult and collaborate while I write, seeking feedback from anyone who is willing, whether it is my mom, spouse, classmate, a published author, or an instructor. Whether in the form of written or verbal communication, all of the feedback I receive from my social network of peers is a form of collaboration that ultimately influences my thinking/writing in one way or another. Since I can personally identify with Bruffee’s philosophy, I am an easy convert and worked to implement Bruffee’s philosophy into my own classroom. One of the ways in which instructors like me incorporate collaborative learning into the classroom is through peer response groups.

As a student, my own experience with peer response groups was negative. I remember feeling frustrated and confused as students left what seemed to me random comments on my rough drafts. These comments were far from helpful, often short, and unclear. The comments I provided were not any better either since I too did not know how to provide effective peer feedback. There was also no time allotted for discussion after these writing workshop sessions. Thus, I was left to decode some of the comments my peer’s made about my essay, positive or negative. In my own classroom I attempted to put Bruffee’s theory of collaborative learning to practice by implementing teacher facilitated peer response scripts. The language on these scripts closely resembled the language on the assignment prompt and the language on my rubric. By using similar words and phrases in all of the documents for a paper assignment, my goal was to better help students understand the more important components when writing and responding to
an academic essay such as structure, argument, and organization as opposed to grammar and mechanics. With these workshops scripts and several other group building activities, I felt that I had implemented Bruffee’s theories and created an environment that invited collaborative learning and student response.

When I organized and formed the peer response groups in my classroom, students met together on a regular basis. I worked to create a collaborative learning environment where each group member had the opportunity to frequently share their writing and learn from one another. These peer response groups not only allowed students to share writing with one another, but worked to provide the students with a larger audience than just the instructor who might read their work. Because these peer response groups were a vital part of my classroom pedagogy, I wanted to study their collaborative learning properties, dissect them and explore how these groups used their collaborative conversations to influence their written work.

The first semester I taught first year composition I started to study the practices in my own classroom. Ruth Ray describes this methodology as the teacher researcher in her article “Teacher-Researcher Point of View.” Ray states that the teacher researcher is one who finds that “knowledge and truth in education are not so much found through objective inquiry as socially constructed through collaboration among students, teachers, and researchers” (175). I can only improve my own teaching techniques by testing and analyzing these practices to gain a better sense of whether or not my philosophies for teaching writing are indeed working for me and my students.
The research for this thesis portfolio began with a paper I wrote for my English 220D course. One of the requirements for this paper was to write a literature review. A small portion of the literature review that I wrote for my English 220D essay is part of chapter two of my thesis portfolio. My review of the literature first examines the theoretical lens behind the collaborative learning classroom. I then discuss the ways in which instructors facilitate collaborative learning in their classroom by using peer response. I also explore how instructors use this mode of collaborative learning as a vital part of the writing process and that it is a tool that teachers use not only to promote collaborative learning but to also encourage revision. Exploring the literature not only from a theoretical framework but also analyzing how this theory is put into practice has helped me understand more about how Rhetoric and Composition theory and practice work to inform one another.

When I wrote my paper for the 220D course, I wanted to capture student’s collaborative conversation and analyze how this conversation influenced the changes they made to their drafts. I tape recorded student groups and collected the drafts and workshop scripts for textual analysis. Analyzing texts and student conversations all emerged in a specific classroom context. This type of research methodology is what Thomas N. Huckin describes in his essay “Context-Sensitive Text Analysis.” In this essay he discusses that the data one collects “accounts for as much of the context of situation as possible (Malinoski)” (89). Therefore, the manner in which I interpret my data does not account for all of the possible variables nor does the data I collect only exist
for one interpretation of findings. The process behind many of the classroom based and case studies in composition research use context-sensitive analysis as their methodology.

The short study that I conducted for my 220D course only spanned for about three weeks, I found words and phrases that students exchanged in their groups that were then used in their revised essays. This was fascinating to me and I thought that after broadening the scope of my data to include more groups and more essays over a longer period of time that I would find more instances of this collaborative type conversation. I thought I would be able to “prove” that there is a direct connection between collaborative conversation and students work. I thought I could trace or track this conversation and find it in the revised text. From this finding, I wanted to join with the many voices that support collaborative learning as opposed to the top-down mode lecture learning. I worked in the following two semesters to make my peer response groups more comfortable and committed to one another. The first semester I taught I did not have students work in the same groups the entire semester. But, since I wanted to study groups over a longer period of time, I thought it was necessary to have the same students work together the entire semester. I also thought that this would help them be more comfortable with sharing their writing with the same group of peers. Working in the same group for an entire semester might also help students trust one another more. While the group dynamic in the following two semesters did seem to make the students more accountable to one another, my expanded study transformed into something very different than what I originally planned. And, this I have learned is the nature of
research. It is important not to have preconceived ideas but let the data guide you in the appropriate direction.

As I studied more students and their writing, I think that either the information I found in my short three week analysis of my students was a major coincidence, or that the particular paper assignment I used played a large part in easily identifying similar words and phrases from group conversations and tracing these phrases in student’s drafts. Studying groups, their conversations, dynamics, etc. is complex and varies from day to day depending on student moods, attendance, personalities, etc. In my expanded study there were 12 groups with a total of 50 students and each group was different. From what seemed like mountains of data I collected, I had just as many different topics emerge. These topics ranged from gender dynamics in a group to how leadership roles emerge and how this power and authority influences group conversation, as well as the ways in which students revise. As I continued to analyze my data, the most glaring conflict was between what the students as a whole thought they did when they revised after peer response groups compared to what they actually did when they revised their drafts. The expanded two semester research project is chapter three in this thesis portfolio.

This research process was at times frustrating. As I followed what I thought might be an interesting thread in my data, I sometimes found nothing at the end. Struggling through this experience and not knowing where it might lead me, has helped me learn to trust more in my writing process. I have had mixed emotions as I have gone through this process. It has been exciting as I discover more about my students and their experiences in my classroom. It has also been discouraging and frustrating when some of
these strategies do not seem to be working the way I want. As I pursue publishing my research, my research study can help other instructors think more about the ways in which they incorporate peer response groups in their classrooms as well as analyze how their students utilize these peer response groups to revise their work.

While I will change some of my practices in implementing peer response groups, after analyzing the data in my project, my teaching philosophy is still the same. The issue here is not a flaw with the theory of collaborative learning but that there are so many different ways to implement and practice this type of learning. My experience with research in peer response is that it is ever changing and depends so much on the student dynamics from semester to semester. I have learned that my method of using teacher facilitated workshop scripts does not encourage students to revise in the ways that I would like. For the future, I am thinking about various ways to change my practices to direct students to respond to one another’s writing in a manner that encourages more substantial revision. This is the first time in my academic career that I have been given the opportunity to write about a topic that I chose, one that I am most interested in, and one that I feel will help me become a better teacher of writing. Besides working to get to know students through their writing, analyzing their practices closely through research is something I look forward to as I grow and develop as a composition instructor.
Collaborative Roots

Collaborative learning has continued to spark interest and create controversy in the field of composition ever since it first appeared on the list of topics to be discussed at the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1982 (Bruffee, 415). The origins of collaborative learning are debatable. Kenneth Bruffee in his groundbreaking article “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” dates collaborative learning back to a group of British educators in the 1950s (416). However, Anne Ruggles Gere in her book *Writing Groups: History, Theory, and Implications* argues that most literary societies use collaborative learning where groups of individuals work together to help one another improve their writing skills. She sites one of the earliest groups to participate in collaboration as The Spy Club which began at Harvard in 1719 (10). The origins of collaboration are important to this study in general. Dating collaborative practices back to the eighteenth century provides a rich history that gives the theory behind the collaborative classroom more merit.

Collaboration outside the University

Advocates for collaborative learning in the classroom such as Lunsford and Ede in their book *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing* observe and survey a variety of professionals including an architect in an engineering firm, a clinical psychologist, a chemist, a manager, and a research assistant, tracking the collaborative writing environment associated within their different fields. Trimbur and
Braun conduct a similar study entitled, “Laboratory Life and the Determination of Authorship” where the writers examine the manner in which scientific papers are published and the collaborative nature of “laboratory life.” Researcher Kitty Locker also explores the collaborative writing environments that occur outside the university amongst lawyers and social workers in her article entitled, “What Makes a Collaborative Writing Team Successful? A Case Study of Lawyers and Social Service Workers in a State Agency.” With a variety of occupations outside of the university environment that utilize collaborative writing and learning, creating opportunities for students to practice and participate in activities that mimic the experiences they will encounter after college to become better citizens and employees, further validates classroom collaboration. Thus, collaboration is not just a fad or “lazy teaching” as Lynn Smelser mentions in her dissertation entitled, *Interaction in the Collaborative Classroom*, but rather an important activity that will aid students in their future careers. However, as research about collaborative learning continues to be applied to the college composition classroom, it has met with some resistance.

**Conflict with Collaboration**

Collaborative learning or active learning, as Bruce Speck in his work *Facilitating Students’ Collaborative Writing* terms it, “generally comes under scrutiny when it comes face to face with the lecture method” (10). The majority if not all classroom activities across the college campus promote the traditional lecture method of instruction. Those that support the lecture method argue that lecturing, like collaboration, is active learning when the student attends class, takes notes, reflects on the subject matter, and asks
questions. Here the student interacts with the material (Speck, 10). However, according to J. Biggs author of “Enhancing Teaching through Constructive Alignment” the type of learning that takes place during the lecture is ultimately “passive” (353). Lecturing provides students with the opportunity only to listen. Verner and Dickinson analyze the amount of information that students retain while listening to lectures in their study entitled, “The Lecture: An Analysis and Review of Research.” The results of their study indicate that during the lecture style of teaching, retention rates are low (98). Researchers Bonwell and Eison, Stage, Muller, Kinzie, and Simmons all agree that the lecture method can become more effective when one applies the components of a collaborative learning structure. Furthermore, the lecture method does not give the student enough time to digest and reflect upon the presented information. Rather, the information is given to the pupil with little means of practice for application. Collaborative work requires students to generate knowledge and understand classroom material. It requires accountability, reflection, and communication. Students can learn and experience much more when they are actively participating in a collaborative learning environment.

The debate about the effectiveness of collaborative learning in the classroom is ongoing even among compositionists. Modern composition theorist David Bartholomae criticizes the idea of collaborative type activities or what he also terms “shared knowledge” in his essay, *Inventing the University*. Bartholomae states, “When I think of ‘knowledge,’ I think of it as situated in the discourse that constitutes ‘knowledge’ in a particular discourse community rather than as situated in mental ‘knowledge sites’” (633). Because students are in the process of learning to be part of the community of
academic discourse, they are not fully equipped to participate in this discourse community. Therefore, according to Bartholomae’s statement, the students must rely more on the instructor who is knowledgeable to lead and guide them as opposed to also utilizing the knowledge of their peers. However, Bruffee claims that peers are knowledgeable and that such knowledge, “is what together we agree it is, for the time being…Collaborative learning models this process” (427). Therefore, according to Bruffee, students are not the “blind leading the blind” (427) as knowledge fluctuates and can change depending on the participants and the environment. Contrary to Bartholomae’s definition, knowledge does not belong solely to the instructors, the already initiated members of the academic discourse community but rather to the entire classroom community. In other words, it takes both students and instructor to create the discourse and knowledge appropriate in the classroom. Therefore, creating knowledge results from environmental and social factors; it does not reside within the individual only but is based on sharing and understanding.

Other compositionists such as Greg Myers and John Trimbur also take issue with some of Bruffee’s ideas regarding the theoretical concepts of the collaborative learning environment. Specifically, Myers and Trimbur quarrel with Bruffee about how he discusses the term consensus. Myers in his article “Reality, Consensus, and Reform in the Rhetoric of Composition Teaching” argues that the “ideas of consensus and reality are part of the structure of ideology” and that with consensus comes the elimination of conflict. However, conflict must be “part of the system, and is necessary to change the system, then consensus, within the system as it is, must mean that some interests have
been suppressed or excluded” (156). In other words, collaborative groups can not reach consensus without also leaving out and thereby silencing the voices of others. Both Myers and Trimbur analyze the importance of dissensus when discussing Bruffee’s term consensus. Trimbur in his article “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning” cites several theorists including Thomas S. Johnson and Pedro Beade who interpret Bruffee’s theory behind consensus as just another term for “group think” or as a means to hide the practices of “a crazy, totalitarian state” (602). Consensus in such terms only continues to perpetuate the already established authority or systems of knowledge, it does not allow for differences to surface. Trimbur’s ideas of consensus therefore, continue to perpetuate a teacher-like authority in the classroom and as a result consensus in such terms runs counter to the idea of shared knowledge between instructor and student. However, in his article, Trimbur does not set out to destroy the overall theory behind collaborative learning and consensus, nor does he fully agree with Johnson or Beade, but rather he sets out to revise and expand the definition of consensus. He explains:

We will need to look at collaborative learning not merely as a process of consensus-making but more important as a process of identifying differences and locating these differences in relation to each other. The consensus that we ask students to reach in the collaborative classroom will be based not so much on collective agreements as on collective explanation of how people differ, where their differences come from, and whether they can live and work together with these differences (610).
The group of peers must not simply reach consensus by ignoring differences, but must feel comfortable discussing the multi-varied approaches in the group dynamic to understand how the dissimilarities operate in order to resolve how to work as a whole. One must welcome the term “abnormal discourse” that Bruffee borrows from Richard Rorty because it is through this abnormal discourse that students speak about differences and struggle to find meaning and exercise their own power and authority. Trimbur does not pit abnormal discourse against normal discourse, as if the two are binaries, as he claims Rorty does, but rather he moves to look at the two, not as in conflict with one another, but as part of the conversation of his broader definition of consensus. As students interact with their peers, using the lens of consensus and the need for dissensus as Myers and Trimbur discuss, one can theorize about the motivation behind whether or not students choose to revise their written work and how the influence of power and authority surfaces as a result of any revision.

As the theories of collaborative learning and its terms continue to evolve and incite dispute, there is also discussion as to what constitutes “real” collaboration or collaborative learning. DiPardo and Freedman in their article “Peer Response Groups in the Writing Classroom: Theoretic Foundations and New Directions” reference a study conducted by Freedman in 1987. In Freedman’s study she observes two peer response groups in ninth grade classrooms, concluding that small groups are not necessarily collaborative unless they are working to solve a single problem. Moreover, real collaboration occurs through a shared text or project (Dipardo, 120). Many researchers support Freedman’s narrow definition of collaboration or collaborative learning as
existing only through a group project or shared piece of writing. Thus, collaborative
learning is often studied and defined only when groups compose together. For example,
Carole McAllister writes *Collaboration and Composition: Effects of Group Structure on
Writing Classroom Dynamics* where she sets up a control group for students in one
classroom to create shared texts and then the other group composes individual texts to
measure the effect of collaboration on student writing. While McAllister claims that the
writing in both groups improves, she does not acknowledge that collaboration still may
have occurred, just in a different form, among those students that composed alone.

Another study by Linda Jean Trendell tests high school students in writing groups
compared to students that compose individually to measure their outcome on a writing
exam given in Texas. Whether in writing groups or composing alone, students all scored
the same on the test. Again, however even if undocumented, collaboration may still have
occurred among the students who composed alone. While McAllister and Trendell do
focus on collaboration in writing groups, they do not acknowledge that collaboration can
and does occur even without a group authored work. The collaborative learning
environment is more complex than a group of students working on a project together.

Charlotte Thralls in her essay *Bakhtin, Collaborative Partners, and Published
Discourse* argues that according to Bakhtin’s theory of language and collaboration,
“collaboration is present in both individually and jointly authored texts” (65).

Summarizing Bakhtin’s theory Thralls claims:

All communication is an active process involving collaborative
partnerships, and that collaborative partners are linked through a chain of
responsive reaction. Taken together, these theoretical premises can help clarify the centrality of collaboration in all writing activity (65).

Moreover, writing is a form of communication that involves a web of intermingled thoughts and ideas where it is difficult to identify an initial source. Vygotsky, LeFevre, Speck, and Bruffee all support Bakhtin’s premise that while most of the time one writes alone, the ideas, thoughts, phrase, etc. are intrinsically influenced by social environments. Various members of any given community contribute, mold, and shape a piece of writing. Therefore, collaboration occurs not only in groups where students share a text, but also when individuals, who are inevitably influenced by their social environments, compose alone.

Peer Response and Process Writing

One of the most popular methods for incorporating collaborative learning into the writing classroom is through peer response groups, specifically groups that are formed in order to respond to another student’s writing. Peer response groups are not new to the classroom. Sterling Andrus Leonard’s text-book *English Composition as a Social Problem* surfaced in 1917 where he encourages instructors to divide elementary-age children into smaller groups to respond and discuss one another’s writing. Leonard suggests two methods for developing the groups. One method he terms as, “unstudied and free conversation” (37) where the students are allowed to discuss and talk about the topic without any structure. The second method is through “prepared compositions...to be judged by the class as a cooperative group of keen but good-spirited critics” (37). Leonard continues to argue that the social experience a child has when sharing their
writing with a group of peers has a profound impact on their overall writing experience (59). Leonard’s text was published over 90 years ago and yet the peer response group continues to create debate as far as whether or not these types of groups adequately and effectively serve the student writer.

While peer response groups have long been part of the writing classroom, according to DiPardo and Freedman who write about the theoretical foundations for the response group claim that the “new” (123) idea behind the group is that it is now incorporated into the composition classroom as being part of the writing process. DiPardo and Freedman reference Maxine Hairston’s article entitled “The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing” as one of the most insightful articles which explain the shift from product to process based writing. Hairston cites Kuhn’s scientific paradigm shift applying it to the movement in the field of composition. Hairston identifies the mid 1950’s as the time when the theory of product to process based writing began. Most notable is the publication of Noam Chomsky’s *Syntactic Structures* in 1957. Hairston claims, Chomsky’s theory of “transformational grammar, with its insistent look at the rules by which language is generated, caused a new focus on the process by which language comes into being” (80). Practitioners that taught writing as a set of grammar rules were called upon to reassess their teaching philosophy. While these grammar rules do govern language, simply knowing these rules does not necessarily create better writers. Once researchers and practitioners were exposed to the idea that writing is much more than a set of rules to be followed, the opportunity for change, for something new, began to take shape.
Exploring the shift from product to process based writing, authors such as Perl, Berthoff, and Sommers examine the cognitive features of the composing process. Perl in her article, “Understanding Composing” finds that writing is a recursive process and that more experienced writers trust what she terms a “felt sense” when they write (101). Berthoff refers to the activity of the mind while writing as the “intelligent eye” (107). Other writers like Nancy Sommers in her article, “Revision strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers,” observes and analyzes how student writers revise compared to that of more experienced writers. This move to study the composing process shifted attention from sole analysis of a finished product to interest in how the product develops.

Most modern compositionists widely accept process centered writing as a vital part of the composition classroom. The writing process is often taught as a series of recursive steps to first year composition students and peer response or peer review is one of these important features of process writing. In Andrea Lunsford’s manual *Everyday Writer* she suggests having, “friends, classmates, or colleagues” (84) view the paper during revision. In Hephzibah Roskelly and David Jolliffe’s rhetoric *Everyday Use*, these authors label the peer response portion of the writing process as *Consulting*, defining it as: “the activity of seeking the help of a “fresh” reader and asking him or her to tell you what is good about a draft, what is questionable, and what definitely needs change and improvement” (98). All of the features mentioned by Roskelly and Jolliffe pertain to the purpose behind the peer response group. Other authors such as Bruce Speck create models of the writing process which include phrases such as: “creating a draft for
editorial advice from your supervisor, teacher, or friend” and also “sending revised drafts to editors and peer reviewers” (4). The suggestions from all of the above authors involve seeking feedback from another individual.

The exchange that occurs whether verbal or written constitutes a form of collaboration within the response. Such responders give the author of any text a larger audience and a variety of options to consider. It is important to note that it does not negate the absence of collaboration if the author of the text chooses not to heed the advice of the reader. Indeed opportunities and options are still presented to the author in the exchange.

Conflict with Peer Response

As peer response becomes part of the widely accepted writing process, there is concern amongst practitioners about properly incorporating the peer response group into the composition classroom. According to a survey conducted by Sarah Freedman in 1987, ideas about the efficacy of peer response groups amongst instructors are inconsistent. Some instructors think peer response groups are helpful to students whereas others do not (157). Instructors are hesitant to give up the control of their classroom for any lengthy period of time to student centered discussions. Often student led discussions can get off topic resulting in socializing and mere chit chat as opposed to focusing on the work of the classroom. To counter this dilemma some teachers have come up with ways to more strictly organize and act as facilitator during peer response activities. Instructors such as Speck, Wolfe, and Spear have created guide books to give teachers a variety of tools to educate their students about how to more effectively work in peer response
groups. Karen Spear’s book *Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes* includes methods, exercises, and activities for composition instructors to use in their classroom in order to help their students become more effective readers and responders to writing. Instructors such as Gloria Neubert and Sally McNelis write, “Peer Response: Teaching Specific Revision Suggestions,” in which the authors discuss their method called PQP where they generate three general questions for students to respond to as they read their peer’s work. Richard Straub’s article entitled “Responding - Really Responding - to Other Student’s Writing” gives students tips and information about how to respond to one another. This article is complete with specific questions for the reader to ask the author as well as a sample essay for students to practice response.

However, research shows that teacher facilitated peer feedback sheets can also create more generic responses to a text and not necessarily authentic student driven response. Sarah Freedman’s study entitled “*Peer Response in Two Ninth-Grade Classrooms*” finds that using teacher created check lists for papers results in less student talk. Moreover, the results indicate that the students are more concerned about completing the worksheet given by the teacher than they are about being able to accomplish the task of providing a more diverse and varied audience for the student writer (29-30). Mark Hall author of “The Politics of Peer Response” expresses similar concerns with teacher facilitated peer review sheets. In the article, Hall analyzes the peer response sheet that he creates for his first year composition class. He highlights both the positive and negative aspects of this practice. On one hand, the response sheet allows students to focus their comments on larger concerns such as content and organization as
opposed to grammar and mechanics. However, Hall complains that the sheets do not promote students to engage in any dialogue. Like Freedman, Hall concludes that students are more concerned about completing the worksheet as opposed to verbally sharing their ideas for revision with classmates. Hall also claims that one of his goals for peer response is to “step back, to construct students in the roles of both teachers and learners” (4). However, Hall finds that he is “very much present – perhaps too much present – in [the] worksheet” (4). Therefore, the idea that peer response works to share the authority in the classroom “may be undermined” (4). In order to attempt to correct too much teacher authority, Hall suggests incorporating post-process theory of constant critical reflection both for students and for teachers. In other words, teachers as well as students need to step back from peer response and evaluate the effectiveness of every response activity. Hall also suggests along with Lisa Cahill author of “Reflection on Peer-Review Practices” that students should work to compose their own response questions. Both of these authors call for more instructors to examine, study, and make sense of their methods, theories, and practices behind implementing peer response in their classroom so that it does not continue to become an unquestionably positive practice on all levels.

While collaboration becomes part of a piece of writing with or without structured peer response groups, practitioners have also used groups of peers to teach students about rhetorical awareness and the importance of multiple view points. However, research by Carrie Leverenz author of “Peer Response in the Multicultural Composition Classroom: Dissensus- A Dream (Deferred)” argues that multiple view points are not necessarily part of small group workshops. Rather her findings indicate that the ideas behind
collaborative learning and the theory of consensus still continue to promote the power authority of the institution and ultimately silence multiple voices, especially minority voices, as opposed to allowing students the opportunity to share and discuss differences (22). The results of her study run counter to one of the many appealing theories behind collaborative learning. However, Leverenz does not suggest that practitioners completely throw out peer response and small group work. On the other hand, she encourages instructors to continue to be vigilant in studying and observing how peer-response groups function. She advocates for practitioners to constantly work to teach students how to accept dissensus, allowing for students to embrace the idea behind the possibility of multiple ways of thinking and interpreting texts.

Regardless of the method for generating peer response, working in such peer response groups gives students the opportunity to collaborate and share their writing with others. Practitioners can organize, formulate, facilitate, or take a completely hands off approach to peer response groups and the students can still have the opportunity to collaborate. While there may be positive as well as negative results, asking students to respond to one another with worksheets created by the teacher can ultimately make it easier for instructors to assess and better understand collaborative work and how group members function in the peer response environment. If instructors want to rise to the challenge set forth by Cahill, Hall, and Leverenz to observe and study the dynamics of the response groups in their classroom, an organized format or worksheet can allow the teacher-researcher to study the inner workings of group collaboration in more depth.
Collaboration and Response

A recent study by Lynne Smelser entitled the *Interaction in the Collaborative Composition Classroom* begins with a question similar to that of my own study: “Are student writers’ texts affected by collaborative activities?” (20). However, Smelser’s findings lead her to study the dynamics of collaborative groups, namely, power structure and gender issues, as opposed to focusing on the initial question dealing with student texts. Smelser does conclude that collaborative activities do affect student texts but her evidence is not directly linked to what can be traceable in the students’ essays (103). These findings are based on student interviews about collaborative work and how these students feel about their writing. Smelser’s study deals directly with student to student groups and dynamics however, she does not attempt to identify where the collaborative learning occurs, nor does she measure the effects of such collaboration as it pertains to specific student texts. Like Smelser, Carrie Leverenz also studies closely group dynamics in response groups. In her articles “Peer Response in the Multicultural Composition Classroom: Dissensus – A Dream (Deferred)” and “Collaboration, Race, and the Rhetoric of Evasion,” Leverenz discusses student to student response as she analyzes how it effects power distribution within the small groups based specifically on racial differences.

Anne Ruggles Gere and Ralph Stevens also study small group interactions in their article, “The Language of Writing Groups: How Oral Response Shapes Revision.” These authors study a variety of students from several grade levels and classify the type of responses they give to one another. This study is very informative as it gives various
labels to the different types of student to student responses. Gere and Stevens conclude on several occasions that the oral feedback sessions do force students to think more carefully about their writing and in many cases improve their work. The authors also claim that they can not “prove” that the exact comments made by the writing group caused the writer to alter their drafts (100). This study then compares and classifies student comments to teacher comments.

A more recent study by Knoblauch and Brannon also recognizes the importance of student response but analyzes data as it can relate to more effective teacher commentary and feedback, not necessarily student to student collaboration and how this type of learning influences student texts. This essay compares “directive” comments compared to “facilitative” comments (306). The authors use examples of student responses to show how comments can be facilitative, working to raise “the writer’s awareness of opportunities for deeper understanding” (325). Knoblauch and Brannon advocate for the effective use of writing workshops on student texts and revision. In the data that these researchers collect, there are certainly traces of collaborative activity as it pertains to student texts however; this is not the central focus for the research in this essay. By studying the conversation and peer response sheets in conjunction with student drafts, my study not only grapples with the varying factors involved in group dynamics but also with how peer response may influence or affect student drafts during the writing process.

The current trend in response research as it pertains to student texts focuses on teacher commentary and feedback as it relates to revision, not necessarily student
response. For example, Sommers, Deidrich, Freedman, and Schneider focus on effective methods for instructors to respond to student texts. Some studies incorporate student response to teacher’s comments such as O’Neill and Fife, Ziv, and Gee. While there are some studies that do grapple with student to student response, the research in this area is minimal. Responding to student writing whether one is a teacher or a student is a form of collaboration, but there is little research done to analyze and connect collaboration and response as it relates to peer feedback. If one wants to know more about collaboration in what Peter Elbow calls “The Teacherless Writing Class” then researchers need to find out more about how students utilize student feedback. My research will attempt to close some of the gap between collaboration, student to student response, and the revised draft.
Chapter 3
RESULTS

Peer Response and the Revision Gap

Over thirty years ago Nancy Sommers published, “Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adult Writers.” In this article, Sommers examined the different ways student writers spoke about and understood the revision process compared to the revision methods and practices of more professional writers. She discovered that more experienced writers tended to view the revision process as recursive where writing led to discovery and thought. On the other hand, student writers followed a more linear model; revision consisted of finding the right word or phrase to use. Like Sommers, I too studied student writers and their revision strategies. While my research methods differ, the implications that students’ revision practices are linear remains unchanged.

When Sommers conducted her study over thirty years ago, she examined the ways in which students defined revision. In this paper, I discuss not only the language that student writers use when they converse about revision, but I also compare this language to what the students actually do to revise their drafts. I found that compared to Sommers study, students speak differently about the revision process in that they have developed a more sophisticated vocabulary; however, the gap between the work that students actually do to revise compared to the ways in which they converse about revision is broad. By recognizing that there is this gap, I suggest that practitioners need to be diligent in continuing to examine and develop their methods for teaching revision. Above all, just because students have adapted to the discourse of revision, does not necessarily mean that
this language describes practice. In this paper, I study the effects that peer response has on the revision practices of the students in first year composition class. I also track what these students do when they revise their drafts based on peer feedback. I seek to address the following: How do peer response groups influence revision? What do students do when they revise their essays after peer feedback? In the following sections, I briefly review the literature about revision and discuss peer response as a popular tool that instructors use to teach revision. Next, I discuss my motivations behind the ways in which I set up my classroom to teach revision with peer response and my methods for collecting and organizing my data. I end by discussing the results of this context-sensitive study and suggest what these findings imply about revision and peer response.

Peer Response: The Debate

Sommer’s article sparked an interest in revision as a vital part of writing processes. Thirty years later the term revision has become a widely used concept in writing courses. Instructors implement a variety of techniques to encourage revision. One of the most popular methods for teaching revision is through peer-response groups. In theory, peer-response groups can help students gain a better sense of audience awareness. Moreover, when students respond to one another’s written work they can re-see their writing from different perspectives, providing options for revision. However, there is concern among practitioners about the usefulness of the peer response group in the composition classroom. According to Sarah Freedman, ideas about the efficacy of peer response groups among instructors are inconsistent. Some instructors think peer response groups are helpful to students whereas others do not (157). Instructors are
hesitant to give up the control of their classroom for any lengthy period of time to
student-centered discussions. Often student led discussions can get off topic, resulting in
socializing and mere chit chat as opposed to focusing on the work of the classroom. In
addition to off topic chatter, students and teachers complain that the feedback from peer
responders is too general and vague. Such comments from peers do not necessarily help
the author of the essay re-see or revise their work.

To counter the dilemma of too much chatter or vague responses, some teachers
have come up with ways to more strictly organize and act as facilitator during peer
response activities. Many instructors create worksheets, guidelines, or checklists for their
students to complete during peer response work. Instructors such as Bruce Speck, Joanna
Wolfe, and Karen Spear have created guide books to give teachers a variety of tools to
educate their students about how to more effectively work in peer response groups.
Spear’s book *Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes* includes
methods, exercises, sample worksheets, and activities for composition instructors to use
in their classroom in order to help their students become more effective readers and
responders to writing. Instructors Gloria Neubert and Sally McNelis discuss their method
called “PQP – Praise – Question – Polish” where they generate three general questions
for students to respond to as they read their peer’s work. Richard Straub gives students
tips about how to respond to one another. His article is complete with specific questions
for the reader to ask the author as well as a sample essay for students to practice response.

However, research shows that these types of teacher- facilitated peer feedback
sheets can also create more generic responses to a text and not necessarily authentic
student-driven response. Sarah Freedman finds that using teacher created check lists for papers results in less student talk. Moreover, the results indicate that the students are more concerned about completing the worksheet given by the teacher than they are about being able to accomplish the task of providing a more diverse and varied audience for the student writer (29-30). Mark Hall expresses similar concerns with teacher facilitated peer review sheets. In his article, Hall analyzes the peer response sheet that he creates for his first year composition class. He highlights both the positive and negative aspects of this practice. On one hand, the response sheet allows students to focus their feedback on larger concerns such as content and organization as opposed to grammar and mechanics. However, Hall complains that the sheets do not promote students to engage in any dialogue. Like Freedman, Hall concludes that students are more concerned about completing the worksheet as opposed to verbally sharing their ideas for revision with classmates. Hall also suggests along with Lisa Cahill that students should work to compose their own response questions. Both of these authors call for more instructors to examine, study, and make sense of their methods, theories, and practices behind implementing peer response in their classroom so that it does not continue to become an unquestionably positive practice on all levels.

Peer Response and Revision

Several studies focus on peer response as it may encourage revision. Anne Ruggles Gere and Ralph Stevens examine small group interactions and the possible influences that groups may have as students revise. These authors study a variety of students from several grade levels and classify the types of responses they give to one
another. Their article assigns categories to the different types of student-to-student responses, specifically examining verbal or oral communication. Gere and Stevens conclude on several occasions that the oral feedback sessions force students to think more carefully about their writing and in many cases improve their work (100).

Another study by Knoblauch and Brannon also recognizes the importance of student response and revision. This essay compares “directive” comments compared to “facilitative” comments (306). The authors use examples of student responses to show how student comments can be facilitative, working to raise “the writer’s awareness of opportunities for deeper understanding” (325). Knoblauch and Brannon advocate for the effective use of writing workshops on student texts and revision. Most of the literature on peer response and revision discusses pedagogical methods and strategies to generate more effective peer response in the classroom without addressing whether or not these types of strategies directly influence revision. In this paper, I work to make connections between peer response and revision using teacher-facilitated workshop scripts in my own first year composition classroom. In this classroom-based research, I have studied one approach in trying to create more effective peer response and examined this method and the ways in which it may encourage students to revise.

Context and Data

In order to better understand how students revise their essays and the manner in which they discuss this revision as it relates to peer-response groups, I collected data throughout the writing process for three formal writing assignments in two sections of my first year composition course. I collected the data for this project over a period of two
Each semester had 25 students enrolled and these students participated voluntarily. The data included tape-recorded brainstorming sessions, recorded peer response sessions, written peer response, revision plans, revised drafts for all three formal paper assignments, and a questionnaire about revision and peer response that the students completed at the end of each semester.

I have approximately eight hours of tape that comprise of both the brainstorming and peer response feedback sessions for all three formal paper assignments. I have also collected approximately 125 essays complete with brainstorming sheets, first drafts, writing workshop scripts, second drafts, and revision plans. I also received a total of 39questionnaires where students gave me feedback about their experience with peer response in the classroom and how they felt it influenced their revision process. I used the information collected from the first and second drafts as well as the peer workshop scripts to categorize student responses and quantify revision strategies. The information from the 39 questionnaires gave some commentary on how the students in my class viewed the practice of peer response, workshop scripts, and how this may have influenced their revision practices.

Using teacher-facilitated workshop scripts made the feedback and the interaction between the students more accessible. For this reason, I chose to use workshop scripts that I created specifically for each paper assignment so that I could more effectively organize and code students’ responses. The language on the workshop scripts closely resembled the language on the assignment prompt thereby encouraging students to focus their responses on specific parts of the paper. The script also gave students a space to
discuss issues in the draft that the workshop sheet may not have covered so the student had the opportunity to generate some of their own responses as well. For example, one of the writing assignments asked the student to analyze her writing process. One of the questions on the workshop script for this particular paper stated, “Describe the author’s writing process” with a follow up for possible explanation: “If the writing process is unclear, offer some suggestions.” A more open-ended question on the workshop script, which gave students the liberty to discuss their own concerns, asked the reader to, “Offer one more suggestion each of praise and critique.” All of the information I collected emerged in a specific classroom context. Teacher research allows for more context sensitivity. As I am intimately familiar with the classroom and the students in this environment, I can provide more in depth analysis and insight as an active member of the classroom community. Thus, my research closely resembles what Thomas N. Huckin describes as “context-sensitive” analysis where the date I collected “accounts for as much of the context of situation as possible (Malinowski)” (89). The manner in which I have interpreted the data does not account for all possible variables nor does the data I collected only exist for one interpretation of findings.

Forming Peer Response Groups

In both of these courses, I formed groups that worked together the entire semester. Ultimately, my goal here was to create a balanced group dynamic so that conversation and communication varied. When forming these groups, my goal was also to diversify to the extent that there were an equal number of males and females working together. I wanted to try to avoid the possibilities that one group member may intimidate or be
intimidated by other group members. I worked to create a group dynamic where all input was encouraged and valuable. By having the students work with the same group, my goal was to give them the opportunity to become more comfortable with one another and grow together as they shared their writing.

I based my decision on two major factors: student participation and a few informal writing assignments. In the first few weeks, students had the opportunity to select their own groups. As students worked in their own selected group, I monitored how they interacted. Making note of which students participated in larger class discussions as well as small group interaction, I recorded what I observed to be differing personality types of those who may have appeared to be more introverted, quiet, or shy and those personalities that were perhaps more extraverted in that they were willing to freely participate and communicate their thoughts and ideas with others. Scrutinizing the group interaction and organizing the students based on what I observed as introverted compared to extroverted personality types was based on what Carole Clark Papper suggests from her own research findings. She claims that the “balance of extraversion and introversion personality types contributes significantly to successful group development (246). Overall, participation was one of the most crucial factors when I decided which students I thought would work well together. For example, if someone was more vocal and willing to participate in class, I placed them with someone who was less talkative and quiet. I felt this created a better balance in the groups so that all of the individuals willing to participate were not placed in the same group, while a few groups consisted of only shy and quiet students.
Along with vocal interaction and participation, I also took into consideration some of the written work that I collected from the students during these first few weeks. With these writing samples, I worked to place writers that may have struggled with those that considered themselves stronger writers. Determining stronger writers, as well as identifying those students that may struggle, was based both on my assessment of several informal writing samples as well as the student’s own confidence or perception of themselves as writers. In these informal assignments, students were asked to share their past experiences with writing, how they felt they were successful, and where they felt they struggled.

Many of the activities in class pre and post group were geared to help students communicate effectively with one another, thereby promoting a more comfortable environment to motivate effective student to student response and encourage a more fulsome revision process. Each group created a contract that discussed group expectations and goals for peer response. We also discussed methods for dealing with dissensus, and practiced effective ways to respond to peer’s drafts.

Categorizing and Quantifying Revision Practices

There were five topics relating to peer-response for the students to address on the questionnaire (See Appendix A). These questions were open-ended and asked the students to expand on their responses. Many of the answers to these questions were very similar and so I kept a running tally of the answers that were comparable and then noted those that were different. I then quantified the data in the questionnaires so that I could draw some conclusions from the various student responses. The responses from the
questionnaires led me to compare the changes made in first drafts to second drafts. I then investigated students’ revision practices after peer workshops from their first draft to their second draft.

I compared all first drafts to second drafts and noted the changes for all 125 essays. Five different categories emerged: minor changes, major changes, adding to the end of the essay, no real change, and re-writing the essay. The first category covered minor changes. I considered minor changes to be adding a few sentences to a paragraph, changing some words, or altering punctuation. These changes were more linear and did not necessarily alter the content or the organization of the draft. The second category covered major changes. These changes consisted of rearranging paragraphs, adding whole paragraphs, or adding multiple sentences to a paragraph. Major changes altered the content of the essay overall and dealt with reorganizing the paper. The next category addressed any changes that may have been made from a first draft to a second draft if the student added to the end of the essay. The fourth category describes those papers with no real changes made to the draft. And, the final category illustrates those students that more or less rewrote their essay from the first draft to the second draft. Classifying the revision practices helped me to see as a whole what the two classes were doing to revise their essays after peer workshops.

Response Influences Revision: Student Perspectives

On the questionnaire the students were asked to connect the activities in the workshop to their own revision practices and strategies. One of the questions asked: What connections do you see between the peer workshops and the work you did to revise
your essays? I found that there were generally three responses to this question. The first and most popular response among the 39 students was that there was a direct correlation between the work that the students did in the peer workshops to the revisions they made with their drafts. The second type of response was that connections with revision and workshopping were minimal. The third type of response was that the students found no connection with peer workshops and the work they did to revise their essays.

31 out of 39 students stated that the peer workshops influenced the revision process. Four out of the 39 students said that the workshops did not directly correlate with their revision process; that they hardly revised their essays based on their peer’s comments. These four students said that they either sought outside help from a parent or that they simply decided what changes to make to their drafts based on their own ideas. Therefore, the students felt that there were some changes made to drafts after peer workshopping, but most of these students claimed that their revision did not occur based on the activity in the peer workshops. The last group of four said that they did not revise at all. These four students admitted to only editing typos and small grammatical errors after the workshops regardless of anything their peers’ or anyone else may have said about their drafts. Based on the results to this question alone, 80% of the class claims that the peer workshops helped them revise their drafts. Therefore, one would expect to find significant changes being made from first to second drafts. More responses on the questionnaire point to peer workshopping as an overwhelmingly positive practice, especially as it influences revision.
In responding to the question: What did you find useful about the peer workshops? The most common answer was that peer workshops helped the students revise. Out of the 39 questionnaires, 19 students said that peer workshops were useful in providing relevant comments that students could take into consideration when revising. Another very popular comment to this question among the students was that peer workshops gave them a variety of response and more of a sense of audience awareness. Other responses included that working with the same group of peers built trust and created friendships. A few writers said that working in groups helped to answer some confusion about the assignments. Some also said that talking aloud was useful and that this practice helped to develop communication and feedback skills.

The language in this question encourages students to analyze the usefulness of peer workshops; therefore, it is not surprising that most of the students responded positively. Yet, the question was open-ended enough to invite some students to disagree. Three students said they found nothing useful about the peer workshops. Despite these very few negative reactions, the majority of the students articulate and identify a variety of useful features of a peer workshop. With only three out of 39 claiming that they did not find peer workshops useful, these results are encouraging in that it appears students are internalizing why workshopping is a vital part of the writing process. The language that the students use to describe the usefulness of the peer workshop mirrors the reasons why instructors use this method in their classroom. All but three students expressed that peer workshopping has many positive practices, including that it provides students with multiple viewpoints, a sense of audience awareness, and aids in the revision process.
Another question with overwhelmingly positive results related specifically to the ways in which I organized the peer workshops with teacher-facilitated workshop scripts. I formatted the question so that the students could respond with a simple yes or no and then gave them the opportunity to explain their answer. The question read as follows: Do you find teacher-facilitated peer workshop sheets helpful? Why or why not? While there were multiple explanations to support this answer, the majority of the responses were positive (See Figure 4.1).

![Figure 4.1](image)

**Figure 4.1 Do you find teacher-facilitated peer workshops sheets helpful?**

26 out of the 39 answered in the affirmative, yes, that the teacher-facilitated workshop sheets were helpful to them. Nine students replied that the worksheets were somewhat helpful, stating that they were useful because the questions were specific to the paper assignment. These specific questions allowed them to look at their paper differently; however, the worksheets also were a hindrance in that some peers did not put much effort into giving quality responses. These students stated that they would rather have their peers write directly on their paper as opposed to a workshop script. Four students said
that the teacher facilitated workshop sheets were not helpful. These students complained
that the questions on the sheets were too specific, too repetitive and that the scripts just
seemed like tools for the teacher to use to evaluate the writer and did not really help with
revising. While I did use these scripts to give credit to the responder for their efforts in
the writing process, I did not use these scripts to evaluate the author of the essay.
Perhaps implementing a variety of peer response methods or allowing the writer to
compose some of her own questions for the workshop as Lisa Cahill suggests will
address the issue of students seeing the workshop script solely as a method for instructor
evaluation.

While a small percentage of the students did not find that the collaborative
learning environment helped them to revise their drafts, the majority of the students
responded positively to their experience with peer response and workshop scripts.
Furthermore, students pointed to revision as one of the most crucial features of peer
response. However, there is a gap between what the students said they did to revise,
compared to the work that they actually did during the revision process.

Roughly 80% of the students over a period of two semesters said that peer
response and teacher facilitated workshops scripts helped them revise their drafts. This
figure is relatively large when compared to the changes that the students made between
first and second drafts. Several students stated that the teacher-facilitated workshops
scripts and their peer’s feedback gave them a better idea of how to revise their essay as a
whole as opposed to just fixing grammatical errors. One student said that the workshops
helped her to “think about content and structure.” Another student responded that the
workshop sheets “act(ed) as a reference as I revised. The outside perspectives allowed me to not only write for me, but learn how to effectively communicate with other people.” The manner in which these students describe their revision processes and the positive attributes of the peer response group point to more major and holistic revision practices. These students’ language is certainly more sophisticated compared to how students spoke about revision in Sommers’ article. In many of the responses the students articulate that revision is not merely editing or correcting errors in a draft but rather revising is a process where one must look at the essay as a whole. However, most of the changes that these students made in their second drafts were minor, more grammatical, and linear compared to what they discuss in their responses on the questionnaire.

Had I only examined the questionnaire, without also analyzing and tracking any changes made to first and second drafts, I may have thought differently about how teacher-facilitated workshop scripts function in peer response groups and the ways in which they help students revise their essays. The results here are overwhelmingly in favor of teacher-facilitated workshop scripts encouraging revision strategies; however, looking at the student drafts conveys an alternative message and broadens my scope in that I am more cautious about how I interpret student feedback and evaluations.

Comparing First to Second Drafts

After analyzing the questionnaire results, I wanted to get a general idea as to what the students actually did to revise after the peer workshops. While a few students admitted to not revising based on their peers’ comments, most of these students attributed peer feedback as a vital part of their revision process. Therefore, I compared changes
that students made in their second draft to their first. Some drafts fit into more than one category. For example, a student may have made minor changes to their draft but also may have added to the end of their essay as well. The results are found below in Figure 4.2.

![Changes From First to Second Draft](image)

**Figure 4.2 Changes made from first to second drafts**

Out of 125 essays 26 % made no real change. Overall, these drafts were exactly the same from their first draft to their second draft despite peers’ comments. There were many students that added to the end of their essays, about 44%. Most of these students did not bring in a complete draft during the workshop and so the differences between their first and their second draft were mostly because they added to the end of their essay. Some of the students that made no real change may have also added to the end of their draft. 55% of the students made minor revisions. These minor revisions consisted of changing a word, phrase, or even adding a sentence or two to a paragraph. Overall, the ideas and the organization of the drafts in this category remained the same. 14% of the
students made major changes to their drafts. These major changes consisted mostly of whole paragraph modifications and reorganization. Papers in this category clarified ideas and restructured some of their points by deleting and or adding whole paragraphs. Students may also have added multiple sentences into the body of a paragraph to fit into this category. Major changes here deal most specifically with revising paragraphs and reorganizing the essay. Finally, 3% of the students rewrote their essays after their peer workshops. These students either changed the topic of their essay or made significant revisions in that their essay may have had the same topic but most of the paragraphs were reorganized and rewritten.

With 55% of the students making only minor changes, this figure points to the idea that more than half of the class’ revision process is linear. Despite a more sophisticated vocabulary when describing their process, this group of students continues to be fixated on grammar and word choice. Moreover, nearly half of these students simply added to the end of their essay. In other words, their revision practices consist of merely finishing the assignment as opposed to reorganizing or restructuring their essays. It seems here that the practice of peer response may help students start their essays earlier and could provide some of these students with additional ideas and commentary to finish their assignment. Indeed this is a positive aspect of peer workshopping, but it is not revising. Rather, peer workshopping in this manner acts a tool to help students possibly overcome writer’s block. Not coming in with a complete draft, so one can simply add to the end of an essay, and call it revision, could also point to an overall attitude about peer response.
As I listened to the comments peers made during these peer workshop sessions, many of those students that did not bring in complete drafts would dismiss comments made by their peers, arguing that they were not finished with their draft. In turn, peers would always introduce any of their responses with, “I know you are not finished with your essay but…” This type of interaction diminishes the credibility of the responder, since the writer could always come back with an, “I’m not finished” argument.

Furthermore, the majority of the students who added to the end of their essay made only minor changes or no changes despite suggestions from their peers to make more major changes. Based on the results from the questionnaire, one might expect the results on the drafts to be different where the majority of the students either rewrote their essay or made major changes. The ways I was able to code these drafts to track the majority of these changes further suggests that these students’ revision practices remain linear.

Revision Plans

Another point I want to discuss is the gap in the revision plan compared to the changes the students made in their second drafts. In many revision plans students acknowledge that their peers helped them to see that they needed to make substantial changes. However, these changes were not made. Peers wrote on workshop scripts that they could not find an argument or vital point in the essay. In other papers, students commented that the essay needed more analysis or detail. Comments such as this would suggest that a student change their paper considerably; however, when many of these students revised their essays, they either changed a few sentences or simply added to the end of their essay without addressing the concerns of their peers. For example, in one
revision plan the student acknowledges that a peer told him that he “didn’t support his
claim well.” A comment such as this would suggest that the author of the text revise not
only the claim but the support in the body paragraphs. However, the only changes the
author makes to his essay are a few additional sentences in the introductory paragraph.

In another essay, several students tell the author that she doesn’t have a claim. In
the revision plan the author states, “I revised my essay by adding a claim.” The comment
suggests that the author feels that a claim is something that she can just insert and that it
does not affect the whole of the draft. While the author of this essay recognizes or rather
regurgitates what her peers have told her to do, she does not apply this advice as she
revises. Instead, the author does not make any changes to the portion of the draft read by
her peers. She simply adds to the end of her essay.

Similarly, another student is questioned about her claim. Peer responders ask: Is
this your claim? They also make comments such as, “I think that the claim is not quite
clear” and “wasn’t quite sure of what the claim was.” The author identifies these remarks
in her revision plan when she states, “The comments and suggestions that my peers
suggested towards my essay is to clearly state the claim in a clear concise way.” This
particular student does some revising by adding a few sentences to her body paragraphs
and to the end of her essay, but she does not address the issue of revising or writing a
claim as her peers suggest.

In a few other essays peers state that the draft needs more detail and analysis.
After the workshop one author writes, “They told me to go more in depth in my writing
process…I went more in depth in my writing process like they said I should do to make
my paper stronger.” The core of this particular paper assignment is for the student to analyze their own writing process. Therefore, more detail is vital to effectively meeting the assignment goals. Yet, there are no changes made to this draft. Another group of peers found similar concerns with a draft they read. The author summarizes her peer’s concerns when she states, “they said I should add to my analysis.” This author only adds three sentences to the whole of her essay to revise. While the feedback from these students may seem a bit vague, the peer responders clearly recognize that the author needs to revise based on organizational and content issues. At the same time, the author of the essay acknowledges and identifies in her revision plans peer’s concerns; nevertheless, there is a gap in understanding how to apply this feedback when the author attempts to revise the essay and in so doing merely adds some sentences to the body of the essay or the end.

The Ongoing Task of Deconstructing Top-Down Teaching

While most of the responses in the questionnaire were positive, there were a few students that gave some constructive criticism about peer workshopping and revision. Examining a few of these responses may help to provide some commentary about the differences between what students think they do to revise compared to what they actually do. One student said that they had a difficult time responding to three essays in the time allotted; while another student said that they had too much extra time and so their group chatted more about topics that did not relate to the paper assignments. Two students said that they found the process of sharing writing embarrassing. One of these students simply stated, “I don’t like sharing my writing.” Two students commented on the effort
of their peers being a cumbersome feature of the peer workshops explaining that it relied so heavily on peer feedback, and most of the time their peers gave poor or little feedback. Lastly, two of these students said they did not want feedback from their peers. Instead, they only found feedback from the instructor valuable. One of these students’ comments read: “I don’t need feedback from people at the same level as me – that does nothing.”

When dealing with a diverse group of students with different personalities and backgrounds, these responses are not surprising. While I worked to create an environment to try to help resolve some of these workshopping conflicts, issues still arose. A few of these comments relate to time management issues and the uncomfortable process of sharing writing. While time management is definitely one of the challenging aspects of peer response, the comments that I want to discuss in more depth are the remarks about peer effort and not finding the feedback from peers necessary.

While one can only surmise as to what may motive one person to write volumes on these workshops scripts as opposed to a few sentences, taking a look at the final comment in these series of negative responses may shed some light as to why some students give minimal effort and therefore do not revise based on peer feedback. While a few of the lackluster responses may be due to laziness, perhaps this effort is also related to the comment that the last student made about not wanting feedback from people “at the same level.” Students may be hesitant to give detailed feedback because they know that their peers will in turn be critiquing their feedback or ranking it. Some of these students may not spend time responding because they know that the other students will discount their feedback as useless.
The complaint that a few of the students did not want feedback from peers also speaks to the ways in which the university’s hierarchical structure promotes the accumulation of knowledge as resting solely with the instructor. According to this student, the instructor is on a higher level and therefore, only their feedback matters. Ranking knowledge in levels also suggests that there can be an end, where one acquires all knowledge by getting to the next or final “level.” However, while the instructor may have more training, it does not necessarily mean that the students’ feedback is not valuable. Since students look negatively on the feedback given to them by their peers, this in turn affects their attitude toward revising. I have had several students confess that they do not revise after workshopping because they just want to know what I had to say and that what their peers suggest may differ from what I want.

As I read the workshop scripts and responded to the student’s second drafts, many of the comments that peers made on the workshop sheets were very similar to the comments I made in my responses. Convincing students who have been consistently taught using the top-down or lecture method about the benefits and necessary elements of a collaborative learning environment is one of the most challenging components to facilitating peer response groups in the composition classroom. In my classroom, I work to deconstruct the hierarchy model of instruction. Many students are excited about collaborative learning, but some resist. Adopting this type of teaching philosophy in other disciplines is a work in progress. Writing instructors must continue to be diligent in creating new ways for students to understand the benefits of the collaborative learning environment.
Further Implications

Despite the manner in which students define revision in a more sophisticated tone, their practices point to the gap in a more fulsome understanding of revision as a process. While I spent time discussing with these students the recursive nature of revision, they articulate what I have taught them about revision, but still have a difficult time applying the concept. I also understand my idea of revision may be different than what the students may think of as revision. Despite their definitions of how the peer response sheets helped them revise, I also realize that it may take more than one semester for students to understand and apply what it means to revise an essay and not be attached to the first thought that comes into their mind, but to rework and rewrite their thoughts and ideas several times.

Most of the students at the beginning of the semester did not fully understand what it meant to revise an essay and only thought about revision in terms of editing. Because of this fairly new concept, perhaps many of the students felt like they did revise their essays when they added a sentence or changed a few words. In all likelihood what I considered minor changes may have been major changes to the student. Perhaps this can explain the gap between the questionnaire results and the actual work that the students did to revise their essays.

The majority of the students did not make any major changes to their essays. That is not to say that all of the students needed to make major changes to their essays to get a passing grade, but I find it fascinating that a very small percentage made any real changes to rewrite their essay but the results for the questionnaire are overwhelmingly in favor of
peer response as it influences revision. The varying responses from what the students think they do compared to their practice calls attention for instructors to not only use self-reflective sheets to check for understanding but to measure whether or not the students practice what it seems they can articulate. The revision plans and the student feedback about the teacher facilitated workshop scripts seemed like the students were grasping the concept of revision as a process however; their work suggested otherwise.

While the students commented favorably about the using teacher-facilitated workshop scripts, after comparing this information to the written drafts, from an instructor’s perspective, this tool to teach revision did not necessarily encourage a more recursive revision process. I do not suggest discarding the peer response group as a way to teach revision nor do I suggest completely getting rid of the teacher-facilitated workshop script. I do suggest however that perhaps incorporating a variety of response types, both teacher-facilitated and student-directed, may more effectively encourage revision. I also encourage instructors to study their own methods and discuss these practices with students to understand whether or not the activities in the classroom are effectively teaching students to become better readers and writers of texts.

Considering the data I have presented, instructors must continue to spend a fair amount of time encouraging students to revise, teaching them about revision, and giving them a substantial amount of time to revise their essays. Revision is a vital component to writing and the discovery of ideas. As the results in my study seem to indicate, when students do not fully understand nor are they given the opportunity to practice this process, they will simply regurgitate information and miss the application as well as the
experience of real writing which leads to discovery. This was clear when the students in my class spoke about revision as a more holistic process, but did not necessarily apply the concept to their writing. Students continue to need ongoing practice with writing as a recursive process. When teaching, the philosophy to adopt is that if something isn’t working, don’t keep doing it, try something else. Test and try your methods so that you can learn from and with your students.
APPENDIX A

Post Workshop Questionnaire
Research Questionnaire

1. What did you find useful about the peer workshops?

2. How would you describe your experience with the workshops?

3. How would you describe peer workshops for a student who hasn’t been in one?

4. What connections do you see between the peer workshops and the work you did to revise your essays? You may explain each essay and workshop separately.

5. Do you find teacher facilitated peer workshop sheets helpful? Why or why not?

Additional Comments:
WORKS CITED


