

Introduction to Peer Review/Response

By Mandy Hobmeier

With our increasing growing diversity in language learning classrooms has created a need, as well as presented an opportunity, for instructors to rise to the occasion in terms of building productive global awareness and authentic engagement in our classrooms. Learning diversity, linguistic diversity, and cultural diversity, require instructors to continuously evolve their practices, as well as experiment with their unique student populations and incomes in mind. Peer review activities present one such opportunity for evolution by empowering students to be true peers to one another as they develop tools for critical thinking and effective modes of communication through linguistic interaction, knowledge building, and skill enhancement in genres that will serve them academically, professionally, and as they orient themselves as global citizens. Peer review re-envisioned through this lens, therefore becomes a catalyst for global community building and acts of inclusivity.

Classroom Activity: Using Google Docs to Foster Student Accountability in Peer Response

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Snapshot

Using Google Docs as the workspace of peer response is not enough. In this approach instructors must relinquish control over to students embracing the Freirean challenge of a true dialogic classroom. Walking away from participating in peer response as the instructor holds students accountable to each other as well as themselves, cultivating transferable skills for outside the university walls.

Rationale

Academic discourse and writing is inevitably becoming more hybrid, welcoming multimodal and multimedia texts. Because of this shift, the writing process is more centered on students developing ideas, contributing to scholarly discourse, and leading with their perspective. This shift calls for peer-response to be student centered, driven, and be driving students towards being autonomous critical thinkers. As Keith Gilyard notes in his text *Composition and Cornel West*, "Education is deemed authentic . . . to the extent that it demands active student involvement and deliberately aids in the formation of student critical consciousness" (Gilyard



27). The digital environment of Google Docs promotes freer, more authentic feedback, because students are not being critiqued on how their feedback looks—feedback is more centered on the Freirean dialogic education model. Coupled with using Google Docs is the responsibility of the instructor to “walk away,” to transfer authority over to the students. Our educational system is built on an outdated nineteenth-century model. As technology weaves into our culture, it is our social, professional, and educational responsibility to meet our students halfway by integrating tools, interfaces, and formats students are already using, providing an educational experience relevant to their social, cultural, and professional experiences. We are not just talking about shaking things up in terms of peer response; Google Docs mirrors the writing students are already doing and will continue to do after they graduate: it is a more interactive and inclusive experience.

Usually, instructors set all the peer-response parameters. With Google Docs, you invite students to set the ground rules and trust they will use their time wisely. You allow them to succeed or fail. Basically, you treat them like the adults they truly are. Freire believed the educational experience should be experimental, adaptable, and transferable. Agreeing to these terms asks us, as instructors, to enrich peer-response with these same qualities: “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (Freire 72). Transferring authority builds trust between instructors and students, as well as between the students themselves. Learning communities emerge independently instead of being forced on students. Google Docs provides the judgment-free writing space for peer-response sessions more focused on critical contributions than grammatical errors. It eases linguistic pressure and expectations for students because it mirrors social platforms they are already engaging outside class. These digital spaces are less about the performance of intellect and more about valuable exchanges of ideas.

How This Works

1. Before the first peer-response session you have to set the tone. Let them know that they are adults and will be treated accordingly. Let your students know that you will not be participating in the sessions, they will not be graded on their peer-response performance, and that you trust they will do the amount of work on their drafts and in their groups that they feel will earn them the grade they deserve.
2. Share a Google folder with the class so they can upload their drafts prior to the next class session. They will ask you what you want their draft to include, how long, how many words, etc. Tell them it should be whatever it needs to be for that session. Let them decide the amount of work they can do, but do not be afraid to make suggestions.
3. The day of the peer-response session, suggest to the students that they might want to take some time to write down their concerns on their document in the Google folder. Again, you are not monitoring this, just suggesting. Next, let them break into groups. This is the only control you have: tell them the amount of people they need in a group. Lastly, ask them how much time they think they need for the session. And then walk away. Let them work without participating at all or monitoring the work on *Google Docs*.

4. Check in with them and see if they need more time. After they are done, give them time to reflect and plan their next steps for their drafts. If you want, you can also give them time to do some writing, applying the feedback they just received.

Classroom Activity: Towards an Inclusive Peer Response: The Writer's Workshop Approach

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Rationale

Traditional peer review methods have a host of well-documented drawbacks, including students who are ill-equipped or un-prepared to give meaningful feedback, students who are unaware of what strong writing should look like, and feedback that relies heavily on the test-forward approaches to writing learned in high school. There is also growing concern that the focus on assessment or “review” of peer work may alienate multi-lingual learners (MLLs), as well as those with less prior experience with academic writing than some peers. The activity outlined below presents one possible approach in the move towards more inclusive classroom practices: the writer’s workshop, long a staple of creative writing pedagogy. According to Lori Howe, “In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the workshop model has been increasingly utilized as an intervention with at-risk and underserved writing populations, from inner-city middle-school students to incarcerated adults (Haddix, 2012; Schwalb, 2006), primarily as a vehicle for personal transformation, student engagement, and improved writing and communication skills (Howie & Bagnall, 2013; Mezirow, 2009).”^[1] It follows that composition students may also benefit from an approach that privileges communication and collaboration (“peer response”) over more rubric- or assessment-driven critiques of peer drafts.

The Workshop Model: How It Works^[2]

1. A week before the first workshop, dedicate a class day to a mock workshop, using sample papers (the instructor can roleplay as the writer). Go over your expectations for the workshop and why workshops are important to the writing process. I’ve included my handout to students below, for your reference. It is crucial to teach students how to give useful feedback before they begin workshoping each other’s drafts. Keep reinforcing these ideas throughout the semester, so students don’t fall back into old peer review patterns (such as focusing on sentence-level issues).
2. Students come to class having already submitted and read each other’s drafts. I use Blackboard’s “Groups” function to randomly-assign peer groups and create a group page where peers can email each other, share files, and communicate via a group-only discussion board.

3. Students work in groups of 4-5. Time limits and group sizes are adjusted depending on class size and amount of available class time. Nominate a "time keeper" for each group (they will use a phone timer, to keep their group on task).
4. In my classes, I do not allow the writer to speak during Steps 1 and 2, to prevent defensive responses (and to encourage writers to listen to their readers, even if they don't agree). However, the writer is instructed to be an active listener, i.e., to take notes and prepare a response to feedback.
5. Timeline of activities:

STEP 1^[3]	3-5 minutes	<p>What's Working and Why? One at a time, each group member says one thing that's "working" in the draft, with emphasis on why it works. Encourage students to avoid using the word "like." A model comment might be: "I thought your transitions worked, because they made it really easy for me to see how your ideas were connected."</p>
STEP 2	10-15 minutes	<p>What's Not Working, Why, and What Should Be Done About It? This time should be for more open discussion of the draft. Especially in the first few weeks of the semester, the emphasis should be on idea-generation (cogency). As the students pick up more writing skills, they will usually start incorporating those elements into their feedback on their own (conceptual structure, effective source use, and so on). In early workshops, I like to circulate around the room and stimulate discussion, as needed ("What other ways do you think the writer could support their argument?" "How would you counterargue that claim?")</p>
STEP 3	3-5 minutes	<p>Writer's Response During Steps 1 and 2, the writer should be taking notes and preparing a response to their feedback. This response is open, but may include follow-up questions, reflection on what feedback they found especially helpful, or sharing ideas about how they will approach revision.</p>

Student Handout: The Do's and Don'ts of Peer Workshop

DO:	DON'T:
<u>Check your ego</u> at the door. It's human	<u>Sweat the small stuff.</u> Grammar and spelling

nature to get defensive when being critiqued. Writer: Listen and take notes about any questions you may have. Don't speak until the last 3 minutes or so, when you should respond and ask questions. In the end, **you** decide what feedback to take to heart, and what to leave by the wayside.

Begin with positivity—what's working in the draft? If someone else has already made the point you wanted to make, you can elaborate further or explain another aspect of what the writer did well (try not to repeat!).

Have a conversation, not a lecture. Don't just read aloud your written comments. Engage with the other commenters. Do you agree? Do you have anything to add? If someone points out a problem, what are the possible solutions?_

Think of these sessions as collaborative brainstorming. You may not have all the answers, but maybe you can give a fresh perspective that will inspire the writer to develop even more compelling claims.

Ask questions. What do you want to know more about, as a reader? What would make you feel more engaged with the subject matter?

Care by critiquing. You can show you care about your peers and their writing by giving *real, useful* feedback. Telling them their work is "good" or "fine" does them a massive disservice.

Show your respect for your peers and the class by coming to peer workshop prepared and ready to participate. It's the old adage: "do unto others as you would have them do

errors are going to happen on a rough draft, but it's the writer's responsibility to proofread their draft. Focus instead on the "big picture" stuff, like cogency and structure. Point out grammar/spelling only if the errors make it hard to follow the writer's ideas, or if it interrupts your reading of their text.

Trash talk. Constructive comments only (okay, it's not working, but what can the writer DO about it?).

Take the easy road. Avoid vague/broad language such as "it's really good!" or "I just didn't *get* it, you know?" That's just a way to avoid thinking critically. The point is to move past our first, emotional reaction to a draft (liking/not liking) and think about why things *work*, why they *don't work*, and *what can be done about it*.

Rewrite the draft for the writer. That's their job.

Expect instructor intervention. Peer workshop is about you, not me. You will become a better writer by immersing yourself in writing—figuring out on your own what works, and what doesn't. If you want to know what I think of your draft, come see me in office hours or make an appointment.

<p>unto you." When your turn rolls around, you'll want feedback from engaged, active readers, not people who skimmed over your paper on the way to class.</p>	
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^[1]Howe, Lori. "A Review of Creative Writing Workshop Pedagogy in Educational Research: Methodological Challenges and Affordances." *The Journal of Poetry Therapy*, vol. 29, no. 4, 2016, pp. 195.

^[2]There are many different approaches to the writer's workshop. The method outlined here is one that I have found useful for both lower and upper division writing courses, but it can be easily modified/adapted to suit different teaching styles/pedagogical purposes. For example, you might follow up a lesson on global coherence by having students workshop each other's rough plans, outlines, or a list of topic sentences.

^[3]Although I haven't yet done this in my own classes, some instructors I know also allot the first minute or two for the writer to express their intentions for their draft—what they think they need to work on, or what they perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of their draft. In my experience, some writers have a tendency to over-explain their work (and possibly intimidate peers), but there is something to be said for foregrounding the writer's intention as part of the writing process. For example, adding that step would enable peers to point out areas where the writer's intentions could come through more clearly to the paper's audience.

Author Centered Reflective Reading

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ABSTRACT

Author-Centered Reflective Reading (ACRR) is a peer-response technique designed to build empathy and empower authors to re-see their drafts in a fresh way. For a given draft in progress, an author journals about what they hope to communicate, and a reader journals about what they glean from the piece. Partners then compare the author's intention to the reader's response and work collaboratively to identify ways to clarify the author's message and its expression.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS: CARL ROGERS & REFLECTIVE LISTENING

In the 1950s and 1960s, Carl Rogers pioneered the client-centered therapy movement,^[i]an approach that recognizes the client as a crucial source of knowledge and insight. Rogers developed "Reflective listening" (RL), in which the listener adopts the "therapist's hypothesis,"

which is simply the belief that the capacity for problem-solving and growth resides within the speaker.[ii] Basically, RL involves listening actively for a speaker’s intended message and then expressing that meaning back for verification.[iii] This posture—listening empathetically to support others as they solve problems and grow—is one that students can be coached to use during peer response. Because RL does not require a therapist who functions as an authority figure, this process can take place between non-professionals in many settings. It is an elementary and non-directive strategy that can be easily picked up by people without specialized psychological training.[iv] RL is not simply parroting back the speaker’s words verbatim. Rogers uses the metaphor of a mirror: it does not just reflect; it also has a back surface (tain). “Like the back of a mirror, [a listener’s/reader’s] inner process does not necessarily match the [speaker’s/author’s] experience, even though it supports the practice of reflective listening.”[v] The dual activities of listening supportively and checking perceptions “do not eliminate the opposition between empathy and genuineness, but reframe it as a generative tension” that drives dialog.[vi] This distinction between self and other is crucial to empathy. Eric Leake (2016) has theorized Critical Empathy as a disposition. He argues for the necessity of recognizing the limits of empathy to avoid collapsing the self-other distinction, to avoid remaking someone else in our own likeness: “We can never have full access to another’s point of view. In that sense, empathy is always at best an approximation of understanding.” If we overemphasize “shared humanity,” we risk flattening differences. “Critical empathy, on the other hand, starts with a recognition of unknowability...Critical empathy asks us to attend to questions of dissimilarity.”[vii] This recognition creates ongoing tension between self/other, differentiation/overlap, testing/supporting. This tension, in turn, drives peer response conversation. As this technique is grounded in sensitivity to and appreciation of difference, it promotes inclusivity.

WHAT IS AUTHOR-CENTERED REFLECTIVE READING?

Analogous to Reflective Listening, Author-Centered Reflective Reading (ACRR) includes:

- Engaging the urge to understand what the author is saying[viii]
- Resisting the urge to rush to judgement
- Providing non-directive support of the author’s aims[ix]
- Testing understandings / Checking perceptions [x]
- Clarifying the author’s meanings

In an ACRR workshop, each author has the opportunity to hear their words in a new way,[xi] voiced by someone who has read their work carefully and is now trying to re-present (paraphrase) the intended meaning with accuracy and authenticity. This provides insight for the author as they navigate the reader-writer transaction. ACRR is especially useful when authors are at the stage where they are still trying to work out what it is they are trying to say. ACRR allows authors to gauge the extent to which the reader-writer transaction is working, which is useful for writers across all levels of English proficiency. The activity blends genuine support with genuine questioning, with the goals of clarity and empathy.

MODEL LESSON PLAN FOR FACILITATING AN ACRR WORKSHOP

Plan this activity across two class meetings.

SESSION 1 (30 minutes)

1. Begin with a brief conversation about peer response. Invite students to share their prior experiences and expectations surrounding peer response activities. (10 minutes)
2. Drawing on the discussion above and on Slides 2-4, present a mini-lecture about ACRR as an attitude/technique for responding to drafts. Explain the dual move of Paraphrasing + Checking Perceptions (Slide 5). Explain that these questions act as “hooks” that pull the author into a discussion of their aims. Each reader’s goal is to paraphrase some aspect of the author’s work and check back for verification. (15 minutes)
3. Students form partnerships. For homework, assign a deadline for circulating the drafts electronically. I recommend a deadline at least 24 hours before Session 2. Students can email work to each other directly, share materials via Google Docs, or upload drafts to a class discussion board. I prefer the latter, since it makes it easy for me to monitor that students have met the circulation deadline. To incentivize timely participation, I offer homework credit for uploading drafts by the deadline. (5 minutes)
4. HOMEWORK: Students swap drafts and read their partner’s work carefully prior to Session 2. I ask that they read with an ACRR mindset and record some notes—attempts to paraphrase—what the author was trying to accomplish, paying particular attention to aspects of the document that seemed ambiguous, confusing, or contradictory.

SESSION 2 (45 minutes)

1. Authors journal about their intended meaning & what’s at stake. You can ask that students create these journals on paper or on their laptops. I invite students to post these journals to our class discussion board for participation credit. (10 minutes, Slide 7 – Author’s Intention)
2. Remind students about the dual move of Paraphrasing + Checking Perceptions. (5 minutes, Slide 8)
3. Drawing on the notes they prepared for homework, readers journal about their perception of author’s intended meaning & stakes. Here too, students can journal on paper or on their laptops. (10 minutes, Slide 9 – Reader’s Response)
4. Partners meet to share and compare their journal entries. Urge students to notice where the reader-writer transaction is “working” in the sense that the reader’s comprehension matches with the author’s intended message. However, they should focus mostly on moments of contrast, difference, and misunderstanding. For aspects of the text that were misconstrued or interpreted in an unexpected way, the partners should practice the dual move of paraphrasing and testing understandings. Encourage readers to support the author’s goals and to clarify their perspective and its expression. Repeat for partner. (20 minutes, Slide 10 – Share & Compare)

[i]Rogers, Carl R. (1961). *On Becoming a person: A psychotherapists view of psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin.

[ii]Fisher, Dalmar. (2005). *Communication in Organizations*.
<http://www.analytictech.com/mb119/reflecti.htm>

- [iii]Ackerman, Courtney. (2017). "Client Centered Therapy + Carl Rogers' #1 Person-Centered Technique." *Positive Psychology Program*. <https://positivepsychologyprogram.com/client-centered-therapy/#carl-client-centered>
- [iv]Arnold, 2014; Fisher, 2005; McBride, et al. 2018.
- [v]Arnold, Kyle. (2014). "Behind the Mirror: Reflective Listening and its Tain in the Work of Carl Rogers." *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 42: 354-369. DOI: 10.1080/08873267.2014.913247
- [vi]Arnold, Kyle. (2014). "Behind the Mirror: Reflective Listening and its Tain in the Work of Carl Rogers." *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 42: 354-369. DOI: 10.1080/08873267.2014.913247
- [vii]Leake, Eric. 2016. Writing Pedagogies of Empathy: As Rhetoric and Disposition. *Composition Forum*, 34. <http://compositionforum.com/issue/34/empathy.php>
- [viii]Arnold, 2014, p.362. Rogers (1950, 1952, 1954, as cited in Arnold, 2014).
- [ix]Directive approaches can usurp the author's process. If a peer sets goals without input from the author, this "might prevent the [author] from articulating their own goals," constrain self-expression, stoke defensiveness, or create dependence (Arnold, 2014, p.357).
- [x]Arnold, Kyle. (2014). "Behind the Mirror: Reflective Listening and its Tain in the Work of Carl Rogers." *The Humanistic Psychologist*, 42: 354-369. DOI: 10.1080/08873267.2014.913247
- [xi]Lane, Lara Lynn. (2018). "Reflective Listening." *Psychology Encyclopedia*. <http://psychology.jrank.org/pages/536/Reflective-Listening.html>