

## National Council of Teachers of English

---

The Value of Written Peer Criticism

Author(s): Mara Holt

Source: *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Oct., 1992), pp. 384-392

Published by: [National Council of Teachers of English](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/358229>

Accessed: 26-10-2015 21:52 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*National Council of Teachers of English* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *College Composition and Communication*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# The Value of Written Peer Criticism

Mara Holt

When I talk to graduate students and colleagues about their use of collaborative learning, I often hear stories about when it doesn't work. No one's version of collaborative pedagogy is universally rewarding, of course, but I have found some approaches consistently more successful than others. Often, peer criticism consists of oral or hastily written comments by students in a classroom group; sometimes students fill out a checklist or a form that resembles a short-answer test (for example Huff and Kline 122–23). In these cases, neither teacher nor student is taking peer criticism seriously as a writing exercise. Furthermore, much oral or checklist peer criticism is limited to students' evaluations of their peers' writing techniques, thus neglecting discussion of the substantive issues in the paper. Finally, much peer criticism focuses either on the subjective experience of the critic, such as Peter Elbow's "movies of people's minds while they read your words" (*Writing without Teachers* 77), or objectified standard criteria, such as his "criterion-based feedback" (*Writing with Power* 240–45). I would like to propose a melding of exercises from Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff's book *Sharing and Responding* with the series of written peer critiques Kenneth Bruffee describes in his text *A Short Course in Writing*. These two kinds of peer criticism work best in tandem in the collaborative classroom because together they capture the struggle between individual expression and social constraint that most of us experience as writers.

*Sharing and Responding* can function on its own or as a companion piece to Elbow and Belanoff's *A Community of Writers* (second edition forthcoming), with which it was published. The exercises continue the tradition of reader-based responding that Elbow began in *Writing without Teachers* and *Writing with Power*, but with a twist. The exercises in *Sharing and Responding* have a more developed social framework than their earlier manifestations. Although the emphasis is still on the writer's making individual choices, the structure of group interaction is more clearly developed than in Elbow's earlier work. For instance, each exercise has sample reader responses followed by a section called "What a Writer Might Think about This Feedback." These exercises (as well as other subjective or comment-based—rather than essay-length—peer criticism)

---

Mara Holt is an assistant professor of English at Ohio University in Athens where she teaches courses in composition and literature. She has recently published in *Journal of Teaching Writing* and in *Pre/Text*.

work well to get students started in peer criticism and to prod them to think more about a piece of writing when they run out of ideas. A sample of such exercises, several of which will be discussed in this paper, is listed in Table 1.

Elbow and Belanoff's exercises are generally used by students in small groups in class. Teachers and students can pick and choose exercises from *Sharing and Responding*. There is no set structure or sequence to the approach, although the focus is clearly on writing as a process of revision, and the method works well with portfolio grading. The writer is top priority in Elbow and Belanoff's approach. The writer chooses what responses she wants and in what form. Students can write their responses to fellow students' papers and read them in the group or hand them to the writer; students can also respond to other students' writing orally. Student writers gain a sense of play and inventiveness

Table 1

---

Sample of Elbow and Belanoff's Peer-Response Exercises

---

1. *Sayback*: Ask readers: "Say back to me in your own words what you hear me getting at in my writing."<sup>a</sup>
2. *Movies of the Reader's Mind*: Get readers to tell you frankly *what happens inside their heads* as they read your words.
3. *Pointing*: Ask readers: "Which words or phrases stick in mind? Which passages or features did you like best? Don't explain why."
4. *What's Almost Said or Implied*: Ask readers: "What's *almost* said, implied, hovering around the edges? What would you like to hear more about?"
5. *Voice, Point of View, Attitude toward the Reader, Language, Diction, Syntax*: Ask readers to describe each of these features or dimensions of your writing.
6. *Center of Gravity*: Ask readers: "What do you sense as the source of energy, the focal point, the seedbed, the generative center for this piece [not necessarily the main point]?"<sup>b</sup>
7. *Believing and Doubting*: Ask readers: "Believe (or pretend to believe) everything I have written. Be my ally and tell me what you see. Give me more ideas and perceptions to help my case. Then doubt everything and tell me what you see. What arguments can be made against what I say?"<sup>c</sup>

---

Source: Elbow and Belanoff, *Sharing and Responding* 64–67

<sup>a</sup>Elbow and Belanoff attribute "sayback" to Elaine Avidon and Sondra Perl of the New York City Writing Project. Exercises 1–5 can also be found in Elbow's *Writing without Teachers* (76–116) and/or *Writing with Power* (255–63).

<sup>b</sup>This exercise first appeared in *Writing without Teachers* (35).

<sup>c</sup>Articles from which this exercise comes can be found in the appendix of *Writing without Teachers* (147–91) and the more recent *Embracing Contraries* (253–300).

about their writing, and student responders learn that they have useful and creative things to say about their peers' work.

Bruffee's *A Short Course in Writing*, published first in 1972 and now with a fourth edition forthcoming from Harper/Collins, has served as the primary college textbook for teaching writing using collaborative learning. Bruffee's approach to peer criticism is a modification of the peer-review process of professional journals; it is dialogic in structure. Bruffee's approach, which emphasizes the process of negotiation, complements Elbow's focus on invention. Table 2 outlines the stages of Bruffee's peer-review process.

Bruffee's ideal class for the peer-critique sequence is a semester-long course in which students have time to practice the steps of the peer critique cumulatively, as shown in Table 2. For Paper 1, the teacher assigns a persuasive essay of three to four paragraphs focused on the support of a strong thesis (53–84). The student writer composes her paper, then writes for her own paper a descriptive outline, describing what each paragraph says, as well as how each paragraph functions in the essay as a whole (97–107). At this point she gives her paper

Table 2  
Bruffee's Cumulative Peer-Critique Process

	<u>Writer's Tasks</u>	<u>Critic's Tasks</u>
Paper 1	(1) short persuasive essay with descriptive outline (3) optional revision	(2) descriptive outline
Paper 2	(1) short persuasive essay with descriptive outline (3) optional revision	(2) descriptive outline with evaluative peer critique
Paper 3	(1) short persuasive essay with descriptive outline (3) writer's response (4) optional revision	(2) descriptive outline with evaluative and substantive peer critique
Paper 4	(1) short persuasive essay with descriptive outline (3) writer's response (5) optional revision	(2) descriptive outline with evaluative and substantive peer critique (4) second critique (mediation)
Paper 5	(1) short persuasive essay with descriptive outline (3) writer's response (5) final writer's response (6) optional revision	(2) descriptive outline with evaluative and substantive peer critique (4) second critique (mediation)

Source: Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing* 140–52.

(without the descriptive outline) to another student, who writes a descriptive outline of her paper (generally outside of class). The two students then have an opportunity in class to compare descriptive outlines and discuss the reasons for the differences before the writer revises her paper in preparation for handing it in to the teacher. The teacher grades the writer's paper (writer's descriptive outline included) and the critic's descriptive outline and then hands the graded assignments back to their proper owners. As Table 2 indicates, another stage in the peer-critique process is added for each of Papers 2 through 5. This cumulative approach gives students a chance to learn the various stages of the peer-critique process slowly enough both to understand it and to adjust emotionally to its increasing complexity.

Elbow and Belanoff's approach to peer response and Bruffee's peer-critique sequence have strengths and weaknesses that complement each other. *Sharing and Responding* offers creative and provocative invention techniques that are crucial for students whose only previous model for peer review may have been a teacher's grade. *Sharing and Responding* also includes good analytical exercises, but these are less thorough than Bruffee's fuller analytical writing assignments, which ask a student to write the equivalent of a professional peer review of

Table 3

## Elbow/Belanoff's Exercises Incorporated into Bruffee's Paper 5 Sequence\*

	<u>Bruffee Task</u>	<u>Elbow/Belanoff Exercises</u>
Stage 1	3-4 paragraph essay with descriptive outline (writer)	"sayback," "pointing," "what's almost said or implied," "believing and doubting," "movies of the reader's mind" (critics)
Stage 2	first critique, including descriptive, evaluative, and substantive response (first critic)	exercises from Stage 1 (first critic)
Stage 3	writer's response (writer)	"voice," "point of view" "attitude toward the reader," "believing and doubting" (writer)
Stage 4	second critique or mediation (second critic)	exercises from Stage 1 and/or Stage 3 (second critic)
Stage 5	final writer's response (writer)	exercises from Stage 3 (writer)
Stage 6	optional revision (writer)	

Sources: Bruffee, *A Short Course in Writing* 140–52.

Elbow and Belanoff, *Sharing and Responding* 64–67.

\*These exercises from Elbow and Belanoff's text are a sample of many possible exercises from their text that would be useful in the various stages of Bruffee's sequence with paper 5.

another student's paper. Bruffee's series of peer critiques is very useful for analytical skills and for making arguments, but not as helpful for eliciting responses from students about writing in the first place. Used together, the peer-response exercises of Elbow/Belanoff and Bruffee give students something to say and then push them toward a more complicated cognitive perspective in writing a peer review—supporting what they say and being evaluated themselves for their writing skills as reflected by the critique. The result is a fuller, more meaningful peer review process which I elaborate upon using Bruffee's "Paper 5" sequence (see Table 3) as an example inclusive of the entire process.

While very early drafts of the persuasive essay are being composed, Elbow and Belanoff's exercises from *Sharing and Responding* provide a variety of ways to initiate students' interaction with one another on the subject of writing (Table 3, Stage 1). "Sayback," for instance, is an exercise in which a student listens to another student read a passage; then the listener "says back" what she has heard. "Pointing," in which a student merely underlines words or phrases or passages that appeal to her, is a wonderful way for students simply to enjoy classmates' writing before having to explain why. Others include "what's almost said or implied," in which the reader or listener notes implications of the writer's words which may not be explicitly stated; "believing and doubting," which asks the reader to both accept and reject (in turn) what the writer is saying; and finally, "movies of the reader's mind," in which the reader is asked to say what was on her mind while she was reading the paper. These exercises are user-friendly response tools that help students break through emotional barriers they may have erected against the idea of talking about anybody else's writing. Used with early drafts of the persuasive paper, these exercises can fill a gap in Bruffee's system students sometimes have trouble with, invention.

When the persuasive papers are scheduled to be given to the peer critics, writers read them aloud in class and exchange them with class members chosen by the writers (Table 3, Stage 2). I do not call the paper given to the critic at Stage 2 a "draft" (although technically it is), because I want students to have taken the paper as far as they can without formal feedback and then to present it to their peers in "final draft" form. The student critic at Stage 2 writes a three-part critique which consists of a descriptive outline, an evaluation, and a substantive response to the issues in the paper. The descriptive outline proves that the critic has closely read the paper and that she understands its form and content. The evaluative and substantive parts of the critique can be written in the form of an essay modeled after the ideal professional peer review or in the form of a letter (for specific assignments, see Bruffee 148–52). The vocabulary of response gleaned from the earlier subjective exercises in Elbow and Belanoff's *Sharing and Responding* provides a basis for student critics to go beyond the simple response level toward making suggestions for improvement. At this point the student is responding not only to the writing in terms of her own expectations (the thrust of the Elbow and Belanoff exercises), but also to the assign-

ment—to the teacher’s demands. The critic’s job is to help her fellow student negotiate the assignment, which represents the social constraints of the writing situation.

In addition to an analysis of strengths and weaknesses, the Stage 2 critique involves an engagement with substantive issues in the paper. This can take the critic beyond the micropolitics of the classroom into a discussion of broader social concerns. For example, a student whom I will call Thomas, a Hispanic engineering student, wrote a paper in which he argued in support of affirmative action, even though it would mean that white male students might be discriminated against. His first critic, “John” (a white male), gave him good suggestions for making his argument stronger, then proceeded to disagree strongly with his thesis, saying, “It goes against the principles of this country. . . . There are many minorities who began poor and later on became successful without the aid of affirmative action (not just basketball players). . . . I believe this country is the land of *equal* opportunity.”

This comment provoked Thomas into making a stronger argument for affirmative action in his writer’s response, the next stage of the critique process (Table 3, Stage 3). The first part of Bruffee’s assignment for the writer’s response is to “explain how each aspect of the evaluation affects you as a writer” (151–52). Thomas complimented John on the usefulness of his critique and made suggestions for improving it. Elbow and Belanoff’s subjective response exercises come in handy at this point, giving the student tools to try to articulate reactions that may help the critic learn to do his job better. Elbow and Belanoff’s structured responses to the “voice” of the critique, to its “point of view,” and to its “attitude toward the reader,” as well as “believing and doubting” exercises, can be useful to the writer at Stage 3 (Table 3, Stage 3). The second task of the writer in Stage 3 is to continue the discussion of issues. In an eloquent defense of affirmative action and re-vision of “equal opportunity,” Thomas took on John’s assertion that affirmative action precludes the American ideal of democracy:

The only equal opportunities minorities have along with white people are for low-paying jobs. I too believe that it’s morally impermissible to discriminate, but I believe that it’s even more impermissible to continue to hold one class in poverty when a more equitable distribution of wealth should emerge in a truly “democratic” society. In a democratic society, the proportion of people living in poverty for all types of people should be equal. Similarly, the proportion living above the poverty line should be equal if everyone is presented with “equal opportunity.”

The writer’s growing social perspective is expanded even further when he entrusts his paper, his critic’s response, and his response to his critic to a second critic (or mediator) who reads the discussion that has occurred on paper between the writer and the critic and then writes a critique of the original paper and the responses (Table 3, Stage 4). The mediator has three tasks. First, he may



mediate between the writer and the first critic. Second, he responds to and evaluates the writing skills of both the writer and the first critic. Finally, he becomes another voice in the conversation about the issues (Bruffee 151–52). Adding a third person to this conversation complicates the set of social constraints similar to the way professional writing may be scrutinized. This mediation stage represents students working together to deal collectively with the social constraints of the writing task and the power of institutional evaluation represented by the teacher. The task of the student critics is to help the writer say what he wants to say in such a way that it will be heard by his audience. The critics both serve as his audience (this is where Elbow and Belanoff's diverse and provocative exercises are helpful) and help him strategize ways to reach his ultimate audience: the teacher (this is where Bruffee's clearly structured essay assignments are helpful). In working together in this way, students become freer from dependence upon the teacher. Students gain "the ability to reinterpret [institutional] power by defining the authority of knowledge as a relationship among people. . . ." (Kail and Trimbur 12). They can develop political skills as a result of learning to work collectively to accomplish goals in an environment of unequal power relations and learning to argue fruitfully with peers.

To continue with my extended example, the second critic, let's call him Craig, read Thomas's paper, John's critique, and Thomas's writer's response. He then gave Thomas some good advice for making his argument stronger. "Your third paragraph is good up to sentence five," Craig noted. "Say something then to the effect that when white males dominate society, they utilize a poor work force (of mostly minorities), and by not promoting them, minorities stay in the work force; they don't compete for higher level jobs (the white males' own) and they stay poor. Then say affirmative action requires white males to promote minorities, reversing this inequity." After giving Thomas suggestions to strengthen his argument in support of affirmative action in order to help him negotiate the teacher's assignment, Craig switched gears to argue against affirmative action in his substantive discussion, drawing upon his own experience as a white male bartender and restaurant manager:

Why change things? From my standpoint, everything works fine. I have two good jobs won through skill and determination; no one gave me a job because I am white. In fact, my major employer is almost entirely Hispanic. I started out flipping burgers and have worked my way up . . . because I tried. I was (and am) determined to better my financial and employment status. . . . I think the poor remain poor because they resign themselves to it.

In switching the argument from an "objective" to a "subjective" realm, Craig provided an opportunity for Thomas to reframe his own argument in terms of his experience. Because this was all done in writing and evaluated by the teacher as a series of essays, the students were constrained to participate articulately in both evaluative and substantive discussions, supporting what they said more fully than they might have done in a spoken conversation.



A final writer's response ends the sequence of peer critiques (Table 3, Stage 5). The writer has the last word; he can comment upon what he chooses—ranging from form to content, from style to substance. Bruffee urges students to "reevaluate the essay in light of the peer criticism" and to "reevaluate the peer criticism." Additionally, he suggests that students "review the whole peer critique process, from the points of view of both a peer critic and a writer" (152). The student can choose to revise his paper (Table 3, Stage 6) before handing it in to the teacher. In his final writer's response, Thomas thanks "all the white guys in class for jumping all over me and showing me that I needed to strengthen my arguments." His very successful final revision, titled "Justice and Injustice," begins with a description of his experience as someone who had had no chance of attending college without affirmative action scholarships. Thomas's talent and intelligence are apparent to everyone; his example is more persuasive and his arguments stronger than the more formulaic stance he had taken in his first draft—before being prodded by the arguments of his peers.

After Stage 6, the writers hand in to the teacher their original essays, the critiques that their peers have written for them, their responses to those critiques, and their revisions of the original essay. The teacher can read these separate pieces as a set of narratives of the students' writing processes. She grades each essay and its corresponding responses (Bruffee 147–48). The teacher then returns each paper with its critiques to the writers, who keep their persuasive essays and writers' responses and return the critiques to the critics who wrote them. It is beneficial for the teacher to give writers and critics class time to read and possibly discuss the teacher's comments on the papers and critiques so they can get a better sense of how the group of students and the teacher responded to and influenced one another.

The five-step procedure I have described should be modified to fit various situations. I have used it most successfully as a cumulative process in advanced writing courses on a semester schedule (as in Table 2). Sometimes in first-year English classes I have asked students to do only the first peer critique each time a paper is due (Table 3, Stages 1 and 2). For other classes, I have structured the tasks more explicitly, making the peer critique more like an essay exam than an essay or letter. As I am teaching under a quarter system now and would like to try the whole process, I am considering extending the one persuasive essay and four peer critiques ("Paper 5") over an entire quarter. I have used Bruffee's *Short Course* model without Elbow's subjective inventive responses, and I have at various times used either Elbow's *Writing with Power* or Elbow and Belanoff's *A Community of Writers* without Bruffee's written critiques, but I have seldom had a completely successful class employing either method by itself. It is the conjunction of the two that has made the difference.

In recent years many writing instructors have argued that peer critiques can help students learn first hand the communal nature and intellectual excitement of writing. But less attention has been given to distinguishing among the kinds of peer criticism that students can fruitfully engage in. The interplay of the

subjective and the socially-mediated exercises insures that students write imaginatively and creatively as well as conventionally and analytically. Both approaches to academic writing are validated, and students begin to see how the use of each kind of discourse can enable the other. Furthermore, the use of both kinds of peer critique is politically important in that it challenges students to engage in intellectual discourse in writing. This is an excellent pedagogy in a course in which gender, race, and class are the focus; such courses sometimes focus on political content without teaching students political skills. With cumulative peer response, social negotiation becomes part of the political content of the course. In part through the peer-review process the student in a collaborative classroom finds her identity as a writer not just in imitating models, but in the way we who publish in the disciplines do—by negotiating with peers.

### Works Cited

- Bruffee, Kenneth A. *A Short Course in Writing: Practical Rhetoric for Teaching Composition through Collaborative Learning*. 3rd ed. Boston: Little, 1985.
- Elbow, Peter. *Embracing Contraries*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.
- . *Writing without Teachers*. New York: Oxford UP, 1973.
- . *Writing with Power*. New York: Oxford UP, 1981.
- Elbow, Peter, and Pat Belanoff. *A Community of Writers: A Workshop Course in Writing*. New York: Random, 1989.
- . *Sharing and Responding*. New York: Random, 1989.
- Huff, Roland, and Charles R. Kline, Jr. *The Contemporary Writing Curriculum: Rehearsing, Composing, and Valuing*. New York: Teachers College P, 1987.
- Kail, Harvey, and John Trimbur. "The Politics of Peer Tutoring." *Writing Program Administration* 11.1–2 (Fall 1987): 5–12.

The New York College Learning Skills Association issues a Call for Proposals for possible presentations at the Sixteenth Annual Symposium on Developmental Education to be held March 28–31, 1993, at the Marriott in Albany, New York. Appropriate topics include all aspects of developmental education and learning support services at the college level. The proposal submission deadline is October 23, 1992. For complete proposal submission guidelines and forms, contact JoAnn K. Branch, Director, Learning Assistance Center, North Country Community College, Saranac Lake, New York 12983, telephone (518) 891-2915, ext. 210.