“Where’s the Writer?” Examining the Writer’s Role as Solicitor of Feedback in Composition Textbooks

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In an effort to better understand how to help students engage more fully with the feedback process, this article examines the role of the writer as solicitor of feedback in composition textbooks, noting that textbooks don’t appear to offer sufficient tools to move students from “Do we have to?” to “Can we, please?” in peer review, and includes pedagogical suggestions that will encourage students to become engaged writers who are able, and willing, to solicit feedback and participate in peer review.

In today’s class, as a tool to help you develop and revise your papers, you will exchange your writing with each other. First, I’d like you to write down three questions for your reader to answer about your paper,” the instructor explains. The reluctant class members collectively roll their eyes. One writer thinks for a moment and, not knowing what to ask, hands over the paper to the respondent without asking any questions. When seeing the blank paper, the respondent asks, “What do you want me to focus on?” and the writer answers, “I don’t know. Can you help me with my grammar or something?” Yet another writer interrupts out loud, “Do we have to? Can I just work on my paper myself? I’ve done peer response before, Professor X. It’s a waste of my time.”

This classroom scenario reflects a combination of real experiences that point to silent, frustrated, and helpless writers in writing classrooms. While familiar, these experiences represent an unfortunate reality in a field that advocates writing as a social act. If we consider the theory and practice of peer response, which was launched in part with Peter Elbow’s *Writing without Teachers* and Kenneth Bruffee’s work on collaboration and writing, there is no doubt that peer response can play a significant role in the writing process, especially if both writers and respondents are engaged. In his foundational article “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind’” Bruffee makes clear that students are working collaboratively on their writing not when students write or edit or, least of all, proofread, but instead when students (1) converse, (2) talk about the subject and about the assignment, and (3) talk through the writer’s understanding of the subject (645). Undoubtedly, peer response is a perfect opportunity for this kind of collaborative conversation, but
only if both participants know how to “converse.” As the above scenario reminds us, when parties involved in the peer review conversation are not both engaged in the process, collaborative exchanges can fall short, leaving us with frustrated, helpless, or even silent students.

In an attempt to minimize these all-too-familiar scenarios in our classrooms, we turned to the literature to consider students’ roles in response. Without a doubt, the response literature makes clear the value of collaborative peer response for students. Peer response, for example, assists in writers’ development (e.g., Bruffee; Elbow; Gere; Gillespie and Kail; Harris; Moss, Highberg, and Nicolas; North; Nystrand and Brandt; Trimbur) and strengthens critical thinking skills (e.g., Harris). It also helps students develop “a vernacular for talking about writing” (Gere 90; Nystrand and Brandt), which allows for richer group discussions that result in deeper revision (e.g., Gillam; Harris; Nystrand and Brand; Spear, Sharing). As Nystrand and Brandt explain, “[S]tudents who write for each other not only learn to write better, but also . . . learn to write differently than students whose sole audience is the instructor” (209, emphasis added). Given these benefits, the prevalence of peer response workshops in writing classrooms and the research that supports these workshops is no surprise. In order for peers to truly gain from one another in the response process, both the response workshops and the feedback offered in them must be effective. Not surprisingly, a significant amount of response research focuses on (1) teaching teachers how to design workshops that strengthen the feedback process (e.g., Anson; Dixon; Glenn, Goldthwaite, and Connors; Healy; Liu and Hansen; Spigelman and Grobman; Thomas and Thomas; White) and (2) teaching peer-, tutor-, and teacher-respondents how to give feedback both in face-to-face and in online settings (e.g., Auten; Brannon and Knoeblauch; Coogan; Elbow; Formo and Neary; Geiger and Rickard; Gere and Abbott; Hewett; Hobson; Honeycutt; Inman and Sewell; Palmquist, LeCourt, and Kiefer; Spear; N. Sommers; Strasma; Straub and Lunsford). This body of research provides instructors with the tools they need to design effective workshops and give appropriate feedback to writers or teach others to give such feedback. However, in our struggle to find literature directly addressing the writer’s role in the response process, we realized that the research notably emphasizes respondents’ roles more so than the writers’ roles.

Although we do not discount the importance of teaching respondents how to give feedback, we argue that writers must also be taught how to request the feedback they desire. After all, collaboration, in its truest sense, requires participation by both writers and respondents. As Bruffee acknowledges, and the plethora of articles on workshop design support, “Organizing collaborative learning effectively requires more than throwing students together with their peers with little or no guidance or preparation” (“Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation’” 652). Yet, despite the response research on giving feedback, we know that students often are not talking to one another, begging the question, “As teachers, are we simply telling students to give each other feedback when we assign peer response groups or are we supporting collaboration in its truest sense?”
Consistent with the pedagogical implication of Bruffee’s work, which emphasizes collaboration, the closest we came in our search to finding what works for writers in soliciting feedback was a handful of research and teaching resources that help writers learn how to have conversations about their writing. One such resource was Carl Anderson’s book, *How’s It Going: A Practical Guide to Conferencing with Student Writers*, where he asserts that writers must be active participants in conversations about their writing and that writers can assume active roles only if they know how to “talk about their writing” (82). To help writers talk about their writing and establish conversations with their teachers prior to conferencing, Rick Monroe, Jeffrey Sommers, and Michael D. Soderlund also encourage writers to write memos to their (teacher) respondents, while Karen Spear, in her book *Sharing Writing: Peer Response Groups in English Classes*, suggests teachers prepare writers for writing conferences by asking writers to answer this question: “What specific questions or problems would you like your group to help you with?” (92).

These publications are qualitatively useful and no doubt help teachers encourage writers to engage in the response process and take ownership of their work. However, in light of the hopeless, silent, and frustrated writers in our peer response scenario and the emphasis on the respondent’s role, not the writer’s role, in peer response research, we wondered whether pedagogies evidenced in textbooks encourage the writer’s role in response or further reinforce the focus on the respondent. To answer our question, we turned to textbooks to consider the tools they offer writers during the response process. As we demonstrate, while textbooks provide writers with some necessary tools to engage the response process, they appear to provide respondents with more tools for giving feedback than they provide to writers for getting feedback.

**How Textbooks Advise Writers about Peer Response**

As Michael Palmquist says so succinctly in his textbook *The Bedford Researcher*, “WRITING IS A SOCIAL ACT.” And if peer review is an extension of this social act, “a conversation in which writers and readers exchange information and ideas about a topic” (xvi), then we should expect textbooks (and teachers) to encourage some interaction between writers and respondents and to provide tools that help both parties converse in the process. If, in the act of writing, we expect writers to demonstrate ownership over their texts and their writing, then we should concern ourselves with whether or not they have the appropriate tools to “Get feedback.” To consider how textbooks address writers and their role in response, we began with an overview of several textbooks being used in Ball State University’s composition program. We wanted to know what books tell writers about asking questions. Paging through the textbooks, we found no instances of authors telling writers how to ask questions in the process. We looked at peer response sections of the textbooks (both peer response questions in individual chapters and actual chapters on peer response). The closest example we found was a 1990s textbook by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff that was focused on the writer (*Community*). As we started to no-
tice a possible gap in what was on our very bookshelves, we expanded our search with intentions to review the five to ten top-ranked and top-selling composition textbooks and handbooks.

Consulting with publishers, professional organizations like NCTE, and libraries such as the Library of Congress in our quest for a “Top 10” list, we were, unfortunately, only able to identify which publisher had the biggest share of the market (courtesy of the Simba Marketing Report, Print Publishing for the School Market). Unable to confirm that the texts we reviewed comprised a representative sample of texts that are commonly used in college composition courses and wanting to ensure that we were not missing books that might have specific information directed to writers about their role in the peer response process, we searched CCCC book exhibits between 2008 and 2013 and met with book representatives annually to ask if they were aware of new composition textbooks or handbooks that provided this kind of guidance for writers. In the absence of such lists, we narrowed our field of study by selecting a representative sample, across at least five different publishers, of seven frequently used composition handbooks and textbooks:

- *The Everyday Writer* (2010), by Andrea A. Lunsford

These textbooks, not unlike most college composition textbooks and handbooks published in the past twenty years, use writing process, social constructivist, and post-process theories as their guiding pedagogical frames, supplying writers with multiple (re)writing strategies.

To complete our review, we followed the same procedure for each book: We studied the table of contents/index for any material related to (peer) response, read the preface to students or teachers, noted any advice to writers about getting feedback or asking questions, reviewed all of the headings in each textbook, looked for instructions to writers about response, carefully noted the types of instructions writers received about engaging the response process, and, finally, read other sections of the textbook (e.g., introduction, invention, organization) to compare what kinds of information were being conveyed to writers throughout the process. In recording our detailed notes about each textbook, we quoted anything remotely connected to response as we worked to understand how textbooks highlight the writer’s role in peer response.
To organize our notes, we asked ourselves the following questions: What advice is being given to writers about getting feedback/response? Is there anywhere they are telling writers to ask questions or how to ask questions? What are they telling the peer respondent? In our argument below, we present illustrated patterns that, taken together, suggest how these representative textbooks portray the writer’s role in the response process. As we argue, we find that textbooks, for the most part, offer cursory suggestions to writers in three broad categories: get feedback, provide context, and ask questions.

**Be Specific about the Feedback You Want**

Not surprisingly, in the textbooks we reviewed, the authors use imperative verbs to stress the importance of getting feedback. For example, *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing*, like others, tells writers “to get feedback from readers” (123), and *The Brief Penguin Handbook* contends similarly that writers “ask . . . peers for specific and genuine feedback” (12). Some textbooks go further, making a point of telling writers to get helpful feedback. For example, Palmquist, in an “Ask for Feedback” section in his textbook *The Bedford Researcher*, tells writers:

> You can ask for feedback on your draft from a friend, relative, colleague, or writing center tutor. It’s generally a good idea to ask for help from someone who will be frank as well as supportive and to be specific about the kinds of comments you’re looking for. Hearing “it’s just fine” from a reviewer will not help you revise. (255, emphasis added)

Clear in Palmquist’s message is the advice that writers should carefully consider what they ask of their respondents when they solicit feedback in order to avoid unhelpful responses such as “it’s just fine.” Arguably, such responses are potential conversation stoppers that could reinforce the silent, helpless, and, likely, frustrated writer in the scenario at the beginning of our article. Unfortunately for writers, textbook authors offer few examples for how to get specific feedback.

**Provide Background Context to Invite Writers into Your Work**

Not unlike the conversations and memos that Anderson, Spear, J. Sommers, Monroe, and Soderlund advocate to help writers interact with their respondents during the response process, some textbooks encourage writers to set up the context of their writing as they prepare to receive feedback (e.g., Lunsford; Ramage, Bean, and Johnson; Bullock and Weinberg). Andrea Lunsford, for example, in *The Everyday Writer*, instructs writers to prepare for the pending conversation with their respondents accordingly: “If you ask other people to evaluate your draft, be sure that they know your assignment, intended audience, and purpose” (84). Likewise, Richard Bullock and Francine Weinberg in *The Norton Field Guide to Writing* advise, “Make sure that anyone you ask to read and RESPOND to your text knows your purpose and audience” (57, emphasis theirs).
Ask Questions about Your Work

Though few, some textbook authors also ask writers to identify problem areas or ask questions that they would like their peers to answer. In an effort to get writers and respondents working together, Lunsford suggests that writers “guide . . . readers” by identifying problems they “see in this draft” and by asking questions: “Does this WORK? What’s wrong here?” (85).

To help writers “[e]licit good responses,” David Blakesley and Jeffrey L. Hoogeveen, in their textbook Writing: A Manual for the Digital Age, tell writers: “Ask readers to respond to aspects that trouble you or may need more attention” (38). Similarly, John D. Ramage, John C. Bean, and June Johnson in their chapter “Composing and Revising” in The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing, advise writers to prepare questions for their respondents based on the challenges or successes they are experiencing:

For the Writer
Prepare two or three questions you would like your peer reviewer to address while responding to your draft. The questions can focus on some aspect of your draft that you are uncertain about, on one or more sections where you particularly seek help or advice, on some feature that you particularly like about your draft, or on some part you especially wrestled with. Write out your questions and give them to your peer reviewer along with your draft. (Ramage, Bean, and Johnson 447, emphasis added)

With these instructions, the textbook authors recognize that the writer’s role in response is not only to solicit feedback but also to get the peer review conversation started. Writers are therefore advised to set the stage for their readers by sharing the challenges or successes they may be experiencing with their writing.

As we think back to the helpless, frustrated, and silent writers in our all-too-familiar scenario, we question whether textbooks provide emergent writers with enough tools or explicit models to engage actively in peer response conversations. While the advice we found clearly directs writers on what to do when engaging peers in response, emergent writers may still be left asking, “How should I be specific? How should I provide background information? How should I ask questions?”

How Textbooks Limit the Role of the Writer in Peer Response

Arguably, we may have helpless, frustrated, and silent writers in need of additional guidance because, most textbooks, if our sample is representative, omit a level of detail that could aid writers in accomplishing the very directive that every textbook gives: “Get feedback.” As noted above, Palmquist does not offer examples for getting feedback but merely warns writers of the consequences of not being specific in their request for feedback: “Hearing ‘it’s just fine’ . . . will not help you revise” (255). Similarly, in The Brief Penguin Handbook, Lester Faigley helps writers identify resources (e.g., “fellow students” and “peer review sessions”), but he does not offer how they might get that feedback:
After you’ve finished your first draft, you’ll want to get comments from other writers. A good source of help is fellow students. Your instructor may include a peer review session as part of the assignment. (224)

In contrast, in the subsequent section of the textbook, “Reading another student’s paper,” (224) directed at respondents, Faigley explicitly outlines instructions that respondents should follow when reading a peer’s paper:

It is usually best to read through a project twice, looking at different levels. . . . The first time you read through a project, concentrate on comprehension and overall impressions. See if you can summarize the project after reading it once.

Once you’ve read through the project a second time, write concluding suggestions and comments about how the writer could improve the project. Be specific. Saying “I liked the project” or “It’s a good first draft” does not help the writer. Comments like “You need to cite more sources” or “You might consider switching paragraphs 2 and 4” give the writer specific areas to concentrate on in the revision. (224)

Unlike the previous examples aimed at writers to get feedback, the directive to “be specific” in this section aimed at respondents is followed by explicit examples of what constitutes both unhelpful (e.g., “I liked the project”) and helpful responses (“You need to cite more sources”). In providing such models, we argue that Faigley offers respondents specific examples that empower them to actively engage the process and give feedback. We contend that emergent writers need a similar level of instruction if they are to be agents in response.

Looking closely at the peer review activities in textbooks like The St. Martin’s Guide to Writing and The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing, which are not unlike those found in many composition textbooks and handbooks, we notice that the discussion quickly turns away from the role of the writer to the role of the respondent in peer review activities. In fact, the visual rhetoric alone paints a clear picture: approximately one-quarter of the peer review activity is directed at writers while the other three-quarters is geared toward the respondents.

In these peer review activities, we see an opportunity for modeling that is not fully realized. Consider, for instance, the questions provided for respondents to answer in these activities. Writers could use those same questions in their efforts to solicit feedback and participate in response conversations. Interestingly though, in our review of textbooks we noticed that while some textbook authors call writers’ attention to peer response questions, most do not. Take, for example, the ways that various textbooks introduce questions in their sections on peer response:

Use the questions here to respond to someone else’s draft or to analyze your own. (Lunsford 84)

The following questions can help you study your draft with a critical eye. Getting Response from others is always good, and these questions can guide their reading, too. Make sure they know your purpose and audience. (Ballock and Weinberg 35, 80, emphasis theirs)
In addition to the generic peer review questions explained in Skill 16.4, ask your peer reviewers to address these questions. (Ramage, Bean, and Johnson 123, emphasis added)

The instructions that precede peer review questions in Lunsford’s textbook, for example, convey to writers that while respondents might answer the included questions about a writer’s work, writers might also use them for self-evaluation purposes. Yet, there is no mention that writers might use them for purposes of soliciting feedback. In the second example from The Norton Field Guide to Writing, it is ambiguous whether the questions are just for respondents or whether writers can use the questions as a way of “getting response from others,” though an excerpt later in the textbook suggests that their intention is the latter:

Sometimes the most helpful eyes belong to others. . . . Ask your readers to consider the specific elements in the list below [e.g., title, introduction, thesis, audience, purpose, etc.], but don’t restrict them to those elements. (Bullock and Weinberg 235, emphasis added)

In this example, like the one we see above from Ramage, Bean, and Johnson’s textbook, Bullock and Weinberg point writers to a specific set of questions that they should ask of their respondents. Such instructions take a notable step toward shifting the locus of control from the respondent to helping writers engage their peers in conversation. Unfortunately, as we see in these four examples, the modeling that students receive is dependent on what parts of the textbook they choose to read. If students read the peer review sections within the content chapters in The Norton Field Guide to Writing, the instructions do not clearly articulate how writers might use the questions (e.g., “GETTING response from others is always good, and these questions can guide their reading, too”; 35, 80). If, on the other hand, they read the “Getting Response” chapter later in the book, they will benefit from the textbook authors’ instructions that they should in fact use questions that will help them solicit their feedback (e.g., “Ask your readers to consider the specific elements in the list below . . .”; 235). A similar pattern appears in The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing, where Ramage, Bean, and Johnson explicitly instruct writers to use the questions (i.e., “ask your peer reviewers to address these questions”) in some, but not all, parts of their textbook: the generic peer review in Skill 16.4 of their textbook (447) does not refer writers to use the questions in soliciting feedback. When these textbook authors preface their peer review questions with an explicit invitation to writers to use the questions, they are taking an important step toward offering students models for soliciting feedback. Unfortunately, though, such instructions are inconsistent in these textbooks. And aside from the two questions, “Does this WORK?” and “What’s wrong here?” (85) that Lunsford advises writers to ask, we uncovered no similar instructions in any of the other textbooks.

Instead, it is noteworthy that the most explicit advice for writers about asking questions and, in effect, setting up good conversations is buried in an instructor’s manual for The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing. In this manual, Susanmarie Harrington not only informs teachers of the need to “train students to ask good
questions” when soliciting feedback (like the advice we found in many textbooks), she also provides explicit examples for doing so:

You will need to train students to ask good questions, which will help reviewers target their attention. Questions like “How can I make this draft better?” “What grade do you think this will get?” and “What did you think?” are not helpful, as they are vague and don’t reflect anything about the writer’s own thoughts. Questions like “Am I getting off topic in the introduction when I talk about walking my sister to the corner on her first day of school?” or “Does my tone on page 3 seem harsh? I’m trying to be fair to the people who disagree with the decision I’m describing” help readers understand the writer’s purpose and will set up good conversations. (Harrington 14, emphasis added)

In these instructions to teachers, Harrington illustrates the difference between vague and helpful questions, pointing out that helpful questions effectively “help readers understand the writer’s purpose” and reinforcing why textbooks like The Everyday Writer, The Bedford Researcher, and The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Writing, among others, encourage and instruct writers to identify their purpose and audience in preparation for the peer response process. In addition, she reminds teachers that helpful questions encourage “good conversations” with respondents. It is these “good conversations” that are so critical, we argue, to the peer response process and lead us to question why so many textbooks omit seemingly simple comparisons of helpful versus vague questions that could offer students a model for soliciting feedback.

Unfortunately, this information is limited to the instructor’s manual; it is not easily accessible to writers so they can benefit from examples of helpful questions. Recall the plethora of peer response questions that appear in popular textbooks. While such questions are helpful to emerging writers, who depend on modeling, they lack explanation about what makes them “helpful” questions. As a result, emerging writers may perceive them as a prescriptive set of questions that must be answered (or worse, a set of questions to be “given over” to a respondent), rather than what they are intended to be: questions that could advance the writer’s thoughts and agenda. In providing examples of both “vague” and “helpful” questions, Harrington could help writers see and understand differences between “helpful” and not-so-helpful questions, giving them tools to think about the kinds of questions that would best serve their purpose when soliciting feedback. Unfortunately, reserving such discussion for the instructor’s manual at the very least limits writers’ access to tools that could facilitate their participation in peer response conversations.

A Dated Exception: A Textbook with Explicit Advice for Writers

This advice that could be helpful to writers, hidden in an instructor’s manual, reminds us of Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff’s first edition of A Community of Writers published in 1995, in which eleven “Sharing and Responding” techniques, directed toward writers for soliciting feedback, were reserved for the instructor’s manual. In response to teachers’ requests to make the information readily available to writers, the “Sharing and Responding” techniques section was moved to the textbook in...
subsequent editions (until their last edition in 2003, *Being a Writer*), as a way to ensure that writers understood the value of both giving and getting feedback. Unlike the textbooks mentioned above, which focus on giving feedback but seem to lack consistent and explicit models that help writers get feedback, Elbow and Belanoff highlight the value of both giving and getting feedback:

In 56 pages near the end of this book, we’ve explained all the good methods we know for getting feedback from classmates on your writing. . . . The ability to give responses to your classmates’ writing and to get their responses to your own writing may be the most important thing you learn from this book. (*Being xx*, emphasis added)

Importantly, they explain to teachers that “it’s no good telling someone, ‘Ask for whatever kind of feedback you want,’ if that person doesn’t know many options” (xxv). Not surprisingly then, to put students “in a position to ask for the kind of feedback that is right for [them]” (352), Elbow and Belanoff urge students to “try [all the techniques] in order to learn the wide range of options [they] have for feedback” (352). The message throughout their work is clear: teaching writers to use these sharing and responding techniques will result in more effective writers who know how to solicit the feedback they need.

Interestingly, Blakesley and Hoogeveen’s textbook mirrors three of Elbow and Belanoff’s strategies: pointing, summarizing, and reflecting. However, rather than presenting these strategies to writers, their advice is directed at respondents, a pattern that seems consistent with our findings above. While the textbooks in our sample arguably provide writers with guidance about the writing process, we are struck that when it comes to teaching students how to engage the feedback process, it appears that more attention is focused on teaching respondents about their role in the feedback process than on teaching writers.

**Into the Classroom**

We speculate that if, as our research suggests, our field’s textbooks and course materials devote more attention to the respondent than to the writer, we may unwittingly be encouraging writers to be bystanders, rather than active participants, in the response process. In the absence of many explicit tools to guide writers through the feedback process, we see a demonstrated need for research that focuses specifically on the writer as solicitor of feedback. As we advocate for and contribute to this research, we need to help our students engage in productive, interactive dialogues with respondents about their writing. Our shared frustration and concern about the writer in the scenario at the beginning of our article point to the value we place on writers. As teachers, we want them to be involved in the process, so in this section we offer suggestions that will help teachers get writers involved. In short, we suggest that we, as teachers, first and foremost take stock of the textbooks, handbooks, and course materials we are using to teach students about peer response. In addition, we need to teach writers how to engage in conversations about the feedback they need and receive. To do that well, we need to teach writers how to
identify where they have questions, comments, and concerns about their writing, and with that, we need to guide them in learning how to ask questions of their peers about their writing.

Take Stock of Your Course Materials

We encourage teachers who use textbooks or handbooks in their writing courses to recognize first what is and isn’t in the books they are using:

> How does the guidance provided to writers compare with that provided to respondents?
> Are there clear resources for writers and respondents on how to engage the peer response conversation?
> Are writers encouraged to tell respondents what they think they need in the feedback process?
> Do they tell writers to get feedback? If so, how?
> Do they tell writers to provide context for the pending conversation? If so, how?
> Do they tell writers to ask questions of their respondents? If so, how?
> Do they call writers’ attention to questions (explicitly intended for respondents to answer) that writers could co-opt as questions of their respondents?
> Are writers provided with examples of effective questions to ask?
> Does the textbook explain what makes an effective question? If so, how?

In effect, these questions encourage teachers to consider whether the tools offered in their students’ textbooks or in classroom materials are designed to put writers in conversation about their writing. If it appears that the course materials replicate the findings we have shared, we hope that by asking critical questions like the ones noted above, teachers will adapt their materials to better meet the needs of their writers so that both respondents and writers can fully engage in the peer response process. We have found that this critical consideration of course materials helps us, as teachers, assess the level of direction we need to add to our courses. Unfortunately, this awareness alone does not benefit our students. We have found that the teaching suggestions articulated in the next two sections are also important in helping students learn how to solicit the feedback they need.

Teach Writers How to Engage in Conversations

To engage writers in conversations during peer response, it is important to offer activities to ensure that both respondents and writers are able to articulate a clear purpose of what they are trying to accomplish. These activities, guided by the pedagogies used to prepare writing center consultants (e.g., Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli’s *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* and Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner’s *Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*), include a quick assessment of their experience with peer response and mock peer-response sessions.

Early in the semester, weeks before asking students to exchange their writing with each other, we find it helpful to facilitate a brief discussion about students’
experiences in peer response groups. The scenario at the start of this article best captures their collective responses. As the class discussion comes to a close, students do a quick-write, answering the question, “What would it take for you to be invested as writers in peer response?” Students’ typical responses include the following:

> “I need to know what to ask.”
> “I don’t know what to ask about my writing, except for things like punctuation and grammar.”
> “Does the person reading my work really know what the assignment is? Better than I do?”
> “I’m not really sure if I’m supposed to talk or ask questions when someone is giving me feedback about my work, so I don’t really do anything. They write stuff on my paper. Sometimes I read it if I can, but I don’t really know what to do with it.”

Our consistent observation in reading students’ comments is that they are usually very similar across lower- and upper-division courses. Students’ comments often point to their struggle to position themselves in peer response. Should they talk, ask questions, or just sit silently as someone else says or writes things about their writing? Another common observation is that there is often a collective sigh of relief when students recognize, after hearing their brief responses being read orally, that they all have similar concerns about their struggles with peer response activities.

Following our conversation with students about their experiences with peer response, we also want to know what kind of feedback writers find to be useful and what kind of feedback they find to be useless. As a result, we also developed an activity, “Feedback: What Works for You and How Do You Get It?” (Formo and Stallings), that not only helps teachers and students understand student experiences with response but also helps create a shared language for requesting feedback that the class can use. The observations and shared language that are generated from these conversations and activities position teachers and students well for mock peer-response sessions.

Teach Writers to Identify Questions, Comments, or Concerns and to Ask Questions of Their Peers

To help writers identify and generate specific questions, comments, or concerns that they have about their work, we build on their experiences from the previous activity and reference assignment rubrics (for guidance in facilitating rubric workshops, see Chris Anson, Matthew Davis, and Domenica Vilhotti’s “‘What Do We Want in this Paper?’ Generating Criteria Collectively”). For homework, we ask writers to reflect on the quick-write about their experiences with response, to review the assignment rubric associated with a specific writing project, and to revisit the reading and writing they have done toward the assignment. We then ask them to craft three to five questions they have about the assignment to ask of their peers as they prepare to write or revise their assignment. When appropriate, we can direct our students to the course text, where there are typically generous lists of questions for respondents to consider asking of their peers’ writing.
In the following class, with their list of questions in hand, we facilitate an in-class discussion about effective and less effective questions for writers to ask of their respondents, revising their questions as we go. The end result is a robust list of questions for writers to ask of their respondents. They project the collective list of questions on the classroom screen and then look for ways to categorize them. They organize the questions within categories such as tone, content, evidence-based support, style, and logistics. This list of questions becomes a dynamic list that students freely update throughout the semester on the class classroom management site (e.g., Moodle).

Use Mock Peer-Response Sessions

With a list of questions in place, we follow Carl Anderson’s suggestion to teach students how to ask questions about their writing through role-playing. We provide students with a scenario such as the following and ask for volunteers to role-play the scene:

**Writer’s Scene:** As a writer, you feel confident that you have responded thoroughly to the assignment. This is your first peer-response session with this particular paper. You believe the best way your peer can help you is by polishing the punctuation and grammar in your paper.

**What do you bring to the peer-response session?** You bring the most recent draft of your paper (for the assignment the class is working on) along with the assignment sheet.

To ensure that this mock session will be a success, it is helpful before class begins to invite two to three students to participate in the mock sessions and ask them to choose which role they would prefer.

At the start of the mock peer-response class, we set the context for the class—this is an opportunity for us to practice soliciting feedback as writers by helping a student writer in class do just that. We explain to the class that as they watch the mock session being role-played they should be thinking about ways to help the writer and the respondent. We then ask for two volunteers—a writer and a peer respondent—to come to the center of the class where a table with two chairs is arranged. The class is arranged in a semi-circle or circle with the volunteers in the middle. The writer takes a seat with the materials noted in the scenario above—an assignment draft and the assignment prompt—and the respondent sits in the second chair. The volunteers are told that at any point in their mock session, they can step out of their role-playing positions and ask for guidance from the class. The session begins:

**Respondent:** How’s your draft going?

**Writer:** I think I’ve got it. I just need help with the punctuation and grammar.

**Respondent:** Like what?
**Writer:** Commas—I don’t understand them. But I’m sure there’s more to discuss than commas.

**Respondent:** *She steps out of her role and asks for guidance from class. She wonders if this should be the focus.*

This becomes a teachable moment. When the respondent asks for assistance from the class, this break in the session becomes an opportunity for the class to assist the writer and the respondent. The writer appears stuck, not knowing what to ask. And the respondent appears perplexed, too. How can the respondent help the writer ask for feedback that engages the two of them in the ideas of the paper along with the sentence-level issues (if those are in fact concerns for the writer)? To assist the respondent in this mock session, the class suggests that the writer’s question be jotted down for later and that the writer be asked to read a section she likes about her paper. The class prompts the respondent to then ask the writer why she likes that section of her paper. Next, the class advises the writer to read aloud a place where she struggled as a writer. The class also asks to project the list of questions they have generated together in the previous class activity and encourages the writer to use questions on the list as she requests feedback from the respondent. Certainly the respondent benefits from these suggestions. Even more, the writer becomes aware of how she can engage in conversation about her writing so that she can solicit the feedback that will help her revise.

Our goal when we use role-playing, as in the example above, is to ensure that the class has at least two mock-session experiences in a single class meeting. (This provides a variety of learning opportunities while managing the stress for the students who serve as volunteers.) We like to limit each mock session to no more than seven minutes of back and forth between respondent and writer. We end each mock session with a debrief where we ask the class and the volunteers to respond for one minute in writing to this question: “What did you learn today about requesting and giving feedback?” The lessons students share aloud with each other as a result of this quick-write are consistently specific. Their comments suggest that they begin to see how they can be constructive respondents that engage writers. Equally important, they understand that as writers they can solicit feedback about their writing from their peers. Even more, students ask, “Can we do that (peer response) again?”—a sure sign that it was class time well spent.

We contend that student writers will see greater value in peer response if they develop tools that allow them to participate more actively in the feedback process. With teaching suggestions like those above, writers can learn how to reflect on their experiences with peer response. They can also learn to identify their needs as writers and how to ask questions that will solicit the feedback they need. Our hope is that these suggestions help ameliorate the frustrated, helpless, or silent students who may be sitting in our classrooms. With intentional instruction, we are confident that writers can learn how to solicit the feedback they want and need.
Conclusion

The focus in this paper, then, has been on (1) raising teachers’ awareness about the limited tools offered to writers for soliciting feedback in response and (2) offering practical suggestions that teachers could use to engage writers in peer response conversations. Given the field’s emphasis on collaboration, we were surprised to find that the textbooks, just like the research, focused more on the respondent’s role in response and less on the writer’s role in getting feedback. On the other hand, we were not surprised by our findings, given that the pedagogies evidenced in textbooks typically reflect research, something our own work on response research confirms (Formo and Stallings “Where’s”). We are concerned that the lack of available tools to help writers learn how to request feedback unintentionally reinforces the scenario at the beginning of the article, calling into question the field’s writer-centered ethos in response research and practice. Without a doubt, student writers must learn how to anticipate readers’ questions, and the best way to do that is to give writers opportunities to work with peers. At the same time, we must help students reflect on these experiences so they can begin or continue to reflect on their needs and questions as writers. The suggestions we present in the “Into the Classroom” section represent our attempt to help teachers in their quest to empower and engage writers in peer response conversations.

After all, in a field that emphasizes the social act of writing, we suggest, as Jay Simmons’s article title “Responders Are Taught, Not Born” conveys, that writers must also be taught how to solicit feedback and engage in peer response conversations in ways that are useful to them. We anticipate that once we intentionally teach writers how to be active participants in peer review conversations, they will no longer sigh, “Do we have to do peer review?” as the students did in the scenario at the start of this article. Instead, they will ask, “Can we please get into our peer response writing groups?”

Works Cited


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