Responding with the Golden Rule: A Cross-Institutional Peer Review Experiment

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New Voices

Instructors recount the challenges and successes that accompanied a collaborative peer review project between first-year college students at two institutions.

The Problem with Peer Review

In many conversations about our teaching, the two of us have found ourselves discussing similarities between the students in our first-year writing courses. Kristen Getchell teaches at a small, urban, private college, and Ann N. Amicucci teaches at a midsized, rural, state university, yet we encounter the same challenges in getting our students to converse with each other about their writing. As both John Mumma and Susanna Kelly Engbers describe, students often perceive peer review feedback as less legitimate feedback than that which they receive from an instructor. Engbers argues that peer review is successful when students are able to recognize the role of “real readers” in relation to their writing (401). In our courses, we had difficulty getting students to see each other as “real readers.” We tried various methods to engage students in peer review, from modeling peer review and sharing our own professional peer review responses to viewing and discussing resources such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology film No One Writes Alone. These exercises managed to move the needle ever so slightly in a positive direction, but we still lamented the general malaise we felt on peer review days. Many of our students avoided giving constructive feedback for fear of offending another student in class, while many others did not take peer review seriously because the responses they received were from their classmates. Drawing on Peter Elbow’s and Kenneth A. Bruffee’s arguments that considering others’ perspectives—the perspectives of readers—can enhance writers’ learning and development, we felt it was pertinent to convey to students the value of peer review in the writing process. Thus, we chose to take peer review outside of the classroom to prompt students to recognize the role of readers and the value of peer review in their writing process.

We developed a cross-institutional peer review unit in which students provide feedback to other students at a partner institution. In both our courses, students first practiced traditional peer review with their classmates, then moved...
on to cross-institutional peer review as a subsequent, more challenging version of offering peer feedback. By somewhat mimicking a blind peer review process, we gave students the opportunity to evaluate each other’s writing for its merits without the burden of responding to someone sitting nearby in class; the unit asked students to write with a peer audience in mind who they would presumably never meet. In this article, we give an overview of the cross-institutional peer review unit, present some challenges we encountered, and then discuss students’ and our own reflections on this process.

Overview of the Unit

The unit took place over a three-week period during weeks ten through twelve on our academic calendars. Both instructors had Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedules. We used the first class period to introduce the unit and provide background on context and purpose. Both our courses were focused on writing about place, so we designed the collaborative unit to focus on readings and writing related to each campus’s location. We introduced students to each other’s schools in various ways, such as by talking about the student population on each campus, showing the location of each school on an online map, and showing photographs from each school’s website and photographs of each other to our classes.

It was our hope that this would give students in each class some sense of audience. We wanted students to have some audience in mind when writing their reading responses and peer feedback, so we discussed some similarities and differences between the two locations to allow them to begin to create their own idea of their distant peers.

On this first day, students were curious. In Getchell’s class, they had several questions about the instructors, the school, and the other students. In Amicucci’s class, they were curious about the writing level of their new peers and asked if the courses were comparable. Even if this was only curiosity on the part of the students, the increased engagement was encouraging.

Modeling Reading Response and Feedback: Trial Run

The first article that we distributed to students was Joel Stein’s 2013 *Time* article “The New Greatest Generation: Why Millennials Will Save Us All.” We chose this article as a jumping-off point because all of our students in the four sections were traditional eighteen- to twenty-two-year-old college students and, as such, fell into the millennial generation. By starting with an article to which both groups of students could relate, we aimed to start discussion of response and feedback from a relatively neutral ground. Then, students would read one piece that was situated in western Pennsylvania and one in Boston.

For each article in the unit, students wrote a paper in response to a prompt organized into two categories: Questions about the Essay and Questions about Your Experiences, which we used to prompt students to discuss both the content of each article and their position in relation to that content (see the appendix for
examples of prompts). Our larger goal in these assignment directions, in relation to the learning objectives in each of our courses, was for students to develop their abilities to explain and substantiate their ideas in writing.

On the first discussion day, we talked about the Stein article and students' responses to it by attending to each of the questions in the prompt. We encouraged students to use the text to support their answers. Then, to practice the peer feedback process, we chose one response and asked each group of students to offer feedback to it. Students' feedback in this unit was guided by a set of questions that asked them to respond to the content of each other's writing and to suggest areas for revision (see the appendix). In this initial mock feedback discussion, we talked about different types of feedback and their effectiveness in a writer's revision process. Additionally, we stressed the importance of remaining constructive when responding to the work of others.

This modeling day was very important for instructors to get a sense of how students would respond to the work of their peers and also to provide guidelines for feedback. Further, it allowed us to go through the questions provided for students in the directions titled “Responding to Someone Else’s Paper” to give them ideas about what to look for in a peer’s response.

**Live Responses and Feedback**

After the trial day, we “went live” with the responses for the next two readings in the unit. Each of the articles followed the same four-class schedule:

*Prior to First Class Period:* Students read the article and write their response papers.

*First Class Period: Class Discussion of Reading*

Students discuss the article and their written responses to it in class. The class period is focused on discussing the content of the article and students' ideas about and experiences related to that content. Students submit their response papers to the instructor.

*Intermediate tasks for instructors:* After class, instructors remove students’ last names from responses, swap responses via email, and pair students for peer response. Because of differing course caps between institutions (Getchell’s courses each had sixteen students, while Amicucci’s each had twenty), several students at one institution are offered extra credit on the assignment in exchange for responding to more than one peer.

*Second Class Period: Responding to Peers*

Each student is given a response paper from his or her cross-institutional partner. Students spend the class period answering peer feedback questions about this student’s reading response paper. Instructors circulate to answer questions and offer suggestions as students write answers to the feedback questions. Students submit their peer feedback to instructors at the end of the class period.
**Intermediate tasks for instructors:** Instructors read responses, remove any last names, and exchange peer feedback via email.

**Third Class Period: Revise Based on Feedback**

Each student receives peer feedback from a peer at the other institution; students who responded to more than one paper receive feedback from more than one peer. Students discuss the feedback they received, then use class time to revise their initial reading response papers based on this feedback. Instructors circulate to help students identify useful suggestions from feedback, interpret unclear feedback, and make revisions. Students complete their revisions at home.

**Final Class Period: Hand in Final Draft of Reading Response**

Students submit their revised reading response papers along with their original response paper and the peer feedback they received. In class, students reflect on the peer feedback and revision processes.

Following their response to the Stein article, students read the creative nonfiction essay “Grieving Ceremonies” by Helen Sitler, written about the Flight 93 memorial site in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. This reading choice focused on Pennsylvania: located roughly seventy miles from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) campus, Shanksville and the crash site held local significance for many students in Amicucci’s classes.

In the second class period, as students read papers from their cross-institutional partners, they shared some opinions on these papers, both individually with instructors and, in a few cases, aloud to the class. We noticed that students were not hesitant to be critical of papers they read—in Amicucci’s classes, in particular, a handful of students made remarks indicating that they thought their peers at Getchell’s institution hadn’t followed the assignment guidelines correctly. One student called Amicucci to her desk and said she was unsure of how to respond to her peer’s writing, as the peer did not seem to have read the Flight 93 article prior to responding to it. Students’ criticizing their peers’ work in this way came as a surprise, as we had not witnessed students criticizing their same-class peers in a similar way during previous peer review sessions in our courses.

In the third class period, the peer feedback that resulted from these more critical responses did not go unnoticed. Several Curry College students commented to Getchell that the feedback they had received was “snippy” or even “mean.” As Getchell read this feedback, she found it was, in most cases, straightforward, directive feedback. This added another element to our experiment: students, in addition to not learning how to give critical feedback, were also unprepared to receive it. Amicucci’s students had a similar experience—a few were offended by what they found to be highly critical feedback, and a few criticized their Curry peers for producing feedback that contained typographical errors, even though their own feedback had contained similar errors.

After this first exchange, we examined the feedback that each group had produced and identified ways to emphasize, in discussing the peer feedback direc-
tions, that students were to provide feedback that was both more constructive and perhaps more gentle than in the first round. This intervention did not change the assignment at all, but instructors reminded students to be collegial and thorough in their second responses.

The next article was Janet Reitman’s controversial *Rolling Stone* article “Jahar’s World” that profiled the Boston Marathon bombing suspect Dzhokhar Tsarnaev. We chose this as our Massachusetts-linked piece: the marathon event held local relevance for Getchell’s students, both because the event occurred roughly ten miles from Curry College and because Tsarnaev was a college student at nearby University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, a school where several of Getchell’s students had friends. The second exchange followed the same pattern as the first, as outlined on the schedule above.

Grading

As this was an experimental unit, it was important to us that we could evaluate students based on their work but not jeopardize their grades if something went awry. We constructed a short rubric to assess student work for each of the two exchanges (see the appendix). Each of the three assignments in the unit was worth ten points and was a somewhat low-stakes assignment in our courses (in both courses, the thirty-point unit totaled roughly 10 percent of students’ semester grade). Because of the experimental nature of the assignment, we chose not to evaluate the strengths of students’ peer responses but, rather, to give students credit simply for completing this stage of the assignment. As shown on the rubric, the majority of the assignment grade resulted from an evaluation of students’ revised papers, which emphasized overall writing abilities that each of our courses gave students practice in developing.

Results

The student feedback that was given during this unit was varied. Getchell noted a marked increase in the professionalism in the documents that were submitted for feedback. Suddenly, some students who struggled with details of preparing an academic assignment were including informative headings on their papers and numbering page numbers diligently. Amicucci noticed a wide range of responses, varying from some students who put little care into the assignment (perhaps because of its relative weight in their overall course grade) to other students who went far beyond the assignment requirements and composed responses that were sophisticated in comparison with some of their previous course work.

During the first article swap, we found that a lot of feedback was surface feedback that did not prove very helpful for the writer. We had many students who included comments such as “add more detail” and “you have a lot of run-ons” without indicating where and specifically how these issues could be addressed. Many students commented that the feedback they received during this first swap was unhelpful due to the vague nature of the comments. However, this gave us an
excellent opportunity to have students reflect on their own feedback. The question we asked our own students was, “And how many of you did the same thing?” Many students, finding difficulty revising based on vague feedback, were able to understand that their own feedback was perhaps less than helpful. Based on this experience, we enacted the “Golden Rule,” a guideline suggested by one of Amicucci’s students: give the type of feedback you would like to receive. Most students said they wanted to receive feedback that was directive and well explained, which would help them revise their papers, but that was also presented in a positive manner. This was the mantra for the second article, and we noticed a significant difference in the level of detail in feedback. By following this guideline, we could also encourage students to avoid any comments that could be construed as mean-spirited.

Most of the revisions made based on the feedback included adding examples. Students seemed to have the most ease in telling the writers that they lacked examples from the text and were direct in explaining where the writer could add textual support. Despite the improvements and strong work of some students, the second swap still included some surface level, vague feedback. Students who received this kind of feedback were instructed to use the rubric to revise or ask a classmate to review their work.

**Censoring Responses**

We entered this unit with no intentions to censor students, yet we discovered that some censoring was necessary. In particular, we wanted to protect students from any comments they might perceive as mean-spirited or hostile and not constructive. We ended up censoring only one comment, in which a student from one group offered a mean-spirited comment to a peer indicating that the peer’s level of writing was not appropriate for college; we determined that the comment would not be well received by the peer, who was a struggling writer, and chose to remove one sentence from this student’s peer feedback as a result.

As explained, we removed all last names from students’ work with the intention of keeping students’ identities private. However, some students tried to include Instagram and Twitter names to connect with their peers. During the first round, Getchell had one student who included a Twitter name at the bottom of her feedback, which Getchell removed. By the second round, though, multiple students expressed an interest in connecting with their peers, and many asked if it was acceptable to list their social media information along with the feedback they wrote to a peer. As a result, we gave students the agency to identify themselves via social media if they chose. A handful ended up including Twitter information on their second responses to each other.

**Student Reflection on Cross-Institutional Peer Review**

At the end of the unit, we were left with the question, Did students and instructors find the process of cross-institutional peer responses to be helpful in students’
learning process in a first-year college writing course? We asked students to reflect in writing on their experiences during the unit and to evaluate the effectiveness of the activity. The feedback was mixed, but overall, students found the activity helped them gain a better understanding of their writing process. However, the specific part of the process found to be useful was different from student to student.

Some feedback was very specific to the assignments, while some students commented on the overall writing experience. One student in Getchell’s class commented specifically on using the feedback when revising:

In my response to “Grieving Ceremonies” Matt F suggested that I explain how the memorial of the Flight 93 class site comforted people that visited and how the author felt about the change of the memorial. I took more details from the essay about how the crash site looked like initially and how it changed with the help of Wally Miller and The National Park service who had been constructing the permanent Flight 93 memorial. Also, I took details of how the author felt about the change of the memorial. Matt F also suggested that I add more detail about the author’s experiences at the crash site, which I included in my revised response.

Some students reflected on lessons that they learned about peer review during the unit. A student from Amicucci’s class gave the following reflection:

Our papers are only ever checked by the people we know and go to school with. Typically if you are friends with a person and you are checking their paper, then you will not want to make them feel bad for correcting their mistakes. What I have been seeing is the opposite though. It is nice to get feedback from someone you do not know, but this is proving to be pretty much the same thing as responding to a paper of one of your classmates. We are finding the same errors that we would just correcting our own papers. Like I said though, it is nice to get feedback from someone you don’t know.

Another student from Amicucci’s class explains how a cross-institutional audience changed his mindset while writing:

Throughout the last three weeks I have noticed that I changed how my mindset is while writing a paper. Usually I had only written papers based off of if it made sense to me. Now, I realized that that is not what I should be doing. Instead, I should be focusing my writing on making sense to the reader. I now write with the focus on the readers because that is what is important. If I continued to write for my writing to be only understood by me, it would be difficult to understand for others. I think I have done a better job writing with this now in mind.

Other students chose to reflect more globally on their experiences as a writer. As one student from Amicucci’s class reflected:

One thing that I noticed is that I’ve begun to try to explain my statements more clearly through using more textual references and person[al] interpretations than before. I think that explaining myself thoroughly is more important because these people have no idea who I am, but . . . I can [explain] to a peer in my classroom because they’re more accessible.
The feedback went beyond students’ writing process and took into consideration the notion of place in their response to the unit, as one student from Getchell’s class wrote:

I think going back and forth with the class from Pennsylvania helped me reimagine my idea of place. When you live in a certain place, you think of where you live in one certain way. When you think of a place you are not from, you also have a pre-conceived notion of what they are like. Going back and forth about the Flight 93 crash site, local to the Penn class, and the Boston Marathon bombing, local to us, was very helpful. We got insight from people who could have likely been directly affected by Fight 93 and insight from people who were most likely not directly affected by the Boston Marathon bombing. Reading and reviewing with the Pennsylvania students showed me how ideas of place are often constructed in our heads or viewed very different from individual to individual.

In anticipation of our own response to this question, we kept notes about observations during the unit. In addition, we reviewed student work at the end of the term and spent some time reflecting on the unit.

**Conclusions: Instructors’ Reflection**

We designed this unit in reaction to students’ attitudes toward peer review: we hoped to prompt students to take peer review more seriously and to give one another more critical feedback. In reflecting on the process of cross-institutional peer review, we both found that the unit succeeded in achieving these goals. Students’ awareness of the role of audience in writing increased, as evidenced in their reflections above; even in class discussion, students began talking about the need to clarify their writing for an audience in ways we had not heard them identify prior to the cross-institutional exchange. Additionally, students broke away from their hesitation to give same-class peers any critical feedback and were unafraid to criticize their cross-institutional peers’ work. Of course, with this new boldness in criticizing each other’s work came the primary challenge we encountered in this unit, that of dealing with some students’ overly critical comments and other students’ at times overly sensitive reception to peer comments. When we teach the unit again, the one change we plan to make is the way we model feedback initially, prior to students’ first exchange. We plan to spend more time up front having the “Golden Rule” conversation with students and guiding students to think about ways their comments could be misread by an audience they don’t know personally. Despite this challenge, we consider the unit to be a success. Students who completed the cross-institutional peer review exchange were able to accomplish the goals of peer review by revising their work in light of peer feedback while also gaining insight into the role of audience in their academic writing.
APPENDIX: EXAMPLE OF A READING RESPONSE ASSIGNMENT

Responding to the essay:
Directions: Read “The New Greatest Generation” by Joel Stein. Take notes and highlight as you read, then answer the questions below:
1. Question about the essay: How does Stein characterize your generation in his article? In other words, what message is Stein sending about the current generation of young people? Explain your answer, and use one or more specific examples from the article to support your explanation.
2. Question about your experience (pick a or b to answer):
   a. What experiences have you had that support (or agree with) what Stein describes about your generation? Explain your experiences and how they support the points Stein makes in his article.
   b. What experiences have you had that contradict (or disagree with) what Stein describes about your generation? Explain your experiences and how they contradict the points Stein makes in his article.

Responding to someone else’s paper:
Directions: Read the paper you receive twice: First, read it and pay attention to the author’s ideas—this will help you answer questions 1 and 2 below. Next, read the paper again and pay attention to the way it is written—this will help you answer questions 3 and 4. Type your answers to all four questions, and remember that you are speaking directly to the author of the paper in your answers:
1. Do you agree or disagree with what the author says about Stein’s article? Why? Explain to the author what you agree with, disagree with, or both, and explain how your understanding of Stein’s essay was the same or different.
2. When the author describes his or her experiences in connection with the points that Stein makes in his article, can you relate? How is your experience the same or different from the author’s (or both)? Explain.
3. What could the author say more about in this paper? Point out specific areas where the author can add to the paper, and make suggestions for how the author can do this.
4. What is one other way that the author can strengthen his or her writing in this paper? (Some ideas might be to write clearer sentences, organize the paper differently, or add more details). Point out specific areas where the author can improve the writing of the paper in this way, and make suggestions for how the author can do this.

Evaluation: Short Response Papers assignments will be graded according to the following criteria.
First draft: Author submits Short Response Paper that addresses the prompt related to the assigned reading. ___ / 2
Response to a peer: Author writes a response to a peer that addresses the four questions listed on the directions for this assignment and explains his or her answers to these questions fully. ___ / 2
Revised Short Response Paper:
   Explaining ideas: Author has explained his or her ideas fully in the revised paper. ___ / 2
   Examples: Author uses specific examples from the reading and his or her own experience to support the ideas presented. ___ / 2
   Professionalism: Author presents a paper that is free from grammatical and typographical errors. ___ / 2
Total: ___ / 10

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Works Cited


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