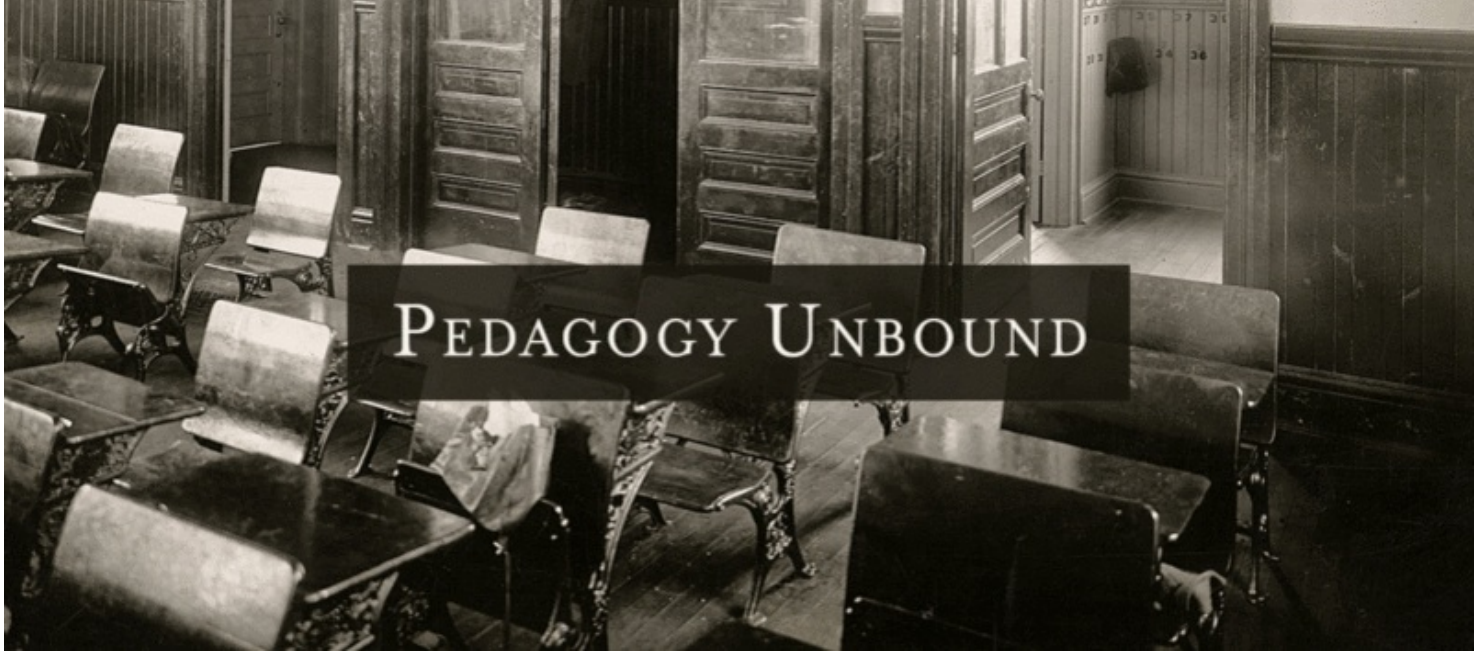


Why Students Hate Peer Review

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It is either ironic or absolutely unsurprising that while instructors love peer-review sessions for student writing, students mostly do not.

Having undergrads read and respond to each others' drafts is such a promising pedagogical idea: Students receive feedback on their writing, they get to see how others have tackled the same writing project, and the instructor doesn't have to do all the heavy lifting for once.

An in-class peer-review workshop is a part of the process for every major essay I assign. But I've made it a habit to ask my students about their previous experiences with such workshops, and their answers are almost uniformly negative. My students tell me these workshops are never useful and are a waste of time for both reader and writer. Through some combination of trial and error, dumb luck, and doing some reading on the subject, I think I've evolved some ways to ensure that peer-review sessions are helpful to students. I thought I'd share my advice here.

If there's a common thread in my students' complaints about peer-review sessions, it's that their classmates are usually too nice. Too many students read their peers' papers, say they've done a good job, and call it a day. Afraid to hurt someone's feelings, or unwilling to think critically about the writing, or both, students often default to vague and unhelpful praise. That's the usual result when we leave undergrads to their own devices for peer review. If all students are told is, "read the paper and tell the author what you think," they're going to default to kid-gloved generalities.

We can't assume students know how to give helpful feedback — we need to set up the scaffolding ahead of time for the sort of feedback we're hoping they'll provide.

I try to have students pair up with two different partners during the session, one after another, so that they get more than one perspective. During the class before the workshop, I tell them they'll need to bring two hard copies of their drafts, each one with a memo page stapled to the front. The memo page — an idea I got from [Oakland University's Christina Moore](#) — needs to have two parts: a context paragraph and a series of questions. In the context paragraph, writers give a brief report about where they are with their draft — what they've done so far, what they haven't done yet, what they're unhappy with, etc. The questions are requests for specific kinds of feedback: Are my paragraphs too long? Do you think the third example is strong enough? Do I need to write a conclusion?

Both parts of the memo page provide guidance to readers, helping to ensure that the feedback writers get is the kind they actually need.

On the day of the workshop, after pairing students up, I give them at least five minutes to talk before reading. I ask them to discuss their drafts and the prospect of revising those drafts. That amplifies the positive effects of the memo page and underlines an important aspect of the peer-review workshop: The whole point here is to help each other. I try to do everything I can to encourage students to see the process as allowing them to do something for each other — instead of for themselves or for me.

Next, I hand out feedback forms. The best way to make sure students don't just praise each other's work generically is to structure their feedback for them. So I provide a two-sided sheet with a series of questions they have to answer about the draft. Following [Linda B. Nilson](#), I use mostly descriptive (as opposed to evaluative) questions.

Your students are not expert readers. You can't expect them to be able to evaluate their peers' writing consistently or helpfully. But you can think about the important elements you want to see in their essays — a complex thesis, topic sentences, support for their claims — and have peer reviewers look out for those components. For example, I ask students to find the author's thesis and restate it in their own words. Any lack of clarity in the original thesis is usually reflected in this "translation." Descriptive questions allow students to *help* their peers rather than *judge* their peers.

Likewise, the final questions on my feedback form encourage constructive criticism and focus on influencing the revision work to come instead of appraising the work that's already been done. So the form asks things like: What is the biggest unresolved question in the draft? What do you want to read more about in this essay? What are the draft's biggest strengths? And, most important, what are the three most important things the author should do to improve the draft?

Here, again, the goal is for students to give each other helpful advice, instead of being forced into an evaluative role they're not equipped for. It also has the benefit of emphasizing the importance of revision.

Finally, this workshop shouldn't be the only time undergrads talk with each other about their papers. A successful peer-review process requires students to develop a scholarly camaraderie — they need to see themselves as members of the same team rather than competitors for a limited number of good grades.

One way to encourage camaraderie is to give students opportunities to talk about their papers as they're writing them. If you have time in class, you can set up mini-workshops on such aspects as topic choice, thesis development, research, and revision. Even giving students five minutes here and there to pair up and discuss their progress on their papers can be helpful. With that, you are laying the groundwork for your workshop, for peer review to work, and for students to actually see themselves as peers.

I'm pretty sure my peer-review sessions are a step up from the ones my students complain about. At least they tell me the sessions are helpful in allowing them to see the weaknesses in their drafts they would have otherwise missed. But even more helpful, I think, is that the process of learning how to read and give descriptive feedback encourages an attention to the important aspects of good writing that can only help the revision process. I've always

suspected that learning how to read well is the best way to learn how to write well.