

Increasing Student Responsibility in Revision Efforts: Redefining and Restructuring Peer Response with the Millennial Generation

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Abstract

The Millennial Generation presents a unique set of challenges to the classroom, including the desire to multi-task and teamwork as well as a strong need for attention and validation. Frequently, this creates a conflict between the students' current skills and the teacher's expectations when it comes to drafting and revision efforts. Restructuring traditional peer response methods into a group conferencing method allows students to utilize their current strengths while building skills necessary for later writing assignments. By participating in a six-step activity that occurs during a seventy-five minute class period, students are asked to listen, read, write, respond, discuss, and apply writing techniques. Over the semester, the author finds that students are invited into the writing discourse by developing vocabulary representative of global writing issues (development, transitions, paragraph structure, etc.) as well as that of grammar and mechanics. In the process, students learn how to trust their instincts and listen to others while participating in a methodical approach to decision-making.

Introduction

Peer review has been a long-standing writing classroom practice for several decades, and as such, it continues to remain under discussion. From those who established the practice (Bissland 1980, Murray 1979, Bean 1979, Bruffee 1984 and Trimbur 1989) to those who critiqued its strengths and weaknesses (Vatalaro 1990, Spigelmire 1981, Newbert and McNelis 1990 and Graner 1987), peer response continues to be updated and discussed, frequently within frameworks of specific populations like first- (L1) and second-language (L2) learners (Flynn 2011, Crossman 2012, Rakimi 2013 and Srichanysachon 2012), digital learners (Strasma 2009, Liang 2010 and Honeycutt 2001) or even graduate students (Nelson 2012 and Chen 2010). My specific interest, however, examines how peer response needs to be addressed for current students, those who represent the mainstream United States college student known as the Millennial Generation or Generation Y.

Using the research of Carstens and Beck (2005), Werth and Werth (2011:16) outline six specific guidelines for working with the Millennial learner, including to:

1. Resist formal instruction;
2. Plan activities that rely heavily on trial-and-error;
3. Allow much of the learning that occurs to be delivered by peers;
4. Design a curriculum intended to be mastered by students in small chunks, immediately prior to being used;

5. Provide for risk-taking in a safe environment;
6. Allow students to develop skills that are perceived as being of value (or show how the skills to be developed are valued).

I am not laying claim or ownership to a long-standing practice, but I have developed a form of peer review that comes closer to achieving the goals and outcomes of traditional peer response while meeting the above guidelines: group conferencing. As opposed to using pairs of students, or small groups, my approach, which I have adjusted repeatedly and over time, yields more valuable dialogue between students, increased revision, a stronger sense of community, and a collaborative classroom that appeals to this generation of students.

Group conferencing, at its best, fulfills all six of these guidelines. With proper implementation, it breaks down a large task into individual parts, and the discussions, held in a safe environment, embrace a sense of trial and error and student-controlled dialogue. The practice upholds Vatalaro's statement that, '[W]ith peer review we nurture an attitude that conflates cooperation with self-reliance, dependence with independence; it affirms a code of conduct, an ethic for writers. We promote this attitude by modeling ourselves and our actions and then by stepping out of the way once our students have begun to take it seriously' (1992:23) while updating the process in ways that embrace Millennial characteristics.

A Word of Caution

No single stereotype fits an entire group of people at any one time; in fact, Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg caution that 'stereotypes of generations are just that – stereotypes – and as such are as accurate and applicable as any stereotype' (2010: 198). However, there is sufficient research that demonstrates teachers' anecdotal observations that the group so labeled as the Net-Generation possesses certain core characteristics that teachers can use for guidance.

It is our job as teachers to take the information offered through the research and literature and find effective ways to reach the unique individuals who sit in front of us daily. Or, as Worley professes, '[F]aculty must be aware of differences, and must prepare to adjust their teaching philosophies and practices for a new breed of learners' (2011: 31). But herein lies the challenge. Perhaps Stewart states it best when he points out that,

Conscientious faculty have long sought to teach courses in ways that appropriately challenge students and that offer sufficient support for them to meet the challenges presented. However, finding an appropriate balance between challenge and support is exceedingly difficult when faced with students who demonstrate very real differences in academic talent, motivation, and readiness for university work. Realistically viewed, none of us is likely to be able to create the precise balance of academic challenge, emotional and tutorial support and interpersonal connectedness that will move all of our students to overcome their resistance to substantive reading, impatience with the writing process, inclination to memorize rather than understand, and general intolerance for the necessary frustrations of academic work. (2009: 116)

In an environment where the teacher's desire for process is often in conflict with the students' desire for product, and definitions of proficiency vary between teacher and student, using group conferencing as a peer response method capitalizes on specific strengths of our current students while energizing their revision efforts and increasing skills that are necessary for their careers.

The Millennial Generation

Born between 1980 and 2000, America's current students face a new set of life perimeters—political, economic, social, global, and technological. Having a variety of names, they may also be known as

Gamers, Nexters, and the Net Generation (Werth and Werth 2011: 12). Margolis (2008) points out that these students are also known as 'Gen Why?' for their ability to question everything, and 'Generation Now' for having little ability to accept things as they are. They also have a profound belief in multitasking (Nagy 2012), expect immediate results (Carlson 2005), and are team-oriented (Worley 2011).

At an international level, similar characteristics appear. In China, Sima and Pugsley discuss the 'rise to a "me culture"' (2014: 287) where freedom of expression is relatively new compared to other countries. In *Millennials Speak: Essays on the 21st Century* (Thead and Khan 2013), the editors theorize that discussions about Generation Y should 'not be limited to the West or to a single country'. They state 'Existing U.S.-specific research is the first step to create a body of knowledge that considers the Millennial Generation a unique demographic that requires specified study. Yet the United States population only comprises a small percentage of the total world population and the global Millennial population' (iii-iv). Cetron and Davies posit that 'members of Generation X and the millennials throughout the world tend to share values' (2008: 43) pointing out that in some countries, like India, the younger generations dress and think more like their American counterparts than their parents (2008: 43). This generation shares worldwide commonalities in global issues like technology, communication, and economy; it stands to reason that they also share classroom characteristics.

So what do these characteristics mean for the writing classroom? Among the many characteristics defining Generation Y, one of the primary qualities is that of being social and team-oriented. As a whole, our current students have grown up participating in team-related activities. McAlister points out, 'Group activities with a common goal have been incorporated since early childhood as activities such as baseball and soccer often begin before a child enters elementary school' (2009: 14). As such, these students also tend to perform well in team-managed activities. Nicoletti and Merriman state, 'They exhibit a preference for teamwork incorporating cooperative learning and constructivist principles' (2007: 29). Furthermore, they recommend four specific teaching strategies: 1) visual stimulation, 2) structuring the learning environment, 3) experiential and authentic learning activities, and 4) building in community related learning (2007: 30). Using a group conferencing model is not only conducive within these guidelines, but it taps into the specific characteristics.

Among the more challenging traits of Generation Y is their desire for independence. They tend to question authority and want a sense of control over their work. Because of the rapid pace of technology and information acquisition, they also tend to have an inability to focus on a task for an extended period of time (Grant 2008). Using the research of Verret (2000), Barnds outlines several key factors necessary to preparing Millennials for the workforce, including, 'letting them know that what they do matters; telling the truth; explaining why you are asking them to do something; learning their language; being on the lookout for opportunities to reward them; praising them in public; making the workplace fun; modeling behavior; and giving them the tools to do the job' (2009: 2). Following a classroom model for group conferencing, as opposed to simply placing the class in pairs and providing general guidelines for responding to papers, addresses these current student tendencies. Although there is no 'one-size-fits-all' model, learning to use current research places us one step closer to finding successful pedagogical practices that can be used as a starting point for any identified group of students.

A Brief History of Peer Response

Ruggles-Gere, in her extensive study *Writing Groups: History, Theory and Implications*, traced forms of peer response in the United States back to Harvard's 1719 'Spy Club,' where students frequently met to discuss literary works as well as their own writing: 'Writing groups have existed as long as writers have shared their work with peers and received commentary on it' (1985: 9).

The formalized educational practice labeled 'peer response,' however, took its foothold in the United States and prominence in the composition classroom in the mid-1970s, especially with Vygotsky's (1978) frequently cited zone of proximal development that documented how learners grasp more content with the

aid of others. By the 1980s, when writing 'labs' were evolving into writing 'centers' and composition theorists were proponents of transitioning emphasis from the final writing 'product' to the 'process' leading up to the final document, peer response became a more common (and perhaps more 'academic') classroom practice. As Harris (1992) points out, peer response in the classroom or writing center simply formalized what was happening informally in dorms, cafeterias, study halls, and a multitude of other locations on a regular basis.

The classic principles of peer response are sound. It makes students 'independent and confident' (Barron 1991), and Bruffee (1978) shares that it engages 'students more deeply with the text.' Caulk (1994) points out that even when students' responses differ from our own, they are still supporting one another. And perhaps most importantly, Vatalaro (1993) notes that the process can be adapted to any type of student. Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* even outlines an entire strategy for writing and revising in teacherless groups, with a statement in the introduction of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition that 'students can learn without teachers even though teachers cannot teach without students' (1998: xviii).

Regardless of the wide body of research that applauds the power of peer feedback in writing, the practice was, and remains to be, burdened with specific concerns. Peckham (1996) points out that the practice can be abused; it can be a way to simply 'kill time' in the classroom, and Vatalaro (1993) indicates that teachers may have a difficult time relinquishing control of both the conversation and the suggestions. Among students, cultural differences (Nelson 1997) and gender differences (Sommers and Lawrence 1992) can also change the dynamics of all types of peer response, making it difficult (if not impossible) for some students to become fully engaged in the activity. Many students, unless proper preparation and instruction is in place, do not understand the purpose (Graner 1987 and Weaver 1985). Any teacher implementing peer response, even the most successful, has heard the sentiments: 'How can I help someone else if I don't know what I'm doing with my own work?' or 'Teacher, why aren't you doing your job?'

Peer Response As Opposed to Group Conferencing

In more traditional methods of peer response, a whole class may look at a single paper once, generally towards the beginning of the semester, so that a teacher may model the procedure. After that, students work together in pairs or small groups of three or four. This work time, in large part, is unguided, as the teacher generally moves from group to group to offer support, answer questions, and listen to the conversations. Many times, writers receive feedback only from one or two people without the teacher knowing the ultimate quality or accuracy of the feedback. Likewise, the author, struggling with his/her own writing, has little guidance on which comments to focus.

The difference between peer response and group conferencing, in my classroom, is simply about moving the discussion from a one-to-one or small group dialogue to the entire class. In my model, the majority of a class period (usually seventy-five minutes) is dedicated to one student's paper, and that process is repeated throughout the entire semester for each of the fifteen students in the class. Unless students volunteer, which frequently happens later in the semester, students are selected in random order. Within a student's assigned class, a set routine is established so students know what to anticipate for each conferencing class, and over the entire semester, all students have an opportunity to share their work once within this particular method. However, before the first review, clear responsibilities and expectations are discussed.

Preparation: expectations and respect

During several classes prior to the first conference session, we discuss the public nature of writing, audience, and revision strategies. We also discuss how we critique (appropriate as opposed to inappropriate language and comments). For instance, it is necessary to be clear in the difference between, 'This sentence makes you sound stupid,' and 'Rewording this sentence would make your thesis clearer.' (Unfortunately, even with the best of preparations, a comment like the former is uttered and

must be addressed specifically.) Likewise we discuss what we critique (a paper's content as opposed to the author's personal story). This is especially important for classes that include papers containing potentially controversial topics, so establishing the environment as one of trust and respect is essential. There is a sense of exposure that can be uncomfortable, and if abused, downright damaging.

Classroom method for the group conference

Each conferencing class follows the same procedure. As these students generally prefer a clear sense of structure and expectations (Hartman and McCambridge, 2011), following the same pattern for each class period that employs group conferencing creates a sense of expectation. Although I am frequently concerned about the repetitive nature of the activity, my current students voice their satisfaction. In fact, it is not unusual to receive comments requesting more response time on course evaluations.

Step 1: Read aloud and student text engagement

The student selected for that day's conference is responsible for bringing printed copies of his/her paper. Although they cannot produce single-spaced copies, they may utilize other paper-saving techniques, including using space-and-a-half-lines (as opposed to double-spaced), smaller margins, and/or double-sided copies. The papers are distributed to all members of the class, including myself, and the author reads his/her paper aloud from his/her seat.

As the paper is being read, students engage with the text using their own shorthand (I do not have them memorize formal editing marks). For instance, I will suggest that if they want to discuss a passage they should underline it; or, if they do not understand a sentence, to bracket it off and put a question mark next to it. Exclamation points, check marks, and even 'smiley' faces may be used to indicate phrases that appeal to them. Grammar errors may be marked if they are recognized and marginal notes of any kind are encouraged.

This first step yields several results. For the reader, some pressure is removed during the public speaking portion, as everyone's eyes are focused downward on the paper, which helps when readers fumble over a difficult sentence, a grammatical mistake, or other issue. Even early on in the semester, it is not uncommon for a reader to stop, mark his/her own paper, and then continue. Many readers have reported the benefits of this first task in finding their own mistakes—one of the reasons reading work aloud is a common practice in writing center tutoring as well. The remaining students, likewise, are also encouraged to interact and connect with the paper. Knowing they have a specific task to complete increases their attention on the paper, their listening skills, and their note-taking abilities, as opposed to allowing them to drift off and miss part of the paper's content.

Step 2: Silent reading and continued text engagement

At the conclusion of the reading, students re-read the paper silently. They may continue their text engagement to find things they missed during the oral reading of the paper while developing and/or finishing comments. This helps address differences in learning styles. Some students simply comprehend better when allowed to process information at their own speed, so this additional time invites those who process more slowly or differently into the process.

Step 3: Writing end comments

At the conclusion of the silent reading time, students construct a series of notes addressed specifically to the author. The first set of notes includes positive comments, while being as specific as possible. Although any writer loves to hear 'I really liked your paper,' such comments are not specific enough to help an author with true revision efforts. Comments need to acknowledge specific aspects in the paper that the author may be able to extend in the current writing or perhaps add to a later writing. For instance, a comment such as 'The dialogue you used for your mother sounded like my mom,' indicates that the author found an authentic voice and representation of a central focus within the paper.

The second sets of notes are divided into higher-order concerns (HOCs) and lower-order concerns (LOCs), terms coined by McAndrew and Reigstad (1984). Under HOCs, students are asked to comment

on the content-related issues of the paper. These comments often extend beyond content to the use of examples, research (if necessary), thesis statement, topic sentences, topic sentence support, transitions, structure, form, focus, and the overall development of the paper. The LOCs ask students to categorize sentence-level concerns with grammar, spelling, mechanics, and awkward sentences.

Step 4: Discussion

Discussion follows the same order of the end comments. Each discussion starts with, 'What has the author done well?' As one may expect, the beginning of the semester often starts with very generic statements. It is not uncommon to hear remarks such as 'This was a good paper.' What students learn quickly is that I do not let them off the hook. For instance, one student may mention that the author used good description – to which I follow up with requests to point out specific examples of the description in the paper and what it was about the description that made it especially strong. Using specific examples from the paper is required.

From here, we easily transition into the question, 'Where do you think the author should focus his/her revision efforts in terms of content?' with emphasis on the higher-order concerns mentioned earlier. Here, a wealth of discussion takes place. Obviously, in a heterogeneous group of writers, including an international population, the papers vary widely over the course of the semester—in genre, content, skill level, and quality. Regardless of the strengths and/or weaknesses of any single paper, writing conventions are taught within the context of the student writing; in essence, the papers create the textbook for the course.

At its best, these discussions brainstorm multiple content options, and as such, I generally step back and only keep order to the discussion by taking notes on the board. Then, towards the end of our time, I summarize those options for the author as well as for the class as a whole. The benefit is that it is not uncommon for students to view something in a paper differently than my teacher eye – or they may find something I did not consider at all. As Caulk's research shows, it is not uncommon for my students to offer feedback that would be different from mine, and when the feedback is similar, students generally phrase 'it differently or from a different perspective, giving the writer different ways to think about the suggestion' (1994: 186). In addition, this higher-order concern discussion also creates a list of reader questions that pertains to the author's content, which I also track on the board.

When the discussion starts to come to a lull, I transition into addressing lower-order concerns. Because students are generally less confident with grammar and mechanics at the beginning of the semester, this can pose a bit more of a challenge. However, this is an opportunity to teach grammar in mini-lessons and through student writing as opposed to workbook-generated exercises. This time provides the opportunity to explain a particular concept followed by having students look for (and correct) the error within the student's paper. Over the course of the semester, most students start to attach official terms (comma splice, run-on, sentence fragment, etc.) to the errors, and I start to see the 'language of grammar' emerge in their written notes, in-text corrections, and verbal comments. For instance, what started as question marks at the beginning of the semester (sometimes meaning, 'I know there's a mistake here, but I can't identify it') evolves into the use of specific language ('Be careful of comma splices throughout your paper; I found three in the fourth paragraph').

For the last part of the class period, the author has an opportunity to ask questions and request clarification. Generally, they are so engrossed in taking notes and listening that it is not until the end of the discussion that they feel they can enter the conversation. However, they are never asked to keep silent during earlier discussions, and they are welcome to ask questions and offer or seek clarification throughout the process.

Step 5: Application

To conclude the activity, all students are asked to take out their own papers and to read through them using the lens of the day's most prevalent topics. For instance, if the day's discussion maintained a heavy emphasis on creating strong transitions and topic sentences, students are asked to re-read their drafts

with those specific constructs in mind. They are given in-class time to ask questions and make notes on their own drafts.

Step 6: Assessment

At the class's conclusion, all of the drafts are given to the author, who takes them home to sort, adopt, and discard suggestions. He or she brings the drafts back to class (generally a week later) to give to me. I assign each student a response grade based on effort and evidence of critical thinking, but not necessarily on the 'amount' of comments or what I deem to be the 'correctness' of the comments, while giving them revision tips. The responders get those papers back the following class. All of the response exercises are collectively worth 10% of the students' final grade. Having this final step is important, as my particular student population equates effort to a tangible grade.

Group Conferencing Characteristics and the Millennials

Based on the procedure outlined above, group conferencing meets the common characteristics of the Generation Y students in our classrooms in terms of their desire to multitask and work as a team. In addition, group conferencing also taps into the Millennials' expectation of the attributes they anticipate in their careers, especially in the skills of critical thinking and decision-making. Ultimately, these benefits help improve their ability to write—a skill they will use during their tenure at the university and throughout their careers.

Multitasking

Although group conferencing is not multitasking in its truest form (using multiple technologies and/or engaging in multiple conversations at once), having a change in activity approximately every five to fifteen minutes (within a seventy-five minute period) encourages students to maintain their participation. As Nagy points out, these students 'can get bored really fast, because it is hard for them to concentrate only on one issue. Their brain is used to diffuse information collected from several sources' (2012: 98). Thus, creating transitions from listening to independent reading to writing to discussion and then to application supports pedagogical advice for a teacher to change the classroom activity, on average, every ten minutes (Wilson and Korn 2007 and Bunce, Flens and Neiles 2010).

Discussion-oriented

In a study conducted by Roehling et al. (2011), results showed that students required significant stimulation to remain engaged in a class lesson. Discussion, especially lively conversations where the instructor was open to varied viewpoints and questions, significantly increased engagement levels. The study asserts that 'students consistently report that discussions help them 'focus better,' 'make it easier to pay attention,' and stop them from 'zoning out.' The attention-facilitating feature of discussions is frequently overlooked when researchers and theorists discuss the value of active learning, but students find this to be a major benefit of class participation' (Roehling et al. 2011:2). This makes group conferencing especially helpful to meet these goals in that it is a scaffolding process that provides opportunities to apply advanced concepts through dialogue—significantly tapping into the higher-order processes outlined in Bloom's taxonomy where analyzing, evaluating, and creating are valued over remembering and understanding—while keeping students interested and engaged (Lemons 2013, Vosen 2008 and Hinton 1994).

Decision-making

Another major aspect of group conferencing also involves decision-making and examining the benefits and challenges of making one choice over another; this focus on thinking about outcomes fosters learning and long-term retention. Siemens (2004) outlines that 'learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions' and 'decision-making is itself a learning process'. Likewise, it meets the students' preference that learning is 'student-centered,' 'horizontal' and 'informal' (Hartman and McCambridge 2011: 27) as opposed to teacher-centered, rigid, and formal. The conversation, although focused on a single author in any given class, generates universal discussion that frequently applies to everyone's work.

Team atmosphere and group work

A great deal of research focuses on the collaborative nature of the Millennials and their need and desire to work in teams (Roehling et al. 2011, Werth and Werth 2011, Hartman and McCambridge 2011 and Barnds 2009). In short, members of Generation Y have grown up in a team atmosphere through a myriad of play dates and extra-curricular activities. They are accustomed to mediating conflict and negotiation. If we follow the advice that structured work environments that include group work and team approaches increase learning, then group conferencing easily fits that objective.

Building confidence

The final major characteristic of the Millennials is the desire to be recognized. Roehling et al. point out that 'prior to college, experiences in which they have been publicly criticized or told that they are wrong have probably been rare. Hence, they are relatively thin-skinned and reluctant to put themselves in a position in which they may look foolish' (2011: 5). Hartman and McCambridge point out that these students 'crave feedback and praise, which can be perceived as high maintenance' (2011: 23), but along with that comes a general characteristic of being 'overconfident, opinionated, and [an] expect(ation) to be heard' (24) in such a way that is often problematic when they enter the workforce. Peer conferencing helps break down the false sense that whatever a writer produces the first time will be adequate while building up an inner confidence that requires students to recognize their need for improvement without taking it personally.

Anecdotal Findings

Certainly, more formal study is required; however, in an informal survey of my classes over the past six years, student response to the group conferencing is quite positive, and they also report that they believe it is an effective use of class time. In fact, it is not unusual to receive the comment, 'more peer response' on end-of-semester narrative course evaluations – despite that the activity is, perhaps, the benchmark of the course. Likewise, students report that the practice should be employed in other classes requiring major writing assignments. The most interesting finding, however, is that students *undervalue* the quality of the feedback they offer. More interestingly, in an informal survey conducted in four classes of college composition, the majority of the students reported that they utilized the feedback they received to improve their writing, only half of them indicated that they believed other students implemented the comments they offered – an interesting finding that requires more research.

Similar results were found when an external researcher conducted a narrative study on my course. As a participant-observer, a graduate student tracked the types of changes and the number of changes students implemented in their writing over the course of the semester, based on both the conversation within the classroom as well as the comments individual authors received on their papers. Unfortunately, at the time of publication for this article, her study was not yet available in a public forum; however, all of her preliminary results are showing significant revision efforts on the students' writing, and more importantly, specific thought patterns where students articulate their decision-making strategies based on the class experiences.

Conclusion

I want to believe that the skills learned through this group conferencing practice help students beyond the classroom by meeting modern workplace skills as well. Many employers are as challenged as teachers when addressing writing and communication skills. Although Hartman and McCambridge speak to business faculty specifically, I choose to think that their requirements for graduating seniors reach a broader career spectrum. They conclude that '(1) business educators must help Millennials more toward a more audience-focused orientation and away from a primary focus on themselves, and (2) business educators must help Millennials become more focused on people rather than just focusing on technology.

Ultimately, the goal is to help Millennials develop their interpersonal skills' (2011: 28). Group conferencing that requires the respect of varied opinions, careful consideration of others' thoughts, and a clear sense of audience helps students move towards that goal.

For sure, more research is necessary and currently underway. Currently, a Ph.D. student is writing a narrative ethnography after watching the practice in my classroom for nearly two semesters, and likewise, a proposed quantitative study is waiting Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission; however, I have collected enough anecdotal evidence to be confident in moving forward with formal studies of the process.

In the meantime, we can learn from existing research and challenge ourselves to modify practices in meaningful ways to our specific populations as opposed to following traditional formats. We have vibrant, talented, and dynamic individuals who, based on societal factors, have characteristics that can be enhanced. Returning to Werth and Werth (2011) and the six guidelines at the beginning of the paper, arguably any student can benefit, but when we attempt to tap into Millennial research, we have a significant opportunity to enhance an already valuable practice.

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