Peer feedback, when guided by teacher modeling and assessment criteria, is a useful assessment-for-learning tool that has been shown to support students’ writing development and contribute to students’ revisions to improve their writing (Boscolo & Ascorti, 2004; Graham & Perin, 2007). Peer feedback can be helpful across the elementary grades, though extensive teacher support is needed in grades one and two. Peers’ comments about how the writing made them think or feel, together with their commendations or suggestions about the content (e.g., characters or plot of narratives; inclusion of examples and other needed information in essays or persuasive arguments), or about the language and other elements of the author’s writing style, provide helpful starting points for revisions that improve students’ writing. Certain types of feedback, such as emotional responses that show what kind of effect the writing has on the audience, and feedback that focuses on scoring criteria, have been shown to be most useful to student writers (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Peterson, 2003). In a grade eight classroom (Peterson, 2003), for example, students were more likely to revise their writing when peers suggested that particular events did not seem plausible. Three of the four focus students did not revise their writing in response to feedback indicating a need for greater clarity, as they viewed such peer feedback as a reflection of their peers’ carelessness in reading the writing, rather than a need for revisions.

Peer feedback benefits not only the students who receive suggestions for improving the writing, but also the feedback providers, as they gain a greater awareness of qualities of good writing through assessing and commenting on peers’ writing. Peer feedback also develops students’ self-assessment abilities, as they gain experience in using the criteria to read their own writing (Cho & MacArthur, 2010; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009). In these respects, peer feedback is truly an assessment-for-learning tool (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & Wiliam, 2003) that should be an ongoing part of writers’ workshop (Graves, 1994).

**Teachers’ Support for Peer Feedback**

It is important to teach students how to give feedback to their peers and how to work with the feedback. This includes setting parameters to ensure that students do not feel discouraged or hurt after receiving peer feedback and maintaining a sense of ownership over the writing: students should be aware that they do not have to use feedback that they feel will not improve their writing. It is also important to provide guidelines for the content of the feedback. Researchers recommend teaching students revision strategies and qualities of good writing assessed by scoring criteria that students know (MacArthur, 2007). Students in a grade one class, for example, provided feedback that their peers felt was useful and made many
revisions and edits that incorporated peers’ suggestions after receiving such formal instruction. Their teacher used ongoing modeling, examples, and reinforcement through posting reminder charts around the classroom and giving students feedback on how well their peer feedback matched the helpful feedback criteria established by the class (Peterson & Portier, 2012). Another effective practice involved students observing two peers using a set of criteria to give feedback, discussing how effective the feedback was, and then applying what they learned when giving feedback to peers on their writing (Van Steendam, Rijlaarsdam, Sercu, & Van den Bergh, 2010).

When desk or tables are arranged so students can easily talk to each other while they write, informal peer feedback is often a natural part of students’ writing processes. Students may ask each other for help with ideas, words, spellings, etc. or they may run a sentence or idea by peers to get a sense of audience reaction. Authors’ groups (Graves & Hansen, 1983) are a commonly-used forum for peer feedback. Students read their writing aloud to each other in turn and often take a “two stars and a wish” or “sandwich” approach where two positive comments are included alongside a more critical comment that identifies an element that could be improved (Peterson & McClay, 2010). In one study, students working in pairs as one student read the other’s writing, identified an aspect that was not clear to her/him, and then discussed with the author possible ways to revise in order to clarify the point (Boscolo & Asporti, 2004). In addition, a successful peer feedback context implemented by a grade 8 teacher involved inviting students to exchange their drafts with a partner, write comments on the draft and then give oral feedback to each other (Peterson, 2003).

In summary, peer feedback on writing develops students’ self-assessment abilities through providing opportunities to learn and apply scoring criteria. It also provides helpful information to guide revisions that improve students’ writing. Teacher support through modeling, providing examples, and giving reinforcement on the content and processes for exchanging peer feedback, is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of peer feedback.

Further Reading


