

Chapter XX

Assessing the Quality of Online Peer Feedback in L2 Writing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on an instrument that was developed to formatively assess the quality of feedback that second language students give to one another in an online, anonymous, asynchronous learning environment. The Online Peer Feedback (OPF) Assessment was originally developed for a peer online writing center in Japan where student peer advisors jointly compose feedback for a client-writer. The OPF Assessment is composed of two rubrics: (1) a rubric that evaluates the initial feedback drafted by a peer advisor, and (2) a rubric that assesses the contribution that individual peer advisors make to the interactive process of constructing the final feedback for their client-writer. The chapter describes the assessment and discusses its potential uses in a variety of contexts as a formative tool to improve the quality of peer feedback and, ultimately, the writing proficiency of both givers and receivers of the feedback.

INTRODUCTION

Knowing how to give, receive, or facilitate peer feedback is a critical issue in second language writing. Peer feedback provides student writers a greater awareness of audience, exposure to multiple styles of writing at multiple levels and stages,

more practice in understanding, creating, or applying quality criteria, and empathetic support to the very recursive nature of process writing (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). Fostering what for centuries has been a way to enable and engage students in their own learning (Topping, 2003), peer feedback in online learning environments is strengthened

by new affordances, definitions, roles, and possibilities. Online learning environments embody and allow new digital stages for peer feedback as a dynamic interaction between peer and self-assessment, between product and process. Such interaction is at a premium today in a globalized world that demands speed, fit, interdependence, and collaboration more than ever (Suárez-Orozco & Qin-Hilliard, 2004). When peer feedback is mediated through online communication, the interaction between two or multiple peers can be anonymous, multidirectional, synchronous, or asynchronous (Jones, Garralda, Li & Lock, 2006), easily recorded, archived, and evaluated from a range of learner and evaluator perspectives (Tuzi, 2004). Additionally, sociocultural prejudices such as those against “accent” or non-native speakers are lessened in online written dialogue (Black, 2005; Warschauer, 1996). These new possibilities afforded by online communication have made it possible to rethink and improve the ways we use and assess peer feedback in second language writing and thus promote language learning for both the giver and receiver of feedback.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce an instrument to assess the quality of peer feedback in a second language online writing environment. First, we describe the peer online writing center that prompted the development of the Online Peer Feedback (OPF) Assessment and the process by which student-peers in the center, called Peer Advisors, jointly compose feedback for a client-writer. Second, we review the literature that informed the development of the assessment. Third, we describe the two components of the instrument: (1) a rubric that evaluates the initial feedback drafted by a Peer Advisor, and (2) a rubric that assesses the contribution that individual Peer Advisors make to the interactive process of constructing the final feedback for their client-writer. We conclude by discussing the potential uses of this instrument in a variety of contexts as a formative tool to improve the quality of peer feedback and, ultimately, the writing proficiency of both givers and receivers of the feedback.

THE PEER ONLINE WRITING CENTRE

The Peer Online Writing Centre (POWC) at Kanda University of International Studies in Chiba, Japan, started as a teacher-action research project when the first author, then a full-time teacher at the university, found face-to-face peer feedback to be failing in writing classrooms due to a lack of buy-in from students. Most students felt that their peers, as learners themselves, were not qualified to give advice on English writing. In order to address this issue, also corroborated in the second language writing literature (Nelson & Carson, 2006; Zhang, 1999), an online anonymous system was set up, whereby a group of paid student-workers use nondescriptive online aliases to work together in order to construct advice for other student-writers in a service not connected to formal classes. These students are hired as Peer Online Writing Advisors (POWAs). This acronym, which sounds like “power” in katakana Japanese, reinforces the idea that peer feedback does have merit. POWAs (PAs, for short) are not hired based on their writing proficiency, but rather on their eagerness to learn and help others. The POWC challenges and supports PAs by giving them a demanding work environment, and also extensive training and professional development. PAs work in groups, receive 20 hours of presemester training, and get weekly comments on their feedback from facilitators. Typically, a ratio of one teacher acting as a facilitator for every three PAs is maintained. Facilitators closely interact with PAs by reviewing, questioning, and commenting on final advice before it is sent to a writer.

The POWC process of advice construction is outlined in Figure 1. Using an online submission form, the writer electronically submits a help-request that includes the piece of writing, their self-assessment, and their questions for the Peer Advisors. This help-request is read and used by a Peer Advisor (PA1) in order to make an asynchronous posting on a discussion board. This posting is a draft of advice he or she would provide the

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