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How I Finally Overcame My Apprehension About Peer Review

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I'll admit it: I was afraid to try peer review in my Legal Practice class. I've been teaching legal analysis, writing, and research for 17 years. I know all of the benefits of peer review. I've read plenty of scholarship about why and how to do it well. I have space in my syllabus to incorporate it into my teaching. But I've been reluctant. I worried that students would be averse to sharing their work with a classmate. I worried that the exercise would embarrass students who felt self-conscious about their writing. And I worried that the truly excellent writers would find the exercise a waste of time. But I finally decided to try it anyway. And guess what? It was successful. I'm sharing my experiences to encourage those of you who may be similarly reluctant to try it too.

I. Why Peer Review?

I wanted to incorporate peer review because I know that, when done well, it's an effective pedagogical tool.¹ Giving and receiving feedback are both essential lawyering skills, and the legal writing classroom is an excellent place to practice those skills. Students benefit both from having an additional set of eyes on their

¹ For a thorough discussion of the benefits of using peer-review in law school classrooms, see generally Cassandra L. Hill, *Peer Editing: A Comprehensive Pedagogical Approach to Maximize Assessment Opportunities, Integrate Collaborative Learning, and Achieve Desired Outcomes*, 11 NEV. L.J. 667, 671-78 (2011).

work (as the reviewee) and from engaging with a key skill—like drafting point headings, organizing an argument, or crafting a persuasive introduction—from a new perspective (as the reviewer). Requiring students to articulate what does and doesn't work in a piece of writing forces them to identify writing and analytical problems with precision, and increases the likelihood that they will be able to incorporate those lessons into their own writing.² Peer editing exercises also build collaboration among classmates and encourage them to continue working together (when permitted) on assignments, modeling the team-based approach that attorneys often take in practice.

I'd already experienced some of these benefits in my classroom in a limited way. In some classes I ask students, on a voluntary basis, to share their work (for example, their Introduction or Point Headings for a motion assignment), explain what they are struggling with, and solicit feedback from the class. These are highly effective classes. Students are eager to help their classmate, the student volunteer's work typically sparks a spirited discussion about effective persuasive writing techniques, and the volunteer is grateful for the feedback. And because I only use this exercise once we are several months into the school year, students know each other well and have developed rapport and trust.

Given these benefits, I knew it was well past time to try it myself. I decided to use a class on sentence-level editing as my initial dip into the peer review waters. In the past, after assigning reading on crafting effective sentences, I've given students snippets from documents they hadn't seen before and asked them to work on fixing individual sentences or paragraphs, before sharing their edits with classmates. Those classes were fine, but I knew that I could make them better. Students weren't invested in what they were working on, and without the bigger context for the snippet of writing, they understandably found it challenging to offer revisions. So I decided to use my class session on drafting effective sentences as the basis for trying a peer review exercise for the first time. I used their first research memo as the basis for the exercise. The timing worked well, because they had just turned in the memo the night before, and it was fresh in their minds.

2. Setting the Stage for the Exercise

What gets us into the right frame of mind for receiving feedback? I thought a lot about this question before trying this exercise. It's something I talk to my students about generally before I return their first set of written feedback, but introducing peer review offered a good opportunity to reinforce those ideas.³ I tell my students that feedback is a gift. If someone gives you feedback, she has used her

² See Kirsten K. Davis, *Designing and Using Peer-Review in a First-Year Legal Research and Writing Course*, 9 LEGAL WRITING: J. LEG. WRITING INST. 1, 3 (2003).

³ See Hill, *supra* note 1, at 691 ("The right 'pitch' by the professor and training for students makes all the difference in the [peer-review] exercise's success."). Hill's article contains a detailed discussion of how to prepare students for a peer-review exercise. *See id.* at 691-99.

own time to make your writing better, and brought something to your writing that you couldn't bring to it yourself: a different perspective. I encourage students to welcome such a gift whenever they are fortunate enough to receive it. And—while it might not quite apply to a class where I require students to offer and accept feedback—it's also a compliment: someone who gives you feedback views your writing as valuable enough to deserve it and to warrant her time spent reviewing and commenting on your work.⁴ I also explain the benefits of peer review as a specific kind of feedback. The value lies not just in receiving advice, but in giving advice, of putting yourself in the shoes of the reader whose job it is to help the writer improve her written product. That experience makes us better writers and editors of our own work.⁵

When I introduced the peer-review exercise, to further get students in the best frame of mind to receive feedback, I asked them to identify a paragraph in their research memo that they felt they struggled with, and to spend a few minutes trying to revise it themselves. My goal here was twofold: First, I wanted to bring each student into the exercise with the mindset of being open to advice. And second, I wanted to reinforce that everyone has areas of their writing they want to improve (even me!). On that note, I also talked about my own experiences in seeking out and receiving feedback on my writing. That gave me the opportunity to acknowledge that reading someone's comments on your writing can be hard! Oftentimes I find myself initially feeling defensive about what I've written. And then I take a breath and (usually) realize that the suggestions are spot-on. (That paragraph that I was sure was perfectly clear? Not so much.)

In offering these framing comments at the start of the class, my objective was to address concerns I had about peer review. I hoped to reassure students who might be embarrassed to share their work that everyone has room to improve and struggles with some aspect of writing. And I hoped to force students who thought that they wouldn't get much out of the exercise to identify something they realized they could improve.

I also explained that, in not too many years, they will likely be giving feedback to others—perhaps as an editor on a law journal, and then as a junior attorney reviewing a summer law clerk's work.⁶ I tell my students that giving effective, thoughtful, kind feedback is a skill they should therefore develop, and that, just like any skill, doing it well requires practice. I suggest that one way to develop that

⁴ I often tell the story of a friend who asked our high school English teacher to read a draft essay she'd written for her college applications. The teacher read the essay and then ripped it up and handed it back to her. When my friend later brought back a completely redone draft, she knew that she'd written something worthwhile when our teacher uncapped her pen and started scribbling comments in the margin.

⁵ See Hill, *supra* note 1, at 672-73; Davis, *supra* note 2, at 2.

⁶ Thanks to Gil Seinfeld for this thought, who shared it during a conversation we had about teaching when we spent 12 hours together one day taking our boys to play soccer across the state. (Thanks also to Gil for doing all of the driving that day.)

skill is to think about what kind of feedback they find the most helpful, and in what tone the best feedback is offered.

Finally, before unleashing my students to review their partner's work, I tell the class that they should view their role not as critiquing the work, but rather as giving advice to their classmate. I hoped to put my students in the frame of mind to approach their review with a kind and helpful attitude, and to reassure them that their partner would bring the same attitude to the review. I also assured them that it's the same attitude I bring to my own feedback on their assignments.

3. The Peer-Review Exercise

After my students spent a few minutes identifying a paragraph they struggled with and trying to fix it on their own, I had them each select a partner to exchange their work with.⁷ They exchanged clean paragraphs—i.e., unmarked-up versions—so that their partner could bring their own ideas to the writing instead of being influenced by what the student had already identified as potential improvements.⁸

My instructions for this part were explicit⁹: Students should (1) describe, in the margins or in their own notes, what might not be working in the syntax and style (using the reading I'd assigned) and (2) suggest ways the writer might address those issues. Students could comment on substance only to the extent that the syntax or style made the substance unclear. I realized—too late—that I should have explicitly told students to also identify what worked in the piece of writing they were reviewing. But I noticed that students did that anyway! I heard them complimenting each other's writing, pointing out things that were effective, etc.

After students reviewed their partner's work, they shared their feedback with each other. Here are a few examples of student comments I heard as I walked around the room:

- Reviewers:
 - "What if you tried shifting this part up to here?"
 - "I agree that this sentence doesn't really work and I also struggled to figure out how to fix it."

⁷ Professors take different approaches to establishing peer-editing teams. Some assign students to teams while others allow students to select their partner or group. And some use pairs, while others use groups of 3 or 4, and have students exchange papers several times. For a general discussion of the considerations involved in establishing peer-review teams, see Hill, *supra* note 1, at 684-87.

⁸ I had instructed students ahead of time to bring either two hard copies of their memos to class or an electronic version they could email to their partner in un-revised form during the exercise.

⁹ Providing clear instructions about what students should and should not comment on is essential to an effective peer-review exercise. See, e.g., Hill, *supra* note 1, at 689-90; Davis, *supra* note 2, at 4.

- “I realized you could put this part of the sentence at the beginning and then the rest of it is much easier to understand.”
- “I thought this part was really good.”
- Reviewees:
 - “I know I struggle a lot with identifying a strong subject for my sentences.”
 - “What I was trying to do here was _____, but I know I didn’t state it clearly.”
 - “This was really helpful advice! Thank you.”

After students had discussed their feedback with each other, several students shared their feedback with the class by posting the original version and the suggested revisions to a Google doc I projected on the screen. The pairs then walked the class through what they discussed: Did the students in the pair agree on what wasn’t quite working in the selected paragraph? What suggestions did the reviewer make? Other students then chimed in to offer advice or comments.

4. Takeaways

It wasn’t as scary as I thought it would be! My students—many of whom initially seemed apprehensive about the exercise—embraced it once they got going. They seemed to genuinely appreciate both the opportunity to get additional feedback on their writing and the perspective that reviewing someone else’s work brought to their own understanding of how to craft effective sentences.

The exercise also produced genuine improvement in student writing. At the end of the class, I invited students to resubmit their memo with the revised paragraph. Most students took me up on that offer. I asked them to highlight the paragraph they had used for the peer review exercise, and the improvement was clear.

Even so, I plan to make some tweaks in the future. First, next time, I’ll start by showing something I’ve written, along with the editor feedback I received. It’s one thing to tell students that even experienced, professional writers receive lots of red ink from colleagues who read our work; it’s another thing entirely to show them. I hope that showing students how my own work has been marked up by friendly editors will further get them into the frame of mind to accept suggestions from their classmates.

I’d also like to free up more time during the class for the actual peer review and discussion.¹⁰ To do that, I will give students a short reading assignment about peer review ahead of time, something that explains the pedagogical benefits of

¹⁰ My class sessions are only 55 minutes long, and that time flies by.

engaging in an exercise like this, so that I can spend less time in class on those preliminaries. And I might forgo having students revise their selected paragraph themselves first. In retrospect, that step didn't seem necessary, and I'd rather give them more time to engage in the peer review itself.

The final change I expect to make: I plan to incorporate more peer review days into my syllabus next year. I expect that I'll start by turning my "volunteer to share your work" days into full peer-review classes. But I am also mining my syllabus for other ways to incorporate this activity into my classes. Now that I've gotten a taste for how valuable peer review can be, I'm eager to put it to use in plenty of other ways.