

Developing Stronger Peer-to-Peer Feedback in the Undergraduate Creative Writing Workshop

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This analysis of peer-to-peer feedback explores the types of feedback most prominently seen in the 200-level introductory course, the 300-level intermediate courses, and the 400-level advanced course in creative writing at Grand Valley State University. The undergraduate creative writing students who completed this study observed writing workshops, interviewed writing faculty, surveyed writing students, and analyzed over three hundred peer-to-peer feedback letters. The results of the study showed that undergraduate writing students often supplied reaction-based comments that were negative and vague, but rarely gave specific and positive advice that was technique-based. This study suggests that undergraduate writers would benefit from pedagogies developing more balanced peer-to-peer feedback in the creative writing workshop.

Professors, writing students, and writing tutors have all seen it—that hopeless look on a student’s face when he or she tries to decipher peer comments that are negative and vague. Maybe the advice is something along the lines of “Your story was boring and went too slow.” When students read through comments like these, it is usually because their next assignments involve revision, and they hope that peer feedback can guide that process. But how does one “use” the above advice? Without a specific page, character, scene, or style indicated by the reviewer, writers might feel hopeless, like it would be impossible to revise something that is wholly boring and slow. As writing consultants and writing students ourselves, we have seen plenty of students discard the majority of the peer feedback that they received. At the beginning, we mistook this act as students’ inability to handle negative comments, or perhaps as a statement that the students disagreed with the feedback and decided not to use it. Of course, negative comments will always be difficult for many novice writing students to digest, and student-writers will often disagree with feedback and not use it. However, we believe that student-writers’ struggles with peer feedback can be understood as something other than simple defensiveness. We believe that in many cases, there may be something about the feedback itself that leads writers to dismiss peers’ responses to their work.

The catalyst for this idea was a pilot class in the Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Writing Department, Writing 380: Authors in Depth. Professor Chris Haven envisioned this course as a way to “make student writing better. To give students skills: so that they could become better readers, deeper critical thinkers, and people who could look at the world in a different way—through writer’s eyes.” Because of his pedagogy, we began to see the possibilities for peer response in a new light. During this class, upper-level students were asked by Professor Haven to analyze texts and give feedback in an entirely new way. Instead of giving potentially “surface-level” feedback, we couldn’t respond to texts with feelings or even literary analysis. We were asked to consider the *exact tools* the writers had used, on *specific* pages, in *specific* lines.

We were asked *how* writing techniques were functioning, and the prospective *why* behind the choices that the writers had made. Because of our unfamiliarity with this type of feedback, we began to wonder how our responses in this class differed from the peer feedback that we had been giving and receiving in workshops for years. This in turn led us to the question that is the focus of this study: *How are peer-to-peer response papers/workshop critiques functioning in the creative writing workshop at GVSU?*

In this article we analyze the qualities of peer-to-peer feedback given by undergraduates, and we explore how student writers used the peer responses they received. On the basis of our research results, we argue that peer responders should dedicate more of their response letters to positive comments in order to boost student writers' confidence. Second, we point to a need to improve student writers' ability to assess how or where to implement advice. We recommend teaching strategies that help students focus on giving very specific advice. With these changes, we believe that communication between peers will be more effective and that the revision process will become much smoother for undergraduate creative writers.

Background: Peer Response in Undergraduate Creative Writing Workshops

In the last few decades, creative writing courses have become more popular among undergraduate students. This rise in popularity has led to universities offering Introduction to Creative Writing courses as electives or to meet requirements for English or writing majors. Despite this increase in creative writing courses available to undergraduates, there is still a distinct gap in the research that outlines the most beneficial way to teach writing at this level. Many undergraduate creative writing classes, like those at GVSU, are functioning under the workshop method that is used in MFA programs: students often read one another's work in advance, then come to class to discuss, or "workshop," their writing.

This workshoping, in many cases, involves little guidance or feedback from professors, relying instead on heavy input from the student-writer's peers. At the beginning of this project, we researched the importance of peer response. We learned that peer response is a useful technique for first-year writing classrooms and creative writing workshops, and many professors and theorists have discussed how foundational it is to students' comprehension of writing as well as to their ability to revise and improve. In "Guiding Principles for Effective Peer Response" Jette G. Hansen and Jun Liu discuss how "peer response comments can lead to meaningful revisions, and compared with teacher feedback, revisions based on peer comments can be better in vocabulary, organization, and content" (32). Additionally, in "Commenting on Writing: Typology and Perceived Helpfulness of Comments from Novice Peer Reviewers and Subject Matter Experts," Kwangsu Cho, C.D. Schunn, and Davida Charney found that peer response can be more beneficial to students than an instructor's advice, as it provides students with direct, positive reinforcement that can guide their revisions.

Since peer response is so crucial to the classroom environment, we wanted to better understand how it was functioning at GVSU, and whether the process was working at its highest potential. Especially in response to Cho, Schunn, and Charney's article, we wanted to know if GVSU students were giving direct, positive feedback. Though there has been a precedent for looking at the differences between vague and specific peer comments (Pattison; Gielen et al.), the examination of peer-to-peer feedback seems to have rarely been looked at in terms of undergraduate creative writing. There are also articles on peer-to-peer feedback in middle- and high-school

classes (Pattison; Gielen et al.), writing center pedagogy (Harris), and graduate-level writing workshops (Shaw), but not specifically on undergraduate creative writing workshops.

The Current Study

Many studies have concluded that peer response teaches students how to communicate, use writing terms, and gain confidence in their writing (Pattison; Shaw; Harris; Gielen et al.). Based on our experience, we agreed that strong peer response could accomplish these tasks, and as an aside, we hoped to discover that peer response at our university was successfully achieving all of those important educational values. But we had also encountered many writing students who never read their peers' comments, or who read them and became frustrated and confused about how to apply the feedback to their revision process. Therefore, we wanted to analyze peers' responses to one another. Unlike other studies that have examined *why* peer response is important, *how* it can be used, or *what* it does for the giver and receiver of feedback, we instead wanted to examine *how much* and *what kind* of undergraduate creative writing feedback was useable and applicable to the revision process. Since peer response is usually intended as a means to guide a student-writer towards better writing, we specifically analyzed the feedback given and received at GVSU and asked: *What are the quality and quantity of the "vague, reaction-based" and "specific, technique-based" comments in the response paper? And how do these types of comments shape the ways that the students receiving feedback revise their writing?*

Methods

In order to answer our research questions, we used four methods to collect data. Since our work began as an in-class project, we were exempt from the university's Internal Review Board. First, we talked with six different faculty members, all of whom teach creative writing workshops at GVSU: Austin Bunn, Patricia Clark, Matt Frank, Chris Haven, Caitlin Horrocks, and Sean Prentiss. We began by interviewing the professors, in hopes that they could give us a strong foundation for understanding the purpose of the response paper. In this first phase, we hoped to identify why response letters or workshop critiques were being used, what specifications each professor had for them, and how the professors viewed the end result or value of this assignment to both the students writing responses and the students receiving response papers. Therefore, we asked the following questions, among others (see Appendix A for the complete list):

- What aspects of the pieces that your students are reading do you want them to focus on when responding to one another? Or do you leave it open-ended?
- Are there any specifications you assign to response papers?
- How much time do you take to outline how students should be responding?
- What exactly do you outline as important/pertinent for students to consider?

These questions helped us to focus on the context in which students' responses were generated.

We also accumulated data through a survey of student writers. Sixty-three student-writers took our survey of seventeen questions. We asked many questions about the workshop experience as well as feedback and response papers.

We also wanted to experience the workshop from the students' perspective. We observed

five different workshops: an Introduction to Creative Writing class (200-level), an Intermediate Drama class (300-level), an Intermediate Nonfiction class (300-level), an Intermediate Poetry class (300-level), and an Advanced Fiction class (400-level). From each of these classes we also collected response papers, roughly three hundred, so that we could highlight trends in the actual comments, as opposed to just asking students and professors what types of comments they *believed* were being produced. Comments were sorted into two major categories: *reaction-based* and *technique-based*.

Reaction-based comments. When looking for reaction-based comments, we zeroed in on phrases that started with “Your story makes me feel,” “I feel like,” “I like,” “I don’t like,” and that ended with advice that could not lead to a specific revision. We found two types of reaction-based comments: vague and specific.

An example of a vague, reaction-based comment is: “I don’t like how flowery and wondrous this story is. It needs grounding.” Though the peer is giving advice, she is referencing the entire story and gives no indication as to *where* or *how* the writer could address this issue with writing techniques.

Sometimes, a comment would be very specific, but still reaction-based and not very “useable” to the writer trying to make revisions. A specific, reaction-based comment would be “This line is horrible. It makes me hate your character.” While this kind of advice is certainly more zeroed in, it seems too rooted in the peer’s opinion, and doesn’t stretch far enough to indicate what writing techniques the reviser could utilize in order to improve it. Those types of comments were labeled as specific and reaction-based, and then were further noted as either positive—a writerly element the reader felt the writer had accomplished—or negative—a writerly element the reader felt the writer had not accomplished.

Technique-based comments. We also categorized specific, technique-based and vague, technique-based comments. Technique-based comments zeroed in on specific writerly techniques. They often began with, “Your piece is working in X way”—where X would be a specific writing technique, such as characterization, setting, details, or refrain—or “X doesn’t work.” If the advice referenced a page, paragraph, line, or trend occurring in the piece, then it was specific.

Here is an example of a vague, technique-based comment: “Obviously the kids are afraid, you tell us that, but it doesn’t feel like they’re actually going to get in any kind of trouble. Even when the trouble happens, it doesn’t seem severe or significant enough. You need more action, more climax, more fire under the pot, like we talked about in class.”

This is technique-based advice. However, when we examined the story draft, we realized that the student-writer’s entire piece was about the kids, and we had no idea where or how the writer should apply this advice. In this way, the advice was vague. It may have referenced a specific idea, but it wasn’t applicable to a specific place in the text. The writer receiving this feedback could go in and add more action and climax, but it could be in a completely different place than the student’s peers intended because the communication here is weak, lacking as it does a reference to specific scenes or pages.

A specific, technique-based comment would be “Wow, the way that you introduced Amy’s father issues on page 1, built on them on page 4, and had them come to fruition on page 12 was really impressive. I wonder, though, if the gap between page 4 and 12 is too big. Because there are so many other things happening, we almost forget about her father in those eight pages. Could he show up sooner—like once on page 7. Or maybe on page 9, because he fits in so well

with the parallel issues that Amy has with her boyfriend, and it makes sense to have the boyfriend stuff from pages 8–10 show little specks of father stuff, too.”

This advice not only uses writing techniques, but it gives the student an idea of exactly where her/his peer began to feel confusion and suggests revisions. Any phrases that included page numbers like this that were also sound and writerly—specifically pertaining to a writing technique— were marked as specific and technique-based. As with the response-based comments, we also sorted technique-based comments into positive and negative categories.

Results and Analysis

After completing the interviews with professors, we immediately noticed both patterns and inconsistencies. In regard to the basic formulation of the response letters at GVSU, we discovered that professors’ requirements were often matters of individual preference, such as requiring the responder not to address the student-author as “you,” but rather as “the narrator.” The only consistency we found was that each professor was asking his or her students to move from positive to negative feedback. Other variations in individual preference included elements like a length requirement: some response papers were short paragraphs and others were full pages.

When asked, “Who benefits from the response paper?” about half of the professors stated that responder and student-author benefit equally. The other half made it clear that the responder benefits more from the response paper than the student-author.

Specifications/Perceptions of the Workshop

In our survey of students, we sought to discover how students felt about the feedback. We wanted to know: What types of feedback were they receiving from their peers? How often did they *use* the feedback? What did they do with the feedback that they generally received? Some of the questions we asked that shaped this study include:

1. When writing response papers to your classmates, or speaking aloud while someone is being workshopped, what are the main types of comments **you find yourself making**?
2. When receiving response papers or oral comments from your classmates, which types of feedback **do you usually receive**?
3. Which are the types of feedback that you find the most useful?

The options for those first three questions were:

- Initial reactions (“I like,” “I didn’t like” or “What did this mean?”)
- Plot or character choices (like, no beginning/middle/end)
- Style of writing (tone, word choice, sentence structure, etc.)
- Spelling/grammar/formatting issues
- Suggestions for changes to be made, directions to take

We also asked:

1. Do you think your fellow classmates will thoroughly appreciate/utilize your response paper?

2. Please rank how you deal with the stack of response papers or oral feedback that you receive from your peers after being workshopped.

The survey results indicated that 57.9% of students (in their self-perception) were using between 50–75% of their peers’ feedback, and 21.1% of students (in their self-perception) were using 20–50% of their peers’ feedback.

Once we knew that so many students were using (or believed they were using) peer feedback, we wondered what kind of feedback they were giving each other. There were 116 responses (from 59 students) to the following question: When receiving response papers or oral comments from your classmates, which types of feedback do you usually receive? We found that the majority, 79.7%, reported receiving what we deemed “vague, feeling-oriented”—reactionary—feedback: “I liked,” “I didn’t like,” “What did this mean?”

Finally, we wanted to uncover what student-authors did with the feedback they received from the responders. When asked, “How do you feel about the structure of the workshop? (Starting with positives, and moving to negatives),” we found that 42.1% of students believe that they take both positive and negative feedback into account equally, but an equal percentage of students focus on the negatives and try to just fix those things before they hand in their final piece.

“My Favorite Part about Your Story Was the Potato Puns”: 200-Level Response Papers

Our analysis of the response papers revealed a wide range of differences in the depth, quality, and length of peer responses. The 200-level Introduction to Creative Writing at GVSU is a class that can be taken for the writing major, to fulfill the liberal education theme of “Creativity,” or as a general education credit. Therefore, the class includes both aspiring career writers and students who have little to no interest in writing at all. In this setting, we observed that the response papers were more like response paragraphs, and that response papers were not filtered through professors, but were instead handed directly from the person writing them to the student-writer receiving them. In our collection of these response paragraphs, we noticed that most moved from positive to negative; however, most were reaction-based or reactionary. In fact, they were incredibly more reactionary than we had even considered with our original definition of reaction-based. Whereas we had anticipated comments like “I liked your character development” without reference to which character, or where this was occurring in the story, we also saw many comments that were much broader and more vague than we had expected. Here are a few examples of the response paragraphs that we collected in Introduction to Creative Writing.

I really liked your story. I had no clue who your fictional character was, but I liked the story. I have very little else to say, so here is some more praise: cool dialogue . . . um . . . cool other stuff. Peace.

My favorite part about your story was the potato puns. Great humor. Great puns. Anyhow, great story. Don’t know what else to say.

According to our coding scheme, the first example is clearly vague and reaction-based. With the exception of telling the writer that his fictional character wasn’t obvious, the comment gives no writing technique-based advice, and is thus reactionary (he “liked” it). It is also vague because it clumps the entire story into one feeling, and does not specifically reference what the

reviewer liked, which pages, which writing choices, or even why. In fact, all of the dialogue is described as “cool,” which is a vague word and implies that all of the dialogue is perfect and without need for revision. As if the idea of “vague” could be more all encompassing, the peer wrote, “cool other stuff,” which literally references nothing at all.

The second example is slightly more specific. It at least tells the writer which aspect of the story the reader enjoyed. However, it is referencing all of the puns as a group. It also says “great humor” without pointing the writer to a specific style or paragraph that he can learn to reproduce in the future. This example thus also falls under “vague, reaction-based.” When the respondent wrote, “great story” without offering explanatory examples, we are left with the belief that this story just “felt” great to him, which is our indicator for reaction-based comments.

Ultimately, in our study, we found that 92% of the twenty-five 200-level peer-to-peer response papers had vague, reaction-based responses. Many of these responses were only a few sentences long, none of them were filtered through a professor first, and at least half included at least one off-subject, subjective opinion about the piece like “I really hated your character’s name,” or “I don’t think you needed so much profanity. Profanity is only appropriate in poetry.” Both of these are examples of reaction-based comments that don’t really address writing technique but more have to do with the personal preferences of the peer as a reader, not as a writer.

Regarding our positive vs. negative research question, it was hard to determine whether 200-level writers were using their peers’ positive or negative comments in any specific way. The responses were often completely positive or completely negative—it seemed as if the responding student either loved the piece or hated it. Due to professor requirements, peer responses might have started with a brief positive comment (or sometimes not), but if the reader hated the piece, the majority of the response would be negative, and that opening sentence of praise often seemed vague and forced.

The Stepping Stone: 300-Level Responses

At the 300 level, response papers from peer to peer made a strong improvement from the 200 level in both quantity and quality. Here, students were still structuring their response papers from positive to negative, but the responses were typically a full page long and were beginning to include some very observant technique-based feedback. There were still many reaction-based comments, but many came alongside specific development comments, making the response paper multi-dimensional: we found response papers that contained both reaction-based and technique-based comments. 50% of students were still giving those reaction-based comments, 28% were giving a mix of reactionary and specific, and 22% were giving mainly specific feedback.

While it was encouraging to note that the 300-level responses were substantially more technique-based, we did discover that they were still lacking positivity. Each letter was equally composed of positive and negative comments, but the positive comments were almost exclusively reaction-based, whereas the negative comments were almost exclusively technique-based. For example, one student started his piece with emotionally or reaction-based comments, saying how he felt about the piece. A paragraph later, he then moved into “things to consider,” which are “negatives” of the piece, in which he specifically outlined which sections in the piece needed to be reorganized in order to give the work a better sense of unpredictability to make it more successful. A lot of 300-level students also composed impressive shifts in their response letters—

they would start by saying something vague or reaction-based (whether positive or negative), and then in the next sentence move into a specific example of what they meant.

For example, here are excerpts from one student’s response:

[Paragraph 1:] Remember to show the reader how you felt instead of just telling us. For each of your stories about your grandpa, I wanted you to elaborate way more.

In this first paragraph, the student has used a kind of elementary term, *show vs. tell*, but hasn’t told the writer *where*, specifically, this should be happening. The student also asks the writer to “elaborate way more”—but doesn’t say *where* or *about what* until the following paragraph:

[Paragraph 2:] One thing to clarify is why exactly you think your grandpa has a dark side. We know that he likes to spend his time downstairs in the workshop, but that doesn’t necessarily make someone have a dark side.

In this second paragraph, the student has finally specifically referenced a concept and a scene where the writer needs to explain more—and has also specifically stated what made him or her doubt that concept. This student’s response letter is a strong example of the type of response letters that we studied from 300-level classes. In most, there are still vague comments that writers will find difficult to link to specific parts of their writing. But usually they are followed with technique-based comments.

Noticing the Negatives: 400-Level Responses

In the thirty-one 400-level response papers, students had successfully whittled their reaction-based comments down to 32%. We found a blend of reactionary feedback and specific feedback occurring about 26% of the time, and we consider this a healthy, appropriate blend. As at the 300 level, letters at this level moved from positive to negative. However, it is notable that despite the fact that advanced 400-level students were fully capable of making strong technique-based comments, they almost exclusively made these specific comments in the “negatives” portion of their response papers. For whatever reason, the first paragraph of the response paper, where students often praised aspects of the piece, was vague and generalized. That is, very few people specifically referenced paragraphs or sentences that they liked, or specifically mentioned techniques that they thought had worked. Instead, the opening comment “I really liked your story” stayed strangely consistent from 200- to 300- to 400-level workshops.

Since revision of pieces is often based on feedback that one has received from one’s classmates, professors, and response papers, we wondered how this lack of technique-based comments in the positives section affected students’ revision process and their perception of the comments as a whole. When we revisited the survey data, we found a question that we had asked, even before realizing this trend, that illuminated what effect the positive and negative sections were having on how students revised their pieces. We asked, “How do you feel about the structure of moving from positives to negatives?”

To this question students could choose one of these answers:

- I take into account both the positives and negatives, I love it all.
- I often am nervous throughout the positives, because I am waiting for the negatives.

- I find myself focused on the negatives, and I know that I will fix my draft so that the negatives are taken care of.
- I am less focused on the negatives, and more trying to pay attention to the positives, so that I may mimic what I did right.

When we originally asked this question, we were wondering if we would uncover something about the revision habits of student-writers. We wondered if the positives and negatives sections were equally beneficial, and how they made the students feel. However, once we discovered that 400-level students were giving very specific, technique-based negative comments but completely vague, reaction-based positive comments, we perceived the answers to this survey question in a new light.

As stated earlier, students were allowed to choose as many answers as necessary to explain how they felt while receiving feedback, which is why our percentages are over 100%. The results of this survey showed that overwhelmingly, students were either focusing on the negatives (42.1%), focusing on both negatives and positives (42.1%), or nervous while reading the positives section (26.3%) because they were waiting for the negatives to come. Only a small percentage of students were focusing on the positives (14.0%) and structuring their revisions so that they could try to mimic or reproduce structures, styles, or choices that had successfully worked.

Discussion

In our research, we discovered that 92% of 200-level students were giving reactionary comments, and the other 8% were giving specific comments. In the 300-level classrooms, 50% of students were giving reactionary comments, 28% were giving a mix of reactionary and specific, positive comments, and 22% were giving specific comments. At the 400-level, 32% were giving reactionary comments, 26% were giving a mix of reactionary and specific, positive comments, and 42% were providing specific comments for their classmates to work with.

These findings led us to understand that change—the scale between simple reaction-based comments and technique-driven comments was tipping to a more even point—was occurring from the 200 level to the 400 level. Throughout our research we came to understand that a mix of reactionary and technique-based feedback was necessary in the workshop setting, but questions still loomed for us. Even though we were aware, both as researchers and as past students of the 200-level class, that these examples came from an introductory course filled with many students who did not intend to be writers in the future, we were also aware that this class is the *only preparation* for intermediate fiction, nonfiction, drama, or poetry, where suddenly professors would expect full-page response papers. The 300-level classes also expect students to thoroughly observe and comment on writing concepts occurring in another's work, and if the professors we interviewed were giving very few specifications for response papers at the 300 and 400 level, *when* were the students learning what should be in their responses? Perhaps the 200-level course, though not for future writers alone, could become that locus in which students begin to understand the difference between reactionary feedback and specific, technique-driven feedback.

Although the 200-level responses showed a heavy-handed tilt towards reactionary-based comment, the 300-level progressed towards a more equal amount of reactionary feedback and technique-driven feedback. As we thought about how the two types of comments were functioning or collaborating in the 300-level response papers, we began to understand that reaction-based comments do have value, especially when the university workshop is usually the only environ-

ment where early-career writers can have a room full of near-strangers read what they've been writing and give them unfiltered *reactionary* advice. Ultimately, many of us will want our books or short stories to sell to readers, not just writers, and so reaction-based feedback is necessary in gauging the success of a piece.

However, we also kept in mind how during our professor interviews, we discovered that many writing faculty believe that currently the response paper isn't quite as beneficial to the person receiving it as it is to the person writing it, particularly because the feedback the student is receiving isn't useful in developing writerly strengths. Weighing our knowledge of the workshop with these professor insights, we realized that the response paper needed to be an effective combination of both reaction and strong advice. Perhaps the workshop is the only time that so many *readers* will look at one's piece and *react*, but it is also the only time so many skilled *writers* can read it and offer *technique-based* suggestions.

Implications: Making Positive, Technique-Based Comments a Priority

As we consider our findings—that creative writing workshop peer-to-peer response letters are full of reaction-based, negative feedback—we realize that there may be two benefits to restructuring the requirements of the response paper so that it includes more specific, technique-based positive feedback. First, knowing one's strengths is a useful tool that any student, whether planning to become a writer or not, can use. Peer responses that attend to positive aspects may give students the encouragement that they need to continue. In our student surveys, many students said that they feared hearing the negatives, and in anticipation of their arrival, often completely tuned out the positive comments that came before them. Our research leads us to wonder if this could be because the positive comments were “fluff” anyway—they were the kind of vague, meaningless comments that were hard to apply back to revision, so ignoring them seemed easy.

Secondly, specific, positive feedback may be the key to universities producing successful authors. Good writers have a style—something that they can call their own, and that they use over and over. Since the beginning idea for this research had stemmed from the insights we gained in the pilot course *Authors in Depth*, we couldn't help but consider what our research findings meant in the context of our experiences in that class. As we had studied successful authors like John Updike and Margaret Atwood in that course, we had noticed extensive repetitiveness in their works. In the same way that Monet repeatedly painted water lilies, haystacks, and pedestrian bridges, Updike and Atwood had successfully found patterns, structures, or series of characters that worked for them, and then they reused them over and over again. For example, if you look closely at Atwood's structure in several of her works you can see repetition—she often sets her reader up for a climax and then with a flip of the page that climactic moment is undercut (e.g., *Lady Oracle*, *Alias Grace*, *Oryx and Crake*). Likewise, Updike often reuses similar characters. In his poem “Ex-Basketball Player,” the protagonist is nearly identical to that of Rabbit in the Rabbit series. Even though our class acutely zeroed in on only these two famous authors, there must be a wide range of writers who become equally repetitive—after all, that is how they come to have their own style. Ultimately, then, finding that style that works for each writer is key.

As we mentioned earlier, GVSU's writing courses, especially Introduction to Creative Writing, serves a variety of students. Some of these students will go on to major or minor in

writing, while others are taking the course just for fun or to improve their writing skills. Regardless of their differences, all of these students have something in common: they want to learn something and to become better writers. If our student-writers are all on the hopeful path towards improvement, then they need to be constantly aware not only of what they are doing wrong in their writing, but also of what they are doing right—what they have *already* successfully accomplished. This is where the importance of positive, technique-based comments becomes so paramount.

If the response paper were redefined (meaning that professors would have to require that these changes occur in the peer-to-peer response letters that are handed out in their classrooms), then it would include some negative, some positive, some reaction-based, and some technique-based comments. Students could (under the counsel of the professors), use each of these sections to their benefit; professors could emphasize that students should attend to all of the specific comments they receive—both negative and positive. Those positive comments that the students receive could then be used by students to fuel their future revisions and future writing. If writers know what they're doing well, they can begin to try that concept again until they've made it even better.

If many writing professors currently believe that response papers cannot fully benefit the person receiving them, it may be because the responses don't contain enough useful advice. Perhaps with a new shift in the structure of the response paper—with a greater emphasis on specific, positive feedback—students could consider each response paper a key aspect in their revision process.

At GVSU, after hearing our presentation on the functionality of the response paper, some professors began implementing changes to their pedagogy. Associate Professor Chris Haven has developed more detailed expectations for creative writing response papers written for his class. He provides models, both good and bad, from his class, so that students can gain clearer insight into what is expected of them when responding to one another. Also, Assistant Professor Sean Prentiss has implemented a more detailed set of questions that each responder can look at when considering what sorts of advice to give. He is also testing a new rubric that each student will consider before drafting his or her response paper. With these new, specific elements in place, our hope is that the response paper can move towards the revision tool that it was meant to be. Both students and professors should note that for the undergraduate writers in our study, peer-to-peer feedback was most beneficial when

- both the positives sections and negative sections contained specificity;
- throughout the semester, professors discussed with students how they should use their new writing knowledge and terminology to improve their response letters;
- students were aware that writing the response letters was an act of learning in itself;
- guidelines implemented by professors were regularly discussed and enforced, including:
 - length requirements;
 - an indication of how much of the response letter should be positives, negatives, reaction-based, and technique-based;
 - an explanation of and differentiation between what it means to

“react” to a piece vs. using writing terms;

- expectations regarding the relevance and tenor of the comments.

The more effective peer-to-peer letters had often been filtered through professors to ensure that students would not receive cruel or off-topic comments.

Based on these observations about what undergraduate writers and professors see as beneficial for developing useful response letters, we recommend these tactics to improve peer-to-peer feedback:

- Explain the purpose of the response letter—mention that it will benefit the writer, make him/her more aware of tactics and tools to use in his/her own future writing—this could potentially improve motivation for writing these letters.
- Do a demonstration on the first day of class that shows how a good feedback session could work: What kinds of things would you say out loud? How can a response letter mimic those same social strategies?
- Set specific, agreed-upon guidelines that are universal among the university’s creative writing faculty, or at least specific guidelines in an individual class room that are explained on day one and maintained throughout the semester. (For example, we observed that a good way to maintain quality is to randomly put a letter up on the projector in each class and have the students analyze it for reactions and techniques, specific vs. vague comments, and positives and negatives. In this way, they’re constantly considering the guidelines they are supposed to be following.)
- Require students to turn in the response letters to professors (regularly for the first couple weeks and at intervals thereafter) as a way to keep the letters sharper and more focused.

As we stated early on in this essay, we are aware that undergraduate students in an Introduction to Creative Writing course are not necessarily going to graduate with a degree in writing. We believe this factor makes it even more important that guidelines about specificity are introduced early on in creative writing courses. That way, students—whether they are writing majors or not—will be able to take the skills they learn and apply them to other forms of writing in courses across the curriculum. Understanding what their strengths are is beneficial to students—not only in the creative writing setting, but also for the continued development of their writing skills in later courses and in the professional world.

If professors teach the difference between reaction-based and technique-based comments, while also emphasizing the importance of giving *specific* positive and negative comments, students’ revision processes could radically improve. When there is praise or objection without specific reference to which specific pages are succeeding or failing, revision is difficult. Students may be flooded with criticisms or praise, but have no idea *where* or *how* to change their piece. If professors and students focus on adapting the genre of the peer-to-peer response, the workshop could become more successful in producing strong writers who can effectively revise while improving their writing, their relationship to their writing, and their abilities to self-identify their strengths.

APPENDIX A

Professor Interview Questions

1. What is the main goal of the workshop?
2. What aspects of the pieces that your students are reading do you want them to focus on when responding to one another? Or do you leave it open-ended? Are there any specifications you assign to response papers? How much time do you take to outline how students should be responding? What exactly do you outline as important/pertinent for students to consider?
3. Do you feel students generally respond as “readers” or as “writers”?
4. How well do you feel the workshop works for the author?
5. As you gain more experience with the workshop method, what have you changed/modified to better suit the goals of the workshop?
6. How do you think that your pedagogical style differs from that of other writing professors, specifically as it relates to the workshop?
7. Do you have experience with any other feedback/critique practices other than the current GVSU workshop?
8. How do you feel keeping the author silent works? Is it beneficial to the author?

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