

EDUCATING STUDENTS ABOUT PEER RESPONSE

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Peer response, a prevalent activity in writing classes, can benefit students involved provided they understand the purpose of responding. Through personal experience and research, I became interested in peer response in the classroom. As a student, I experienced peer response conferences that were both beneficial and unproductive. My first encounter was negative because the response group limited the discussion to grammar, and their main comment was that I did not have any grammatical problems. Then, one semester I took a paper to the Writing Center. The consultant asked me about the main concerns of my paper. Of course, being inexperienced, I said my concerns were proofreading and maybe organization. The consultant said that grammar was really important but that we should consider the main idea, organization, and supporting details before the grammar. At that moment, I knew she was going to provide valuable feedback. In a subtle way, she taught me about responding and revising.

My experiences triggered general and specific questions about the effectiveness of peer response in composition classes. Is peer response more effective if students learn the purpose before they respond? Do students need to learn the language of responding in order to provide useful suggestions? Should peer response be modeled in the classroom before students begin responding? Through information I obtained from closely observing students in one composition class and surveying 122 students in eight freshman composition classes, I will answer the questions above. My research shows that successful response groups require active teachers who explain the purpose and benefits of peer response, model various responding techniques, and actively involve the students in the learning process.

The Benefits of Peer Response Groups

Participating in peer response significantly benefits both the writer's and responder's writing. According to composition scholars, peer response generally helps improve students' ability to revise their own writing. According to Wei Zhu, "It is hoped that by allowing peers to intervene in one another's writing process via peer feedback, peer response groups will help students revise and eventually improve their writing" (493). As students continue to practice responding, they become more experienced responders and writers (Gillam 98). When students respond to another paper, they practice the revision skills they need to utilize when responding to their own papers (Smagorinsky 38; Barron 34). For example, students learn through reading a peer's essay that the thesis or the main idea needs to be present in order for the essay to make a relevant point. The stu-

dent can transfer his or her awareness about the thesis from the peer response group to his or her own essay. Then, the next time the student reads his or her own essay, the student will look closely at the thesis in order to determine if it is coherent, specific, and supported throughout the paper.

In addition to being beneficial for the responder, peer response is immediately useful for the writer. Norma Parker Wilson points out that allowing someone else to read your paper is “risky” but rewarding because the responder asks questions and points out confusing sections (42). Students extend their thinking and look at their writing in new ways when they receive responses from their classmates. Nancy Sommers says, “Without comments from their teachers or from their peers, student writers will revise in a consistently narrow and predictable way” (353). Suggestions from classmates can help writers step away from their papers and view them through the eyes of the reader. Peer response conferences can also influence the information students ascertain about writing and highlight each student’s writing abilities.

Moreover, Hephzibah Roskelley asserts that educators need to allow students to work together to form their own knowledge: “Once teachers [incorporate peer response], we’ll see the work of the small groups in our classes become the real work in the class, with students negotiating their own ideas against and around the ideas they’re offered. When students find a real voice, their own and not some mimicked institutional voice, both students and teachers acknowledge the possibility of the real change that might ensue” (128). Collectively, researchers agree that through response groups, students can collaboratively work together to form new knowledge that they could not have formed on their own.

Successful and Unsuccessful Response Groups

Research proves that peer response is a worthwhile activity and can benefit students involved in the process; however, its success depends on how the conferences are organized and carried out. Zhu explains that successful groups are “task oriented, focus on the global features of writing, provide accurate and specific feedback for one another, and engage in negotiation. In contrast, dysfunctional groups either rarely follow directions or perform tasks rather superficially” (495). Successful peer groups know which issues to address in early drafts, such as thesis and structure instead of grammar and mechanics. Additionally, Zhu provides information that students need to become successful: “Successful peer response requires knowledge and skills of many kinds (e.g., knowledge of written discourse, knowledge of the goals of the task and their roles in it, skills to initiate and sustain negotiation, etc.); lack of such knowledge and skills can reduce the effectiveness of interaction and negotiation during peer response” (510).

In order to become effective responders, students need to learn the language of and reason for participating in peer response before beginning the activity. Alice M. Gillam explains that responding is more than writing a few comments on someone’s paper: “peer response requires that students explain their reading process to themselves and others—where they got lost in the text, how and why a certain passage worked, what expectations were aroused but

unfulfilled” (98). After learning the revision language, responders need to apply that language and provide specific suggestions.

Effective peer groups also know how to analyze student writing; they indicate the confusing sections of the paper and include the reasons those sections are puzzling. Discussing a specific comment allows the writer to find a way to clearly express his or her thoughts. Asking questions and providing examples assist students in understanding how to alter a section of the essay in order to make it clearer. Responders need to provide specific comments in order for the audience—the writer, not the teacher—to understand and utilize those suggestions.

Both Zhu and Ronald Barron agree that simply putting students in groups does not provide all of the answers. Often, unsuccessful groups occur because students do not understand the purpose of peer response or the ways to provide effective feedback. Barron points out that students need to know what peer response is and is not: “They need to learn that evaluating the worth of the papers written by other members of the group is not the primary goal of good responders. Nor is an ‘error hunt’ a valuable approach to the task” (24). “Evaluating the worth” and searching for errors are often seen as a major part of revising because some teachers carry out these actions when grading essays; therefore, students believe evaluating is the ultimate goal of peer response. Barron says that instead of looking for the errors or determining the essay’s value, students need to view the essay for what it really is—a draft (24). Instead of evaluating the paper, students in successful groups learn to provide suggestions to enhance the paper.

In order for the experience to be meaningful, students need to understand for whom they are commenting and their reason for commenting. If the activity is not meaningful to students, then they will not learn from it. In many classrooms, students are briefly told *what* to do, but they are not shown *how* to do it. Kenneth Bruffee finds that “teachers seldom instruct students in how to engage helpfully in the intellectually demanding, aesthetically sophisticated, and socially delicate process of commenting helpfully on the word of peers” (131). In other words, the students are told to comment, but they are not shown *how* to comment. The students do not know what to discuss in their peer response groups. Do they begin with grammar, sentence structure, organization, mechanics, or the thesis? Bruffee says that since some teachers neglect to explain the purpose of responding, “students understand that their comments on one another’s work are made not primarily for the benefit of fellow students. They are a performance before an audience of one, the teacher” (131). During unsuccessful peer response activities, students may not consider their real audience, which is the student, because they think the purpose of the activity is to make suggestions for the teacher.

Studying Peer Response Groups

Although peer response is often used in writing classrooms, the purpose and process differ in every classroom. Response activities vary because teachers set different goals: some want their students to become better writers while others want their students to become confident writers and

responders. Throughout my research, I was interested in whether effective feedback results from educating students about peer response before they participate in a peer response session. As I define it, “educating” students means modeling effective responding approaches, explaining the language and purpose of responding, and actively participating in the peer response conferences. For approximately three months, I researched students’ behaviors in classroom peer response groups, and I also compared them to peer response activities in a writing center. I studied response groups in a freshman composition course by observing four 80-minute classes throughout the semester. I chose this specific class because I wanted to learn more about effective peer response, and I knew Dr. Chris Carter thoroughly educated her students about peer response. Dr. Carter is the director of the writing center and also the only composition studies specialist in the department. My observations focused on the comments generated from the classmates who responded to the participants’ essays. I observed the classmates’ suggestions for the drafts, the participants’ reactions to constructive criticism, and whether or not the participants made the suggested changes. I paid close attention to the revision suggestions and the issues the responders addressed first: thesis, organization, support, grammar, etc. I studied most closely two participants from the experimental class, Kelly and Jessica,¹ because they also scheduled weekly writing center appointments. Observing students with weekly writing center consultations guaranteed that I could observe those students participating in peer response in two different settings.²

In addition to observing the participants in the classroom and during writing center consultations, I conducted a total of four 15 to 30 minute interviews with each participant. During these interviews, I asked the participants to express their feelings about the suggestions made by their peers and consultants and whether they intended to utilize those suggestions. Likewise, I asked the participants to explain their reasons for using or discarding those comments. (See Appendix A for a complete list of interview questions.)

To compare the classroom and writing center observations and the responses from the two participants to a larger number of students, I conducted a survey in eight freshman composition courses (including the experimental composition class). The survey included a total of 18 questions; 16 of the questions asked students to provide an explanation and two questions asked students to rank in order the issues they address when responding to an essay. I divided the survey into two sections: (1) peer response in the classroom, which consisted of ten questions and (2) writing center consultations, which consisted of eight questions (see Appendix B for the complete survey). For the survey, I randomly selected eight freshman composition classes: three basic writing sections and five first-year composition sections. A total of 122 freshman composition students completed the survey. I chose to survey freshman composition classes because in my experiences as a college student, most professors implement peer response in beginning English classes. In addition, all of the basic writing students and some of the first-year composition students visit the writing center.

Findings

Overall, my research produced six important findings, which will be discussed in turn:

1. Teachers should educate their students about the language of responding and peer response in general through modeling.
2. Specific feedback is more effective than vague suggestions.
3. Handouts or guidelines assist students in staying focused on responding.
4. Teacher participation in peer response is crucial.
5. Students in the peer response groups should be actively involved in the conference.
6. Students are more apt to use writing center consultants' suggestions over their peers'.

Educating Students

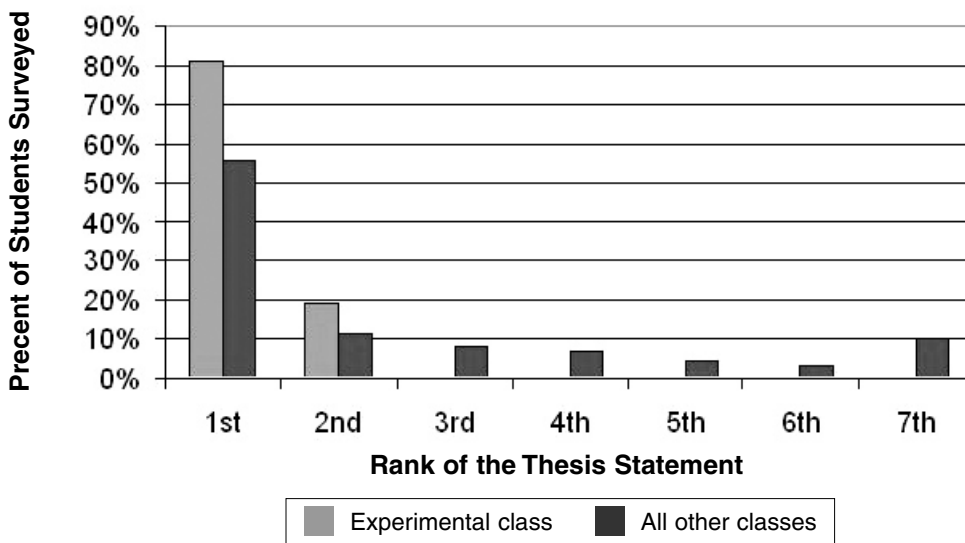
The first and most significant finding is that students need to know and understand peer response before responding. Through my observations, I noticed that peer response was modeled in the experimental class. The class discussed the importance of the thesis statement, which directed the students' attention to global issues. They also discussed the purpose of the thesis statement and how to effectively convey an idea to the audience. They focused on global issues (the essay as a whole) and then moved onto local issues (paragraphs and sentences). The students learned the language of peer response before responding to their classmates' essays, which was beneficial because the responder understood the most important issues to address while responding.

To compare the observations from the experimental class with a larger majority, the survey included a question that asked the students to rank the following issues in order of most important to least important and to follow up with an explanation for addressing the issues in that order: thesis, organization, support, explanation, punctuation, grammar, and sentence structure. Figure 1 compares the survey results from the experimental class with the results from the other seven composition classes and depicts the order in which the students (y-axis) ranked the importance of the thesis (x-axis)³.

As shown in Figure 1, over 80 percent of students surveyed in the experimental class said they looked at the thesis first when responding to a paper, and according to their explanations, they understood that every paper needs one central idea. In their comments, they stated that the thesis was the most important part of the paper and often the most difficult to change, whereas grammar was often the easiest area to correct. Through observing and surveying the experimental class, I concluded that since the students comprehended effective responding techniques, fully understood the purpose of peer response before actually responding, and actively participated in responding to their classmates' essays, they understood the importance of addressing the main idea of the essay early on in the revision process. In comparison, only 55 percent of the students surveyed in the other seven freshman composition classes ranked the thesis first. Slightly over 10 percent of the students in these other classes surveyed addressed the thesis last.

Even though slightly over half of the students surveyed in the other seven freshman com-

Figure 1. The order in which students ranked the thesis statement during peer response.



position classes indicated that they commented on the thesis first, approximately 45 percent of those students continued to address other issues, such as proofreading and editing, before the thesis. In the other seven classes surveyed, students who ranked the thesis as one of the last issues to address indicated that punctuation and grammar errors were easier to locate and correct. Some of these students said that they did not know what issues to respond to first, which is where education and guidance play a major role, since research shows that students who focus solely on grammar fail to provide the writer with useful feedback.

According to composition scholarship, when analyzing peer essays, effective response groups comment on issues besides grammar and mechanics; they make suggestions and provide examples regarding global issues, which constitute the focus, organization, and structure of the entire essay. Additionally, successful groups do not simply tell the writer to change the thesis or to provide more supporting details; they provide examples to help the writer understand how to alter the thesis or how to provide more support. Unsuccessful groups, on the other hand, only do enough to survive; they provide general, not specific, feedback. Ineffective groups often comment strictly on grammar and mechanics. Correcting grammar and mechanics early on in the writing process is often insignificant because the student may end up changing those mechanical errors during the remainder of the revision process (Sommers 358). Likewise, focusing on grammar early in the revision process gives the impression that grammar is the most important issue in a paper.

Initially, the fact that only 55 percent of the students surveyed address the main idea first, as compared to over 80 percent in the experimental class, puzzled me because 114 of the 122 students surveyed said their professor educated them about responding to another student's paper.

Therefore, I had presumed that all (or most) of the students would look at global issues such as the thesis before proofreading and editing issues like grammar. On the survey, the students indicated that the methods of teaching they encountered included lectures, handouts, discussions, question and answer sessions, and modeling. Some of the students surveyed said the teacher provided guidelines and handouts and gave lectures. While these methods are beneficial, they do not teach students everything they need to know about peer response. The students in the experimental class learned about peer response in a variety of ways. They looked at sample papers and responded to them as readers, not evaluators. Together, the professor and students explored how to effectively respond to a paper. The students also received handouts or guidelines during peer response, and the professor actively participated in, but did not control, the peer response conferences. From observing the experimental class, I noticed that the students were not merely lectured to about peer response; they were involved in the learning process. I concluded that actively involving students in learning peer response positively influences the students' ability to respond. In order for peer response to materialize, educators need to teach students how to respond effectively. In essence, teachers need to model peer response and demonstrate successful responding approaches. (For useful suggestions on how to teach the process and purpose of peer response, see Barron.)

Specific Feedback

The second finding from my research is that students need to learn how to provide specific feedback. Throughout my observations in the experimental class, I noticed that Dr. Carter and her students discussed and responded to essays from students in the class. The students provided the first revision suggestions. At first, many of them gave vague suggestions such as "This is not a real summary" or "There is not a real introduction." Dr. Carter took these suggestions and tried to show her students the difference between vague and specific responses. She directed their attention to the thesis and structure of the essay and encouraged the students to focus on one or two ideas, not several. In their writing groups, the students in the experimental class seemed to understand the difference between vague and specific responses because they provided detailed suggestions. For example, the students in one group said the thesis listed several pieces of information. This group suggested eliminating the first part of the thesis to avoid wordiness, and they also recommended narrowing the focus from three ideas to one main idea that served as the central point of the entire paper. Through modeling and discussing the response process, the students in the experimental class learned that their job as a community of writers was to help their classmates think about their papers.

Using Handout/Guidelines

In addition, I found that handouts and/or guidelines are crucial in peer response because they keep students focused on responding and reinforce the idea of providing specific feedback. During an observation in the experimental class, I noticed that the students used peer response

handouts, which consisted of questions about the thesis and explanation, etc. These questions encouraged the students to provide specific, not vague, feedback. Using the handout was optional, but to my knowledge, most of the students followed the handout. I observed a group that responded to Kelly's essay (one of the students who participated in this study). After reading the essay, this group spent a brief moment addressing one grammatical issue and then moved directly to the thesis (the first issue on the handout). The students read the handout question about whether the essay had a focused thesis and commented that the thesis contained a lot of information, similar to a list of ideas discussed in the essay instead of the main idea of the essay; then, they provided specific suggestions about the thesis, such as focusing on one issue instead of three and eliminating wordy and unnecessary parts of the thesis. The handout continued with the focus and clarity of the body paragraphs. The group looked at a paragraph discussing social pressure and realized that this phrase could take on different meanings. They provided examples of their interpretations of social pressure and suggested that Kelly explicitly define the phrase "social pressure" to ensure clarity. Without the information and guidelines, the students may have focused on grammar, spelling, and sentence structure, but since they obtained the knowledge of responding, they were able to provide effective feedback.

I interviewed Kelly and Jessica and asked them if handouts or guidelines were beneficial while responding and both said handouts were helpful because they directed the responder's attention to certain areas. Jessica added that the handouts were valuable when receiving responses but not when giving them because there was too much to respond to under each question. After further explanation, I concluded that handouts helped her understand the responses from her peers because they encouraged detailed suggestions, but when she responded to a classmate's essay, the questions compelled her to provide in-depth explanations. Jessica said that when receiving suggestions, she preferred fewer specific comments rather than an overwhelming number of vague comments. Kelly's and Jessica's comments on the benefits of using handouts in peer response corresponds with what slightly less than half of the students said on the peer response survey. These students recognized the importance of following basic guidelines. One student said, "It would be more helpful if I had a handout to show me what I am looking for." Peer response handouts appear to encourage responses that are detailed and easy for the author to understand. (For suggestions on effective commenting, see Melina and Iding.)

Notably, approximately half of the 122 students surveyed said they did not need handouts in order to effectively respond to their classmates' papers. One student said that handouts were unnecessary "because regimentation will lead to useless responses. Without guidance, responding to the essay is more natural and more interesting." The comments made by some of the students surveyed claimed that they were capable of responding on their own and did not need assistance or to be told what to do, which is not the intent of a handout. The true purpose of a handout is to provide guidelines to direct, not control, responses. In essence, handouts or guidelines help create effective peer response conferences because they remind the students of the most

important issues to address while responding and help them stay on task.

As I see it, peer response is like riding a bicycle; when you first start riding, you need that helping hand to steady the bicycle. With practice and experience, the guide can stand in the yard and watch instead of stabilizing you. In peer response, students need guidelines until they establish a firm understanding of the revision process. After they become confident responders, they can discard (or depend less on) the handouts because they have internalized the guidelines and can automatically think of questions and examples that will enhance their classmates' papers.

Teacher Participation

The fourth finding is that teacher participation in peer response is crucial. Barron says, "Periodic teacher monitoring of groups is extremely important and enables teachers to recognize problems and to try to solve them before they become critical" (28). When observing the experimental class, I noticed that the professor actively participated in the students' peer response conferences by moving from group to group, reading their critiques, and providing suggestions when asked. At one point, a student asked for clarification regarding what to focus on in the critique. The professor then interrupted all of the groups to explain this issue and pointed out that many of their critiques sounded similar to summaries. Stopping the students and providing that insight before moving too far into the discussions benefited the students. Many educators would have stopped with that information, but this professor went on to read aloud student critiques that were summaries and those that were actually critiques. The class then discussed these examples and commented on whether or not they were critiques or summaries. This active participation enabled the students to return to their discussions and point out specific areas that needed to be tightened in order for the paper to take on the form of a critique instead of a summary. Instead of sitting behind the desk and grading papers or reading a book, educators need to become active participants in response groups, but they should not control the groups. When teachers sit in on peer response groups, they need to behave as other group members and provide revision suggestions (Barron 29).

Active Student Participation

Students must be expected to actively participate in peer response. On one occasion, I observed a peer response conference between Kelly and Jessica. They both followed a handout and focused on global issues. After reading the essay, Kelly restated her understanding of the main idea, but Jessica disagreed and said that was not her intent. Jessica then asked Kelly to point out the section(s) that led to her differing view of the essay's focus. Kelly pointed out the paragraphs and supporting details that corresponded with the overall message she grasped from the essay. By asking questions and providing specific suggestions and examples, Kelly and Jessica worked through the essay, eliminating irrelevant information and adding specific examples that supported the main idea of the essay. Through this dynamic discussion, these active participants were able

to determine the focus of the essay and incorporate information that enhanced the effectiveness of the essay. The beauty of peer response is discovering areas in which you need to clarify your ideas and receiving feedback from someone who is detached from the essay. During a peer response conference, the writer's ability to explain and defend his or her idea(s) is crucial; sometimes writers and responders need to discuss the ideas in order to rethink and clarify the position presented in the essay.

Training Writing Group Peers to Respond like Writing Center Consultants

The final result from my research is that students are more inclined to use writing center consultants' suggestions over their peers' suggestions. Almost every student who completed the survey indicated that he or she would use either the consultants' comments or both the consultants' and the peers' comments. Only nine of the 122 students surveyed said they strictly use their peers' responses. One student said he or she uses both the consultants' and peers' suggestions but feels "more secure" with the consultants' comments. Other students preferred the consultants' suggestions because they were easier to understand.

What do the consultants do differently from classmates that encourage most students to use their suggestions instead of or in addition to the classmates' suggestions? The writing center consultants with whom the composition students worked were undergraduate and graduate students. All of these consultants were educated about peer response in much the same way that the students in the experimental class were educated; the consultants learned about responding and actively participated in this learning process. They understood that global and local revisions should come before proofreading and editing. Furthermore, the consultants followed guidelines. Their education, guidelines, and experience assisted them in producing effective feedback. In essence, the consultants' suggestions were more useful because they knew how to respond. This overall finding that students are more apt to use consultants' suggestions over or in addition to peers' comments does not mean that peer response should disappear from the classroom setting. Instead, this finding supports the idea that teachers should educate students about peer response through modeling, discussion, and participation, not strictly through lecture, and students should use guidelines and continually practice responding. In other words, students in classrooms need to undergo the same kinds of training for work in their peer groups as writing center consultants do in preparing to tutor in the writing center.

Conclusion

With effective training, peer response can be beneficial for both the writer and the responder. Through peer response, the writer gains insight into what is clear and confusing in the paper. In essence, the writer looks at his or her paper from a different perspective—the reader's—because of the comments he or she receives from the responder. The responder also benefits from peer response. Since revising is done with all writing, the responder can transfer what he or she

learns from peer response to his or her own papers. As responders learn to think critically about their peers' papers, they also learn to think critically about their own papers. As my research suggests, however, peer response will be more effective if students know and understand the purpose, process, and language prior to participating in response conferences.

I would like to thank Dr. Diana Calhoun Bell at the University of Alabama in Huntsville for her support throughout every stage of my peer response research project. From helping me narrow my topic to designing my research plan to reading drafts, she played an integral part in this project. Her assistance and encouragement helped make my dream become a reality.

Notes

¹ Teacher and student names are pseudonyms.

² The writing center observations were a mirror image of those conducted in the classroom. I observed both participants from the experimental class in two consultations, which lasted 30 minutes each. I listened carefully for the consultants' comments about the essays, the participants' reactions to those comments, and whether the participants made the suggested changes. During the consultations, I paid close attention to the issues the consultant focused on such as thesis, organization, grammar, sentence structure, etc.

³ The legend for Figure 1 lists the experimental class, which consists of the students surveyed from the composition class I observed, and all other classes surveyed, which consists of the students surveyed from the other seven composition classes. This graph comprises responses from a total of 109 students; responses from 13 surveys are not included because these students did not fully complete this specific section.

Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. Do you plan to use the comments made by your peers, the Writing Center consultants, or both?
2. Do you find your peers' comments or the Writing Center consultant's comments more beneficial?
3. Do you feel peer response handouts or guidelines are beneficial?
4. Do you think peer response is beneficial?
5. Do you think responding to your classmate's essay helps you as a writer?
6. Which comments are the most beneficial (i.e. detailed, brief)?
7. When making suggestions, do you find it helpful to provide (or receive) examples?
8. After receiving responses from peers or Writing Center consultants, do you look for those same issues in other papers?

Appendix B

Peer Response Survey

Directions: Please answer the following questions about peer response and provide as much detail as possible.

Peer Response in the Classroom

1. Do you participate in peer response in the classroom? If so, how often?
2. Do you think peer response is beneficial? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel prepared to respond to your classmates' essays? Why or why not?
4. Does your teacher show you methods of responding to student essays? If so, how? (i.e. handouts, lecture, etc.)
5. Do you find your peers' comments useful? Why or why not?
6. Do you feel that responding to your peers' papers has helped you with your own writing skills? Why or why not?
7. Rank in order the areas you address when responding to a classmate's essay.
_____ Thesis

- _____ Organization
- _____ Support
- _____ Explanation
- _____ Punctuation
- _____ Grammar
- _____ Sentence Structure

8. Why do you address these issues in that particular order?
9. Do you feel that you need a handout or some form of guidance when responding to student papers? Why or why not?
10. Is peer response a positive or negative activity? Why or why not?

Writing Center Consultations

1. Have you gone to the Writing Center for feedback on an essay?
2. Do you find the Writing Center consultants' comments beneficial? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel that receiving feedback from a Writing Center consultant has helped you with your own writing skills? Why or why not?
4. Rank in order the areas that were addressed in your Writing Center consultation.

- _____ Thesis
- _____ Organization
- _____ Support
- _____ Explanation
- _____ Punctuation
- _____ Grammar
- _____ Sentence Structure

5. Do you feel that these suggestions were helpful? Why or why not?
6. Are you more likely to use the Writing Center consultant's suggestions or your peers' suggestions or both? Why?
7. Do you prefer to work one-on-one, in a group of three or four, or individually during peer response activities? Why?
8. Do you prefer verbal feedback, written feedback, or a combination of both? Why?

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