

Student Growth Through Collaboration: The Use of Peer Mentor Groups in the Classroom

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Writing skills are an important and necessary skill college students should have upon graduation (Ahrens et al., 2016; Anderson, 2014; Fischer & Meyers, 2017; Lea & Street, 1998). Employers have indicated they are more likely to look for, contact and hire candidates who exhibit strong writing skills (Anderson, 2014; Faigley et al., 1981; Fischer & Meyers, 2017). Students are aware of the importance of writing skills; however, many individuals are intimidated when it comes to writing and the writing process (Brown, 2014). Prior research has shown that undergraduate students tend to be more successful in their development of writing skills when given various opportunities to practice and refine their skills (Fischer & Meyers, 2017; Leggette et al., 2016; Ruth & Emmert, 2019). Additionally, reviewing writing samples or students' drafts and receiving constructive criticism from peers and instructors allows students to learn from different perspectives (Fischer & Meyers, 2017; Leggette et al., 2016; Ruth & Emmert, 2019).

A specific area where students struggle in their writing skills is in the writing process. The writing process consists of multiple stages that helps individuals organize their thoughts concisely when developing written communication materials (Seow, 2002). Brown (2014) provided a six-step writing process: establishing a purpose, identifying the audience and readers, brainstorming the topic of interest and ideas, organizing thoughts, drafting, and revising. The specific, relevant step to note within the writing process for this innovative idea is revision. Students need to continue to develop and use revision skills to improve their work and provide efficient feedback to others' work (Price et al., 2010). Through revision, students learn to critically think through the materials, learn from their mistakes, and brainstorm additional content. Prior research has also suggested students who reflect on the writing process and received constructive criticism in draft stages have reduced writing anxiety and increased confidence when writing (Lawson et al., 2021). There is a necessary need for students to practice drafting, revising, as well as providing and receiving feedback. The need for this innovative idea is to ensure students are equipped with the ability to critically revise various written communication pieces.

How it Works/Methods/Steps

We seek to encourage students to critically examine written communication and provide revisions to their own and their peers' work through peer mentor groups. Peer mentor groups allow for students to collaborate with one another, give and receive edits on upcoming assignments, and enhance their writing skills altogether. To do so, students were placed into groups of 3-4 based on varied skills of prior content knowledge, perceived writing skills, Associated Press (AP) Style, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

Peer review days were held on a specific, consecutive day biweekly in the classroom. Students would bring rough drafts of their upcoming writing assignments for their group to review, revise, and provide constructive criticism to the student to improve their work. The suggestions students provided for their peers included corrections and edits for grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors; suggestions for organization, structure, and flow of content; and providing suggested comments for additional improvement. Additionally, the peer mentor groups provided students with an opportunity to review and provide feedback from the different writing styles within their

peer groups. Students earned participation credit for attending peer review sessions. At the conclusion of the course, students were asked to evaluate their peer groups and each member's attendance, contribution, and feedback, as well as individually reflecting on their experiences for additional course credit.

Results to Date/Implications

The end of the semester reflections provided the results for this abstract. We found the peer mentorship groups were an effective and important step in the writing process, applying knowledge and representing the importance of guidance and teamwork. In addition, the groups served to relieve student anxiety when writing and revising their assignments.

Students expressed *applying the knowledge and skills they learned to future classes and industry* as an emergent theme. One student mentioned, "... I learned how to work with a team and use each other for help. I will use the skills I learned in terms of working well with others in every profession I have in the future...". Students also expressed how important *group collaboration and revisions are critical to the writing process*. One student stated, "I learned that peer mentorship is an extremely important part of effective writing. It is very useful to get other people's opinions and suggestions on your writing. Even if it is just small grammar corrections, it can make or break a paper." Another student stated, "Advice matters. I had teammates that really cared about giving critiques, but also really wanted their papers to be critiqued. I think it is great showing others you want to improve and to iterate you truly want their opinion." Finally, students discussed how having peers review and critique their assignments *relieved writing anxiety*. They said, "it was helpful to have my peers to bounce ideas off of while bettering my draft at the same time. Having extra minds also removed some of the stress of trying revise by myself since they often caught mistakes I had missed." One student stated, "... it is difficult for me to take critiques. I feel in this team project I was able to loosen up and take suggestions. This will benefit greatly in my next group or work experience".

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The peer review process is a critical step to ensuring students possess strong writing skills. Instructors should continue to emphasize on the importance of peer mentorship, as they assist with relieving writing anxiety and an opportunity to connect with other students. Based on our reflections, students within each peer group truly want to help one another succeed. When working with peer mentor groups, instructors should plan to adapt strategies when students do not attend class on peer review days. We recommend instructors provide incentives for students to take mentorship and the revision process seriously by assigning points to peer review days. The mentorship structure is beneficial in any area of concentration and is not specific to agricultural communications and writing courses only. Instructors should also provide a lesson on the writing process and the importance of revisions to clearly communicate its necessity.

Cost/Resources Needed

The use of peer groups is free and does not require any additional external resources. Students have all the necessary materials for the peer mentor groups, such as writing utensils, laptop, or iPad, for editing others' work. Instructors can provide additional instruction or suggestions to students by walking around the classroom and facilitating discussion with peer groups. However, instructors should budget adequate time for peer mentor groups.

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