Peer Review and Revising in an Anthropology Course: Lessons for Learning
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Peer Review and Revising in an Anthropology Course: Lessons for Learning

Anne J. Herrington and Deborah Cadman

I didn't have that much criticism of the actual material so I added to that. Penny's paper was different from mine. She didn't really provide as much of a summary of what was in the book as she did an analysis. So I said, I think I should add some. She went the other way.

Tom had told me that I needed to put in some questions [about needed research in the future]. I didn't know why I really needed to do that. . . . It fit in Tom's paper because he wasn't able to do as much with his study. I got basically what I wanted.

These comments were made by two students in a college anthropology class, explaining revisions they made in their writings after a peer exchange of drafts. Both students talk about substantive changes they considered in their own drafts on the basis of reading peers' drafts and receiving some advice from their peers. The comments reflect the writers' processes of weighing alternatives and then deciding how to act. We believe this process of active, reciprocal decision-making represents the primary value of peer review—not only for writing classes, but also for classes in any discipline where students are asked to write.

Our aim in this essay is to demonstrate this value of peer review by showing how it was used by students in one anthropology class.\(^1\) We hope that the work of these students will give teachers who are uncertain about using peer review a broader view of the role it could play in their classes.

More specifically, we will illustrate the following characteristics of peer-review exchanges as they were accomplished in this course:

1. Peer review can create occasions for active and reciprocal decision-making where students are their own authorities, not the teacher. Instead of following a peer's or even a teacher's advice uncritically, they feel more latitude to decide for themselves how to act, specifically how

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they will respond to a peer's response. Indeed, the value of peer-review exchanges can be realized as much in instances where a writer decides not to follow a peer's advice as where she does.

2. Students can give sound advice to their peers, even on matters they are having difficulty with in their own writing.

3. Writers can profit both from the response they receive about their own drafts and from reading the drafts of others.

4. In peer-review exchanges, students focus not only on matters of organization and style, but also on substantive matters of interpretation and methods of inquiry central to learning in a given discipline. As they do so, they are working out their own understandings of methodologies, ways to interpret information, and ways to present themselves in their writing.2

We believe that the degree to which these claims will be borne out in a given class depends not only on the students, but also on the teacher and the classroom environment she creates. We have also been talking in generalizations. The rest of the essay is grounded in the concrete experiences of students in an anthropology course. We focus on the full exchanges of two students as they worked through the writing assignments for this course, showing how characteristics of the process are evident in their exchanges with other students. In the closing section, we identify aspects of the teacher’s approach that we believe contributed to the success of peer review for these students in this course. First, a bit of background on the course.

Writing in Anthropology

Writing in Anthropology is a writing-intensive course for junior and senior anthropology majors at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.3 It was taught by Sylvia Forman, Professor and Chair of the Department of Anthropology, assisted by a teaching assistant, Ned, a doctoral student in anthropology.

In the syllabus, Forman explained to students two learning goals for the course: “to help you employ writing and research skills to better understand anthropology; and to help you improve your ability to write effectively and comfortably, both generally and in an anthropological context.” To this end, students completed four major writings: a book review, a descriptive field report, a research article for a professional journal, and a popular media article. The first three were to be written for a professional journal such as American Anthropologist or Food and Foodways; the fourth for a publication such as Natural History or Smithsonian. Although the emphasis of the course was writing, it also had an anthropological focus, which that semester was food and culture.

We chose to study this course because of the approaches Forman used, in-
cluding peer review and revision, and because it was recognized as a successful course. Student course evaluations for the past two semesters had been overwhelmingly positive; specifically, over 90% reported that peer review was valuable.

The course procedures were the same for each writing. The salient characteristics are summarized in Figure 1. As that figure indicates, Forman followed a process approach, having students work through multiple drafts for each writing, receiving response from peers and herself or the teaching assistant.

General characteristics:

- Multiple drafts of all writings, at least three of each.
- Peer and teacher review of drafts.
- Students free to choose own research questions for writings.
- Grading deferred until the end of the semester.

Typical procedure for each writing:

- Detailed printed copy of the assignment.
- Model(s) to read and discuss in class, with students noting differences among approaches and their own preferences.
- Brief presentation by the professor regarding various stages of the research and writing for each assignment and brief class discussions of issues that would arise as students were writing, e.g., use of ethnographic present tense, adapting for a popular audience a technical journal article written first for a professional audience.
- In-class small group discussions of, e.g., ideas for research questions and an opening "hook" for the article for a popular audience.
- Peer critique of first draft, written outside of class.
- Teacher critique of second draft: Forman commented on half of the students' drafts, the teaching assistant on the other half.

Figure 1. Course Procedures for Writing in Anthropology.

Forman introduced peer review to the class after they had written their first draft for the book review. She distributed a sheet of instructions stressing the importance of being constructive, of pointing to strengths as well as weaknesses, and of being specific. The most important matters to address were identified as "(1) clarity, (2) organization of data and concepts—including analysis, and (3) interest." She then distributed a sample draft and had everyone write a response to it. Rather than having to follow specific forms to structure responses, the reviewers were to decide for themselves what to comment on. She asked them to begin all responses by addressing the writer by name. After they had discussed their responses to the sample draft, they exchanged their book-review drafts with one another and wrote the peer reviews. The reviews for subsequent writings were written outside of class, although students usually discussed them a bit at class sessions.
Peer-Review Exchanges

We focus on two students, Penny and Jim, for each describing their exchanges with peers as they worked through two writings. We begin with Penny and her experiences with the first and second writings and then move to Jim and his experiences with the third and fourth writings. In two instances, we also comment on exchanges with the teaching assistant to develop points about assuming authority.

We've made these selections for a couple of reasons. By describing exchanges for each writing in succession, we can demonstrate how the focus of peer responses shifted from one writing to another corresponding to the issues students were trying to deal with to meet the particular demands of each assignment. By using two focal students and their exchanges, we can show how characteristics of the process are evident in the work of more than one student. The nature of their responses is representative of the responses of the eighteen students whose peer critiques we analyzed. Still, their exchanges illustrate how various individuals perceived and carried out the process of peer review. Both Penny and Jim were average students and neither felt very confident about writing: of the two, Penny was the less confident and had more obvious difficulties with organization, grammar, and spelling.

To save space, we present only excerpts from the peer-review critiques. A typical full critique ran from one page to two pages and included comments about a wide range of matters, including development and interpretation, organization, clarity and readability, rhetorical effectiveness, and correctness. The excerpts we have chosen refer primarily to development, interpretation, and rhetorical effectiveness.

Penny and Her Peer-Review Exchanges

Penny was a first-semester junior. She said she'd always had a difficult time writing. In fact, she'd been in remedial courses in high school. Although she had passed her first-year college writing course, she still lacked confidence in her writing. She was more confident of herself as a student of anthropology. Despite her own difficulties with writing, she was able to give sound advice to her peers.

The first writing in the course asked students to review Consuming Passions, a popular book on food and culture, for the journal American Anthropologist (AA). Forman viewed this assignment as a way to give students a common starting point and introduce them to writing procedures they would follow throughout the course. In the written assignment which explained the purposes and characteristics of reviews for AA, she stressed that a review was to include both description and evaluation.

For this writing, Penny exchanged drafts with Ann, a friend she knew from
other classes. Ann was also a first-semester junior. She was more confident than Penny of her writing and reported that she usually received positive comments from teachers about the quality of her writing.

Their exchange is notable because even though Ann was apparently the better writer, she profited a good deal from Penny’s response and reading Penny’s draft.

In her peer response to Ann’s draft, Penny began with a positive comment: “Your paper is very good. It includes most everything needed as far as I could see.” She indicated her own insecurity about spelling and syntax in two comments:

I will mark what I believe to be spelling mistakes, but unfortunately, I didn’t inherit my father’s knack for the subject. Double check it with a dictionary later!

Do not take the way I refer to structure sentences as gospel because your writing, overall is clear. Where I put in a word or two is only where I stumbled and thought it might flow a little smoother so the sentence probably just needs a little attention to make it smooth, not necessarily my words.

Through two of her comments, she tried to move Ann to include more of her own evaluation of the book, focusing implicitly on its value for readers: “Did you find the book enjoyable or a waste of time?” Penny also picked up on a claim Ann made that “the book is more a recital of known facts than an argument or presentation of any new thesis on food and culture.” Penny asked, “If they were just reiterating stuff that’s already been written about, did you see any point to their writing the book?”

Reading Penny’s draft, Ann also decided that she should include more evaluation. As she wrote in her response to Penny’s draft, “Your criticism is legitimate and I like how you juxtapose it with your praise. It makes me see how my paper is lacking.” In an interview, Ann commented further, “I realized I didn’t have that much criticism of the actual material. Penny’s paper was different from mine. She didn’t really provide as much of a summary of what was in the book as she did an analysis. So, I said, I think I should add some. She went the other way.” This comment reflects her decision-making. She assessed her own draft in light of Penny’s, deciding that while Penny’s lacked enough summary, her own lacked sufficient evaluation. In her revision, then, she added a few evaluative sentences, such as one about presentation: “The organization of facts is occasionally confusing and one must pay close attention to the material, as transitions between examples are often ill marked.”

In direct response to Penny’s question about the “known facts” claim, Ann added a sentence of clarification: “It does, nonetheless, present a perspective on the significance of food that the reader may have never examined previously.” She said she added that because she felt the claim she made in the first draft was misleading because “I think for the general public it was a real-
ly interesting book.” For her, then, Penny’s comment and the opportunity to review and revise her draft led her to reassess and clarify her point.

Ann’s response to Penny’s draft was generally positive, reinforcing Penny’s own sense of satisfaction with it. However, consistent with her sense that Penny’s draft “went the other way” in not providing quite enough summary, Ann suggested that “the audience might be interested in more examples of the content discussed in the book.” Penny followed this suggestion by adding in two places clauses containing more detail. Aside from some spelling corrections, she made no further revisions.

For the second writing, the descriptive field report, students were instructed “to conduct a brief field study of some aspect of food and culture with local people.” For most students, this was the first field study they had done, let alone tried to write up. Forman saw it as a central assignment in the course:

The major issue in this paper is actually taking raw data and learning to make sense of it. That’s part of learning some process of anthropological inquiry. . . . That’s one of the major things anthropologists do, that process. . . . [This project] is an empowering device, because this is really something they own, that nobody else knows about and research is not a matter of going to the library, it’s something you hold yourself.

So, it was a learning experience: practicing anthropology as the ones in charge and trying to present themselves as anthropologists to other anthropologists. Furthermore, it was intended to encourage them to feel more authority.

How to convey that authority in their writing became a major issue for a number of students, specifically when they tried to balance acknowledging limitations with maintaining their credibility. Note that this issue was not addressed explicitly in the written assignment, the published sample, or class discussions. We note this to show that through peer review, students can address, on their own, issues that might not have been anticipated by the teacher. As they worked on the issue of authority in their own writing, they also were sensitive to it in their peers’. Through their exchanges, they negotiated their own provisional resolutions to the issue.

The dynamics of that negotiation are evident in the exchanges between Penny and her peer reviewer Tom, who reviewed her first draft, and the teaching assistant Ned, who reviewed her second draft. These exchanges also demonstrate that she was more likely to weigh critically the advice from her peer reviewer than the advice from the teaching assistant.

Although Penny was satisfied with her field research, she was not satisfied with her presentation of it in her first draft. Her study examined how the dieting habits of wrestlers affected their social lives. She came up with that question because her boyfriend was a wrestler and she had some firsthand knowledge of it. She’d interviewed five wrestlers and their coach and felt she’d gotten a good deal of information from them, so she didn’t feel there were many
limitations to her study. Still, the issue of limitations and her authority as a researcher arose in her first draft and Tom's response to it, specifically in the Data Analysis and Conclusion. If you look at the two excerpts from the Data Analysis section (Figure 2), you can see that Penny included comments about herself as the researcher. Neither in this section nor in the Conclusion did she mention any other limitations of her study.

The Effect Dieting Has on Wrestlers' Social Interactions

Data Analysis:

Although not all of the questions asked were directly related to the topic of wrestlers diets and the effect posed on their social life, they were helpful to me, because of the lack of basic knowledge I had on the subject. I now understand the sport to a much fuller extent.

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[Commenting on one of the wrestlers:] Dieting and wrestling in general effected his relationship with his girlfriend. "She hated it," he said. I tried to get in touch with her, to discuss her view but was unable to reach her.

Conclusion:

It is very important for wrestlers to make their weight class. These wrestlers social lives were radically effected by their dieting. . . .

In addition the converse was also true, social interactions with friends effect how the athletes chose to lose their weight. This is seen in how some wrestlers, despite the coaches advice will eat only dinner instead of breakfast or lunch. This is because dinner tends to be a more social meal. . . .

Figure 2. Penny's First Draft for Writing 2, Descriptive Field Study (Excerpts Transcribed as Written).

In his peer review, Tom made the following comments relevant to these sections:

Data Analysis: First paragraph not needed.

Conclusion: Conclusion is okay but you should maybe talk about problems you may have had with the study in terms of reliability of data and problems due to the design of the study. Recommend other questions that might be asked in another study.

His comments on the Data Analysis section made no explicit reference to the researcher's authority and he gave no reason for suggesting that the first paragraph be omitted. His advice about the conclusion seemed to reflect his assumption about a convention of the genre: acknowledge limitations and pose questions for future research. Tom may have developed this notion from his other readings or classes. In this class, although neither the written assignment nor Forman's explanations in class included these injunctions, the published sample that was distributed did. It ended with the sentence: "Further research is required to test these expectations." As you will see, Penny had a different view about this convention.
Peer Review in an Anthropology Course

In her second draft, Penny made two deletions in the Data Analysis section. Both reflect her attempts to present herself in a new role, one where she had some authority: that of a professional writing to other professionals, not a student to a teacher. First, consistent with Tom’s advice, she dropped the first paragraph in the Data Analysis. When we asked her why, she didn’t acknowledge that Tom had suggested it. Instead she said the paragraph was to her what she called an “anthropology”: “I’m sorry I did this, I’m sorry if you don’t like it, but I did it because—and I try not to put that in my paper.” She said she saw it used in “every single anthropology paper I’ve ever seen” and she didn’t like it. Penny saw this as an instance of something she’d seen in professional writing and wanted to avoid. There are two things to note in this exchange: Penny did not acknowledge Tom’s advice, although her action was consistent with it; and she explained her decision by drawing on a broader context of her perceptions of the writings of professional anthropologists.

In writing her second draft, Penny also made a self-initiated decision to delete the comment she’d included in the first draft about trying to contact one of the wrestler’s girlfriends. When we asked her why, she told us that “it was too personal. This was almost like ‘so forgive me, I really wanted to get. . . .’ As I started to get to know Sylvia and Ned, I didn’t really think I had to prove to them that I was trying to do everything I possibly could to make this paper perfect. You know, some teachers you feel like you have to show them that even though it didn’t come out, you tried to do it. But I thought once I got through the paper it was apparent that I had done the research as much as I could, so I think, I really didn’t need to do that.”

This issue of shifting from presenting one’s self as a student to a professional is one, we think, many students in upper-division courses struggle with and is one that entails more substantial questions than whether to use first-person pronouns. As Penny’s example shows, it entails as well questions about how to justify research decisions and major claims. (See also Herrington 344–54.) In this course, a number of factors of the class helped students work on this transition for themselves. Most obviously, the assignment did so by asking students to assume the role of practicing anthropologists throughout their research and writing. Another factor was doing the revisions, which gave students occasion to reflect on their own work and try out different options if they wished. A third and particularly important factor was the specific classroom relation students perceived between themselves and the professor, one where some authority and assumption of competence was conveyed to them.

Following her peer’s suggestion, Penny expanded the conclusion with paragraphs commenting on one difficulty she had with the study and identifying questions that remained. (See Figure 3.) She explained that in an interview “Tom had said to me that I need to put some questions in. . . . I didn’t know why I really needed to do that, but I said, ‘All right, I’m tired. . . . If I do this, then I can be finished with this.’ So I put in some questions.” But she also said, “I didn’t like that—but I thought maybe I should put it in because
it was good in Tom’s paper." Here, Penny quite honestly admits a choice many of us make at times: we’re tired or out of time, so we take the path of least resistance. Even so, she is thinking critically, trying to decide what is appropriate—here on the basis of what she’d read in Tom’s draft. Everything is not an “anthroapology.”

Data Analysis: [deletes both of the sentences cited in Figure 2]

Conclusion:

It is very important for these wrestlers to make their weight class. These wrestlers social lives were radically affected by wrestling. . . . The converse was also true, social interactions with friends affected how the athletes chose to lose their weight. Despite the coaches advice some wrestlers will eat only dinner instead of breakfast or lunch. It is likely that this is because dinner tends to be a more social meal.

* * *

Once the study got underway, it went rather smoothly. The wrestlers were difficult to contact but, when I did get to speak to them, they seemed very interested to speak on the subject and were very helpful.

Several questions still remain and were unanswerable in the time given for this study. ie. How does dieting effect the athletes sex life? What were the friends and girlfriends side of this story.

Figure 3. Penny’s Second Draft for Writing 2 (Excerpts Transcribed as Written).

The teaching assistant reviewed the second draft, making two comments relevant to these sections. The first was in his summary comments: “Tighten up your conclusion. It rambles.” The second comment was a question—“Did you ask them?”—written in the margin next to the underlined phrase in Penny’s second draft: “It is likely that this is because . . .”

In the third draft, Penny changed the sentence lead from “It is likely that . . .” to “I hypothesize that . . . but this question should be studied in fuller detail.” She explained the change to “hypothesize”: “I thought about it . . . and I wasn’t too sure. He [the TA] probably even—probably realized that I wasn’t too sure about it.” She decided to add the comment about needing further study, so she could cut the questions she’d added at the end. She said that the TA’s comment to “tighten up your conclusion” encouraged her to cut the final paragraphs. Not surprisingly, the TA’s comment seemed to carry more weight than the student’s did; it also fit with Penny’s own inclinations. This exchange shows Penny’s process of negotiation in action: she added something on the basis of advice from Tom and her reading of his paper, something that went against her own inclination and her assessment of other anthropological writing; but she didn’t take this advice uncritically and ultimately modified it considerably with a substitute that better fit her sense of how she wanted to present herself and her study.
Jim and His Peer-Review Exchanges

Jim's drafts and peer-review exchanges for the third and fourth writings in the course illustrate some of the same characteristics that were at work in Penny's writing, particularly the reciprocal nature of peer exchanges and the active decision-making throughout the process. The dominant concerns are different, however, given differences in Jim and Penny and differences in the assignments.

Jim was a first-semester senior. He didn't perceive himself to be that good a writer, telling us in an interview that "I don't have a strong background in English." He said that in high school, "I wasn't really into writing. It was just take the English requirements." He began college at a community college where he took a writing course that he described as "not very structured. It was more getting the ideas going."

He said he was least confident about "analytical writing" and most confident with "basically descriptive-type work." That self-assessment was borne out in his descriptive field study, which both he and Forman felt lacked sufficient interpretation. As Jim said, "It was descriptive, but we were trying to find why, basically." It was in analyzing "why" that his field report fell short. As he approached the third writing, the professional journal research article, his primary aim was to be more analytic.

For this writing, students were to write a "research article of the type generally published in a scholarly journal" such as American Anthropologist or Food and Foodways. In other words, they were to write as specialists to other specialists. Forman stressed that it was to be "professional in tone" and "more analytic, more theoretical, more 'why' oriented" than their previous paper, the field study. In writing their first drafts, the major problem students struggled with was foregrounding their own interpretations and not getting overwhelmed by all the published research they were drawing on. Having finished their first drafts, many felt they'd not yet succeeded. Still, they were able to assist one another for revising. Their sense of their own difficulties and their support for one another are evident in the following exchange between Jim and Peter, a second-semester junior.

Jim's paper was titled "The Validity of the Maritime Theory on the Development of Early Complex, Societies on the Coast of Peru." He chose this issue because he was interested in archaeology and, along with Peter, was taking a course on South American archaeology. In his peer-review comments to Jim, Peter focused on matters of analysis. He made a global comment asking Jim to work more of his own interpretation into the paper:

In the data analysis section and archaeological section, try to breathe more of your own insights into the situation. At times it seems as though the paper is a statement about Wilson and Moseley's arguments and not your own. . . . My paper in retrospect probably has the same shortcomings.
Note that Peter's comment reflects on his own work as well as Jim's. Acting on this global advice, Jim decided for himself on the particular revisions he would make. Most significantly, he added more of his own interpretive comments to open and conclude paragraphs that discussed various research findings. For instance, at the end of one paragraph, he dropped this sentence reporting on a claim that is counter to his argument: "Moseley (1975) doubts that the small amounts of maize found at the site of Aspero had anything to do with the development of maize on that site." Instead, he put it with other claims that presented both sides of the argument and ended the paragraph with this sentence:

Although more archaeological excavation is needed to determine the role of domesticated plants, one cannot dismiss the fact that Preceramic peoples did use maize and other crops to a limited degree at a time when they were supposedly totally dependent on marine resources.

When we asked him why he made this change, he did not explicitly acknowledge Peter's advice although his explanation was consistent with it. He explained that the Moseley sentence "doesn't really help me at all. . . . I'm trying to sway the people, so to speak." As this comment suggests with its focus on 'what I'm trying to do,' Jim had moved from trying to summarize others' positions to making his own argument.

Jim's second draft was reviewed by Ned, the teaching assistant. Their exchange illustrates how Jim, like Penny, weighs advice critically. In this instance, however, the advice came from the teaching assistant, not a peer. Commenting on the draft, Ned was generally positive. Still, he made a few suggestions, including that Jim specify dates in some places and elaborate some sections. Jim followed these suggestions. In one instance, however, he decided not to. Ned had asked Jim to consider whether trade could have been a factor in the development of these societies. Jim decided not to add a section on trade, saying "that's not a part of this paper. That's going to open up—I don't have room for it [referring to limitations on the length of the paper]. I don't really have the time to do it." So, for a number of reasons, including substantive ones, Jim elected to reject Ned's advice. In short: he felt free to decide for himself which advice from the teaching assistant he would follow. We feel he was more inclined to trust his own judgment because he also had Peter's peer review to give him another point of reference. As Jim commented when he explained why he didn't follow the TA's advice about considering trade, "I just rewrote it with the peer critique."

When Jim reviewed Peter's draft, he advised Peter on the same matter he had difficulty with: interpretation. In one comment, he attempted to prompt Peter's interpretation by posing questions:

On p. 4, the Central Ohio River Valley. You say when increased use of Mesoamerican cultigens (corn, beans, etc.) occurred, a clear decline in health results, which you show was part of the cycle of declining health
throughout the time and area. My question: What was the health of the people before maize was introduced as opposed to the health of the people after maize use? Was the trend of declining health linked, at least partially to population densities or was it totally based on subsistence use? This may be an area you could touch on in your paper.

Peter marked this comment with a check and made a note to himself in the margin: "Mention health of both populations to illustrate subs. change being a factor." In his revision he added information that would help make his point.

This same kind of reciprocal support was evident between Jim and Peter with the fourth paper, the popular media article. For this paper, they worked with the same material as they did for the third paper, but recast it for a popular magazine such as *Smithsonian* or *Natural History*. Forman saw this writing as an important part of learning to be anthropologists. As she explained to them in class, if anthropologists aren’t able to explain their work to a wider audience, then they won’t be able to affect decisions and action in the world.

For this writing, Forman introduced the strategy of using a "hook" at the beginning to get readers’ interests, e.g., an anecdote that might personalize the issue for readers. Getting an effective hook was a concern for many, both in their own drafts and in their review of one another’s drafts. Peter commented to Jim:

> Obviously you know what you’re talking about in the paper, but you need a hook desperately. I did not see one comment as to why the work is interesting and/or important. I know it’s not always easy to come up with a hook, but the paper suffers greatly w/o one.

Jim made a similar observation about Peter’s draft, but also offered a suggestion:

> You need to stress the hook more. I think it is best stated on the top of p. 4 ("agriculture can be functional or dysfunctional, depending on the circumstances.") Perhaps you could pose this as a question in the introduction and answer it in the conclusion. I admit this is a simplistic tactic, but as the paper is intended for a non-anthropological audience, simplicity is best.

Peter followed Jim’s advice.

That Peter and Jim followed each other’s advice is not so much the point here, though. The more important point is that during peer review they were advising each other on matters that they were working on themselves as writers. In the third paper, their primary focus was on the problem of synthesizing and interpreting research information to make one’s own claims. In the fourth paper, their focus was more on a rhetorical problem of adapting a technical, highly specialized article for a non-specialist audience. In both cases, these were matters Forman felt were important to learning to think and write as anthropologists.
Closing Observations

The examples and comments of these students document the critical thinking that can occur in peer-review exchanges as well as the reciprocal and authority-assuming learning it encourages. Revising one’s own draft and reviewing another’s draft move students from passive roles of receivers and demonstrators of knowledge to more active roles in shaping their own ways of thinking and writing.

The reason peer review worked as it did in this course lies in large part in the procedures Forman used in the course and in her view of students. Through the course procedures, Forman maintained an effective balance between structure and autonomy. For each writing, she provided structure by giving detailed assignments defining the issue and conventions for the genre. She provided autonomy after the first writing by allowing each student to choose the particular issue she/he would investigate. Further, for each assignment, Forman provided guidelines and samples from professional journals to illustrate a range of approaches for writing. These samples and, equally important, drafts written by others in the class gave students a context from which to decide for themselves how to proceed—as writers and as reviewers of one another’s work.5 To encourage experimentation, Forman deferred grading until portfolios were due at the end of the semester and allowed students to do additional revisions if they wished. As she explained in the course syllabus, “We do not want to discourage you when you are truly trying to improve your understanding and skills—even if, at the moment, your efforts are not producing optimal results.”

Individual autonomy was encouraged in the context of collaboration. Indeed, the aim of collaboration with peers was not to reach group consensus on ideas or ways of writing. It was, instead, for individuals to consult with others and, in the social context of sharing ideas and drafts, fashion their own ways of proceeding. Forman took it as a sign of success that most exercised critical judgment in assessing their own and others’ drafts and the peer advice they received. Pointing to this critical assessment as a primary rationale for peer review, Forman commented:

I think they take each other’s comments seriously, but not uncritically. Whereas they’re inclined to take my comments uncritically . . . So, I think they’re more thoughtful about their dealing with those kinds of comments than they are about the instructor’s comments. And I think that, pedagogically, that’s a very useful experience.6

For her, peer review was pedagogically useful in the same way as the descriptive field study. To use her words, both were “empowering devices” that fit with her philosophy for her teaching: “The responsibility is basically on the student to learn and my role is to find out effective and interesting ways to encourage them into assuming that responsibility.” From what we observed and heard from students, a main reason that they took on this responsibility
was that Forman conveyed she believed they were capable of good work—as aspiring anthropologists and writers—and she expected it of them. They viewed peer review and redrafting as a chance to assist one another and improve their drafts before giving them to Forman or the teaching assistant. As one student said, “She somehow conveys this impression that she has high expectations. So, it’s almost intimidating, but she’s not intimidating as a person. She’s sensitive to the students, but she really has a way of getting you to work at your highest level.”

Forman’s belief in her students’ capabilities came through during an interview as she tried to pinpoint why peer review seems to be successful in her courses:

These are adult people, not fully developed people, but they’re adult people and they’re capable of putting the effort into this if they want to. And they have a kind of autonomy and control in that and they seem to understand that... Students are sufficiently sensitive to those power messages that undercut the process: “It doesn’t matter what I say or what my peers say to me. This is not really a significant part of the process because really all the power is over here.” And what I’m trying to say is that not all of the power is in my hands. Some of the power is in their hands. Not all of it, but some of it. And they know they can make of it what they will. And I think as long as they perceive that, they do pretty well with it.

By conveying to them her belief that they could be helpful to one another and giving them some “autonomy and control,” Forman helped students believe in themselves and their abilities. Penny commented on the feeling of “knowing you can help somebody else. It’s the confidence thing you know. If you know you can help somebody else make their paper better, then you know you obviously have some sorta talent or some sort of, you know, good ideas.”

It is important that we recognize the value of developing that confidence and authority and creating occasions for students to make the kinds of decisions they were making in this class—decisions that carried forward their own thinking, decisions that encouraged them to reflect on their own conduct as researchers and how they would present themselves to others.

That kind of learning can be accomplished with peer review. Whether it does will in large part depend on teachers. It means that the primary concern when initiating peer review in a class is not to teach students how to critique written drafts—that’s secondary; it is first to create a classroom environment where we give students the gift of having some responsibility—some authority for their own learning: To do that means first believing that students can exercise that responsibility productively. They can.

Notes

1. Our information is derived from a semester-long field study of this class. We observed nearly every class session and participated in all small-group discussions. We focused on nine
students chosen to represent a range of experiences as writers and students of anthropology. From these nine students, we collected and analyzed drafts and final versions of all writings and both the written peer critiques they did for others and the ones they received. Consequently, for the analysis of peer critiques, we had responses from eighteen students for each writing. We also interviewed each case-study student twice, asking particularly about specific changes students had made in successive drafts for each writing. We conducted comparable interviews with Professor Forman and her teaching assistant. Finally, we administered a questionnaire to all students at both the beginning and end of the semester (25 students). We also had access to students' course evaluations for this semester and the previous one.

In this essay, we use pseudonyms for the students and the teaching assistant.

2. The first and fourth claims in particular reinforce two primary assumptions about the value of collaborative learning. It can decentralize authority so that students assume more authority for their own learning instead of being passive followers of a teacher-authority (Bruffee, “Way Out”; Trimbur, “Collaborative”). And it can create a situation conducive for individuals to test out and share their ideas and ways of writing with their peers (Bruffee, “Writing”).

3. For another description of this course and the university’s writing program, see Forman et al. Even though this is a writing-intensive course, we feel that the values of the peer review observed in this course can extend to “regular” courses as well, where there are fewer writings, fewer drafts for each writing, and less in-class attention to matters of writing. For example, Professor Forman reports that peer review has also worked well in an Introduction to Anthropology course she has taught. Steffens writes of using peer review in an undergraduate history course. In Programs that Work, a number of teachers from various disciplines report on using peer review in their courses.

4. We analyzed the peer-review responses in two ways. First, we did a content analysis of the written peer critiques for each writing. For this analysis, we trained two readers to read and classify each comment, following a scoring guide we had developed. Their percentage of agreement for all critiques averaged above 80%. This analysis showed that students focused on such matters as interpretation, clarity, organization, development, correctness, and rhetorical matters of ethos and effectiveness with an audience. Further, it showed that the nature of their comments changed with the particular demands of each writing. For example, for Writing 2, the descriptive field report, they focused on providing adequate backing for assumptions and how to acknowledge limitations of their research; for Writing 3, the professional journal article, they focused on interpretation; and for Writing 4, the popular media article, they focused on rhetorical effectiveness for readers not trained as anthropologists.

For each of the case-study students, we also studied their drafts and peer and professor critiques to analyze the nature of their revisions. We supplemented this information with interview comments.

5. Recall also that for peer-review exchanges, Forman presented general guidelines, but gave students the latitude to say what they wanted in each exchange. Many teachers and researchers point to similar factors as central to effective peer review. For example, both Atwell and Freedman use the term “ownership” to make the point that students need to be granted more autonomy for their writing and learning. Both stress as well that the teacher should provide guidance—but not prepackaged formulas—without taking ownership away from students. Also see Gere (99–112), and in reference to collaboration, Bruffee, “Way Out” and Trimbur, “Collaborative” (101–06).

6. In a critique of collaborative learning, Trimbur argues that the aim of collaboration need not be consensus that results in accommodation with peers or to existing conventions. Indeed, he argues that collaborative learning can be a “powerful instrument to generate differences” (“Consensus” 603). In one respect, we can see such differences in the exchanges amongst students in this course. As we have said, the peer-review exchanges were not intended to generate consensus on ways of writing, but rather to allow for diversity as individual students decided for themselves how they would follow conventions. Recall Penny and the “anthropology.” Trimbur goes further to advocate a “critical practice of collaborative learning” where courses focus on identifying and transforming “the dominant power relations that organize the production of knowledge” (603). That was not an explicit aim of this course, although the traditional power relation of teacher to student was clearly altered by the ways Forman gave students authority for their own learning. Further, in class discussions, Forman made a point of explaining
conventions associated with anthropological genres as just that: social "conventions," not ideals of "good writing" that could not be questioned. In this way, her approach was nearer that described by Myers: she taught students the forms of academic writing in anthropology, without "assuming there is anything liberating about these forms or about academic discourse" (170). Also, by creating assignments where students tried to use some of these conventions to explain their own research and by encouraging students to discuss them, she helped create a situation conducive to students' reflecting critically on them.

7. Penny's comment reinforces Gebhardt's claim that we should recognize the 'tangle of technical and emotional matters' writers struggle with and, in turn, recognize the emotional as well as the intellectual benefits of peer feedback (71). It is his view—one we support—that advocates of collaborative learning too often stress the intellectual aspects of it and neglect the emotional ones (70).

8. We wish to thank Sylvia Forman, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and the graduate teaching assistant and students in her Fall 1988 Writing in Anthropology course for their time, good nature, and insights. We acknowledge also the helpful responses we received from readers of our earlier drafts, particularly Marcia Curtis, Peter Elbow, and Christine Plette.

Works Cited


