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## Integration of Classroom Computer Use and the Peer Evaluation Process: Increasing The Level of Composition Proficiency Through Student Revision

*S. Bailey Shurbutt*

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It has long been suggested to teachers of freshman English that some form of peer evaluation or collaborative learning is helpful in improving composition skills and increasing retention because students helping students is a concept that enhances the composition skills of both the evaluator and the individual being evaluated. Writing strategies and mechanics skills instilled by teacher evaluation of student essays are reinforced as students themselves become evaluators. The chief advantage of peer evaluation, however, is that students are prodded to rethink essay organization, style, and mechanics, that they are encouraged to revise essays for more effective writing. Yet revision has the negative connection of extra work—long hours of recopying and the tedium calculated to dampen student enthusiasm or any extensive changing and rewriting. Fortunately, when the peer evaluation process is coupled with use of the word processor in student writing, most negative feelings about essay revision seem to vanish. Students are no longer reluctant to make major structure changes, and revision becomes more than merely “fixing grammar mistakes” or superficial editing. Something else is gained, as well, by coupling the processes of peer evaluation and word processing in student essay writing: students are released from the inhibitions that seem associated with writing by hand—the ink is no longer “indelible.” Creativity is enhanced and fluency is increased; students actually write more as the “chains of correctness” somehow, in their own minds at any rate, seem to melt away. In this

essay I will offer practical suggestions for integrating essay composition on the word processor with the peer evaluation process, and I will propose strategies for encouraging more profound essay revision.

## **The Practical Benefits of Peer Evaluation or Cooperative Learning**

There are, first of all, common-sense reasons for employing the peer evaluation process in improving composition proficiency: students “speak the same language,” have the same interests, and often suffer the same disappointments in their composition classes; thus it simply makes good sense to encourage the concept of students helping students. Also, the process imitates the way many of us consult our peers in any problematic endeavor. However, there are clearly pedagogical reasons for encouraging peer evaluation as well. Any kind of collaborative learning forces students to become actively involved in their own education.

The clever teacher quickly learns that knowledge students work for, arrive at on their own—though they are usually covertly guided by the teacher—is more readily remembered than the “spoon-fed” variety. Brown University Professor Tori Haring-Smith, one of the acknowledged authorities on collaborative learning, has written, “Students involved in peer criticism are exposed to a variety of points of view on their writing. They can see how different audiences with different backgrounds and interests react to their prose. It is far too easy for students to dismiss an instructor’s judgments, because so many students believe that English instructors have a special set of standards not shared by the rest of the world” (2). From a teacher’s point of view, the peer evaluation process also offers the valuable benefit of early feedback to students and thus encourages revision of first drafts; such feedback for early drafts is often very difficult for the teacher personally to provide due to the pressures of time.

## **The Advantages for Students Composing with Word Processors**

Colette Daiute, a leading researcher in the field of computer enhanced writing, records the responses of two students, newly introduced to essay composing on the word processor. One student writes, “The computer shows me my mistakes.” The other reflects, “The computer helps me see what the reader won’t understand.” Daiute believes that some students who use computer programs intended to stimulate composing and revising may view the computer as an authority, a power they once gave to teachers. Others, she feels, will learn through this tool to control their own writing

processes in more profound ways (131). Coupling peer evaluation with word processing will help to elicit the second student's response.

What, though, are the practical advantages that a word processing approach holds over conventional methods of teaching composition; must pen and yellow pad be forsaken for floppy disks and plastic keys? On the side of the somewhat trivial, most classroom teachers who have begun to use word processing in composition classes agree that there is not only the obvious advantage of the novelty of computer writing but the convenience that word processing offers students, who are often more comfortable with micro technology than many of their teachers. Bridwell and Ross report in their study "Integrating Computers into a Writing Curriculum" that though administrators allow their composition students at the University of Minnesota an average of two hours per week for computer composing, they are "increasingly encountering students who get 'hooked' and want to do all of their writing" at computer work stations (110).

Many of us using the computer in our writing classes at Georgia Southern have found that often students who develop word processing skills in our classes also begin completing assignments for other classes on the word processor, finding that they are able to produce higher quality and more polished writing with computer use. Kiefer and Smith suggest that the word processor encourages student writers to develop a more critical stance toward their writing, perhaps because students feel they are more in control of their composition efforts, the printed screen seeming not as indelible as the more tangible product with pen and paper. They observe also that word processed drafts tend to be somewhat longer than hand-written drafts (65). Again, the freedom which novice writers perceive the PC screen offers may be a factor in increasing fluency. Nettles and Timmons report a similar observation. They add, surprisingly, that few students, when given the opportunity to hand draft or computer draft their rough drafts, opt for the "yellow pad"—though it is their feeling that students should be given that option if they wish ("Freshman Composition in the Computer Lab"). And Stephen Soitos concludes in "Teaching Writing with PCs" that the "fluidity of change only possible with the PC encourages the student to search for excellence, simply because any idea can be accepted, rejected, or restated all in a matter of seconds" (3).

Even for the more basic-level students there are distinct advantages to using the computer when composing: spelling improves (even without programmed spelling options), missing word endings are more likely to be caught, and proofreading in general becomes more efficient. The advantage for the slower learners appears to involve seeing words printed instead of scratched in often awkward and illegible script. Certainly, for students with special learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, writing with a word processor

becomes not just desirable but indispensable. The potential for spelling aids and thesaurus capability that accompanies most word processing programs is advantageous for both basic and better writers.

The central advantage, however, for students writing with a computer is in the area of revision. Revisions are made more quickly and easily (without the necessity of laborious recopying); thus students have more inclination and opportunity for true revision, no longer merely limiting themselves to superficial mechanics correction. Many students often find revision, as a result, a more rewarding task, discovering, as Pope did two centuries ago, that “half the fun of writing is in the polishing.” Fortunately, using a word processor usually makes “the polishing” no more difficult than issuing a few key strokes or simple commands. As Soitos stated: “The PC word processor is to the typewriter as the typewriter is to the quill pen” (4). The computer then frees students from the labor traditionally involved with revision so that they may enjoy the more creative aspect of refining their writing. And from a teacher’s point of view, the revision process is the key to acquiring and retaining good composition skills, for it is not the writing of essays themselves that hones students’ word craft, but in the type, degree, and effectiveness of the revisions they make.

### **The Advantages of Integrating Computer Composition With Peer Evaluation**

A major hurdle for college students, used to the competitive nature of their college classes, is accepting the fact that writing is a social event, that composing is a supremely humanistic endeavor. Does it not seem incongruous then that humanism and micro technology should be linked? How many of my cohorts have I heard lament the plastic technology and vow that “those machines” will never seduce them from their yellow pads! They’ve taught enough Orwell and Asimov to fear the potential of RAM power or what they perceive as the sinister possibilities of PCs. Students, admittedly, appear less threatened by computer technology than any of their professors. Still, coupling computer use with collaborative learning techniques not only enhances the vital process of revision but mollifies the mechanistic “appearance” of writing with a computer.

In the most basic sense, these two techniques—word processing and collaborative learning—complement each other. Paradoxically, the process which seems on the surface somewhat unstructured—unskilled student writers leading unskilled student writers—is in reality, if used effectively, highly structured, requiring much guidance and preparation on the teacher’s part. Similarly, the process which appears significantly structured—writing with a system that works on a highly schematized set of

commands and programmed functions—in reality encourages a level of creativity and allows a degree of composition freedom which pales traditional pen and paper. Thus, these two processes suit each other well.

### **Preliminary Preparations**

How does one successfully integrate two teaching techniques that obviously require a great deal of careful planning on the teacher's part? The key to success is student preparation. Early in the quarter or semester, at least one class period should be devoted to an introduction to word processing and those computer functions necessary for student essay writing. With a simplicity program like Milliken, fifteen or twenty minutes will suffice; for a more detailed program like Word Perfect, an hour's class period plus a teacher-prepared handout or mini-manual especially designed for student writing is desirable. Students can start by putting a revision of a previous essay on the word processor, just to learn the basic program functions; then the teacher can mark some changes, additions, and blocking and cutting in the revision so that those more complex operations can be practiced. (Or the teacher can construct his own "Learn" exercise, modeled after the "Learn" activity that accompanies programs like Word Perfect yet specifically geared to essay writing. What we at Georgia Southern have constructed takes no more than twenty minutes for the student to complete, yet he learns all the significant editing and revising techniques by going through the exercise.) Therefore, students can put first or second drafts on floppy disks and participate in peer evaluation exercises. Some students will prefer the traditional pen and paper for rough drafts, but most will opt for composing on the word processor; both alternatives should be provided.

Initial preparation for peer evaluations are equally important. Collaborative learning works best after a few weeks into the quarter or semester when the teacher has had the chance to lay the foundation necessary for evaluating good writing and correct mechanics. However, even as this instructive part of the course is taking place, some group work can be accomplished, and it will prepare students for the peer evaluation of essay to come later in the course. Small groups of three work best, with each member having some task (i.e., a group moderator, a recorder, and a class reporter); also, it is important to change frequently the mix-up of these small groups in order to insure participation by all and to allow for class rapport to develop. Activities involving sentence combining, parallelism, misplaced and dangling modifiers, and somewhat complex activity requiring a group consensus works well in collaborative learning situations. Brainstorming exercises are also excellent for group work. It must be stressed, however, that clearly defined instructions and problem solving goals are essential for cooperative learning to succeed (Haring-Smith 4-11).

Once students have been exposed to the initial elements of effective composition—strategies in planning and thinking through essay topics, the varieties of possible ways to organize and present ideas, effective grammar and mechanics habits, and, most important, learning to think about their words, that delicate art of transferring the beautiful chaos of ideas and thoughts into clear, logical and effective sentences—then a limited form of student evaluation of essays can begin. Initially, a number of evaluating sessions in large groups is best. In the larger group setting, essays from other classes can be used for teacher-moderated evaluation sessions. Later, smaller, less threatening group sessions work well, with the students evaluating their classmate's essays. Though students have experienced the teacher's evaluation already on several essays, their own mode of evaluating should necessarily be somewhat different—more suggestive and less combative.

It's also important for the teacher to be aware that there are as many different kinds of reader-response sheets and checklists as there are types of essays or rhetorical modes. The teacher can prepare such checklists to focus on specific parts of the essay—paragraphing, effective sentences, and details; or checklists can be prepared to elicit either a general reader-based response or a criterion-based response. The possibilities are limitless, and the teacher can tailor his checklists to suit whatever he may be stressing at a particular time in the course.

## **The Process of Integrating Computer Writing and Peer Evaluation**

By mid-term, students' competence on the word processor and familiarity with the peer evaluation process ought to be fairly well established so that they can begin working in pairs to evaluate computer drafts of their essays. For peer evaluation at this point, the library or some quiet place on campus, rather than the classroom, is best for the evaluating sessions. Toward the end of the quarter, students can make their own arrangements on their own time for the evaluating sessions. The evaluation checklist or response sheet, of course, can be used to provide the structure and focus that the teacher wishes for each particular essay assignment. At this point also, some student self-evaluation is wise. This type of evaluation can be accomplished in a number of ways: students can write on the back of evaluation sheets a statement to the effect that essays are ready for teacher evaluation after their having made a number of specific revisions, and then they should list those revisions; a separate self-evaluation response sheet can be devised; or the teacher can simply collect preliminary and final drafts and compare, though having students make some formal type of response appears preferable because this activity itself is a valid learning task.

If the class is lucky enough to have its own networked computer lab, then the possibilities for collaborative learning are multiplied. As a class, in small groups, or in pairs, students can analyze and revise essays on PC screens. The variety of revision techniques—blocking, cutting, and rearranging of essay parts—can be demonstrated directly at student work stations. Students can work collaboratively on the computers to solve particular essay problems, either together at PC work stations or trading diskettes and calling up each other's essays for peer evaluation. Notes and comments about essays can be stored in memory and traded between students. Whole essays can be revised, evaluated and revised again while stored in memory before a printed draft is ever made. Another possibility is for the teacher to prepare a sample essay in which are found specific errors that he wishes to emphasize. This essay can be copied onto student disks in a matter of minutes, and then, working in pairs, students can collaboratively go through the essay, making the necessary revisions and printing for the teacher their joint effort—an edited and improved essay.

Obviously, integrating computer use with learning techniques is a complex and involved process, but then any serious writing is precisely that—complex and involved. As teacher-writers, we seldom compose ourselves without making drafts and revisions and calling upon our peers to evaluate what we've written. Computer composing and cooperative learning encourage students to go through these elaborate processes, processes which are difficult to carry out in traditional classroom settings. Perhaps most important for novice writers, however, is the fact that collaborative learning and word processing encourage more extensive and complex essay revision. When students learn that writing can be a marvelous, exhilarating and creative experience—when they learn the challenge of transferring thoughts to paper and translating feelings into the symbols of language—then we will have accomplished much more than merely instilling some rules of mechanics into sometimes apathetic minds that too soon forget our red-linked admonitions. Honing student writing skills in a cooperative rather than competitive classroom setting is certainly a desired goal; and learning to utilize the helpful, liberating tool—the computer—in such a setting can afford students control over their communication.

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