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Review: Virtual Peer Review: Teaching and Learning about Writing in Online Environments.

Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch
Albany, NY: SUNY P, 2004

by Kevin Dvorak

Perhaps the irony of this book review is that it has undergone the very pedagogical treatment that is at the heart of the work it is discussing, a treatment so common to writing instructors that we often do not even realize we are performing it. This review has been written by its author as a computer document, sent to the editors at *The Writing Center Journal* via email, reviewed using Microsoft Word's "Track Changes" and "Insert Comment" features, and returned via email to its author with questions and suggestions embedded within the text that encouraged further writing. It is this act of "virtual peer review," an "activity of using computer technology to exchange and respond to one another's writing for the purpose of improving writing" (10) that Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch explores in *Virtual Peer Review: Teaching and Learning about Writing in Online Environments*.

In her work, Breuch sets out to create an epistemological foundation for virtual peer review, a developing concentration in writing studies that Breuch claims "has received very little explicit attention" (2). *Virtual Peer Review* constructs a solid theoretical foundation for this concentration by isolating virtual peer review as a deliberate, individual pedagogy; deconstructs elements, issues, and definitions pertaining to virtual peer review; demonstrates how to use virtual peer review as an extension of classroom practice; and presses for further research and practice to assist in developing this nascent pedagogy.

In establishing her theoretical foundation for virtual peer review, Breuch suggests that virtual peer review "differs fundamentally in practice from peer review but is rooted in the same basic purpose: to respond to another's writing" (9), and that, as a concentration of its own, virtual peer review has received too little research given the amount of virtual peer reviewing we perform daily. In fact, Breuch claims that "one of

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the frustrations in studying virtual peer review is that no concrete definition of the activity exists; as far as I can tell, even my use of the term 'virtual peer review' is new" (10). Breuch appears to be correct. There are few studies regarding this concentration, and she is, to my knowledge, the first person to use this phrase to describe such an activity. For a writing center practitioner, it is, at times, difficult to digest the idea that virtual peer review is new considering the amount of research the writing center field has put into online tutoring and OWLs. However, it is important to note that Breuch separates her work from writing center pedagogy in one significant way. Breuch suggests that student-student relationships are much different than either tutor-student or teacher-student relationships. The latter two relationships, according to Breuch, involve more "power differential," and less peer-ness, than student-student relationships.

Breuch understandably promotes an optimistic overview of virtual peer review's elements. With so much apprehension toward integrating computer technology into the classroom, it is important for her to argue this way. Interestingly, though, her optimism is embedded in a long, deliberate, critical examination of peer review, writing studies, and computer technology. For example, Breuch's most assertive claim in differentiating peer review from virtual peer review is that the latter "remediates" peer review, suggesting that "electronic communication 'borrows' from face-to-face communication" (8), thereby changing the focus of the activity. This change in focus, for Breuch, results in the primary difference between these pedagogies: the text-based nature of virtual peer review calls for a review to be performed entirely by writing, thus countering the oral nature of peer review. Breuch also details how virtual peer review disrupts three major elements of peer review—time, space, and interaction—and discusses how attitudes shaped by virtual peer review are different from that of traditional peer review. Four of the book's six chapters examine these extensions, or differences, she claims distinguish each of these pedagogies from the other.

By focusing so much attention on the "differences" rather than the "similarities" between these two pedagogies, Breuch leads her reader to a carefully constructed conclusion: that virtual peer review creates an "abnormal discourse" in regard to the normal discourses that pervade peer review, writing instruction, and computer technology. Breuch frames this conclusion using works by Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, and Kenneth Burke, highlighting Rorty's use of the terms "normal" and "abnormal discourse" (57). According to Breuch, the normal discourse of peer review suggests that writing conferences should be conducted orally, or face-to-face, between active participants and is strongly backed by both composition studies and writing-

center praxis. Again, Breuch's assertion has merit. For many of us, this is exactly how we are used to conducting conferences with other writers, and are, perhaps, too comfortable with using. So, while reading Breuch's explanation of abnormal discourse and her argument of how virtual peer review possesses the qualities of abnormal discourse in regard to peer review, it may be hard to digest thinking of virtual peer review as "abnormal," a term that suggests deviance. And while virtual peer review may, in fact, be deviant from peer review, it does not, I hope, possess the negative connotations that deviant or "abnormal" can so quickly imply. Breuch concludes this deconstruction by suggesting that virtual peer review needs to create a new discourse, one that separates it from face-to-face peer review.

If writing center folks are going to find anything deviant in the foundation Breuch establishes for virtual peer review, I believe it will be in her acknowledgement and acceptance of the directive nature virtual peer reviewers often assume when commenting on other's writings. This potential complexity appears to serve as an impetus for Chapter 4, in which Breuch examines issues concerning ownership and authorship. Recognizing how difficult it can be to get online tutors to stay away from usurping textual ownership from writers, one can only imagine how much more difficult it can be to get lesser-trained writers to be less directive. However, Breuch challenges this assumption, asking not what one can do to lessen potential usurpation, but how we might re-think ownership and authorship in light of this situation. She suggests that a student who receives a paper with directive comments must engage with those comments critically before applying them to his or her paper; thus, "virtual peer review is a form of collaborative learning but should not be a form of collaborative writing" (87).

I was left wondering why Breuch only briefly touches on writing center literature concerning OWLs and online tutoring, rather than using these works to recognize an existing foundation for virtual peer review. Perhaps it is because of the peer relationships Breuch suggests students have with one another, as opposed to the conflicting power relationships students have with tutors and teachers. When Breuch does recognize writing center literature, many of the references she makes are in an effort to construct a normal discourse for peer review in order to distinguish the "abnormal" discourse of virtual peer review. For example, in Chapter 3, Breuch acknowledges that, while recent writing center scholarship has examined tutorials "in terms of both oral communication and written communication," a strong preference still exists among writing center scholars to use "such terms as 'talk' and 'conversation' to describe the work of writing centers" (63). According to Breuch, this preference for traditional peer review terminology marginalizes any new lexicon virtual peer review may

eventually offer. There is, however, one very specific instance where Breuch uses writing center literature to assist in establishing her groundwork for virtual peer review. Breuch effectively cites Barbara Monroe's "The Look and Feel of the OWL Conference," using Monroe's terminology to demonstrate ways students may make comments on each others' papers.

In *Virtual Peer Review*, Breuch achieves the goals she sets for her work. She has given virtual peer review the explicit attention she believes it has needed and has provided writing instructors with a concrete foundation for a pedagogy many of us have been using and will continue to integrate into our classrooms and professional lives. For writing center practitioners, this book offers a critical challenge of how our discourse concerning face-to-face peer review has become a dominant discourse in writing pedagogy, perhaps without many of us even realizing it.