Developing Writers in Higher Education

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CHAPTER TWO

“A GOOD DEVELOPMENT THING”

A LONGITUDINAL ANALYSIS OF PEER REVIEW AND AUTHORITY IN UNDERGRADUATE WRITING

Benjamin Keating

Peer review, a collaborative learning tool that emerged in the 1980s as a response to the failure of traditional writing pedagogy to meet the demands of students previously excluded from higher education (Bruffee; Trimbur), is intended to help students cultivate a sense of authority over the texts they produce and to support them as they position themselves as new members of scholarly or professional communities. Research from the 1980s and 1990s suggests that peer review can help students develop as writers by destabilizing traditional hierarchies between instructors and students that had previously limited student authority (Berkenkotter; Gere and Abbot; Nystrand; Stanley). However, research has also shown that peer review could in fact reproduce the inequitable effects it intended to mitigate, not only between instructors and students, but between students, especially around gender (Spear; Stygall), race (Fox; Villanueva), language difference (Allaei and Connor; Silva and Matsuda), and ideological difference (Horner; Myers; Trimbur). Therefore, more research is needed to understand whether peer review works as intended (Kerschbaum; Leverenz; Moss et al.; Ruecker; Stygall; Trimbur). Does peer review actually enhance writing development by empowering students, destabilizing instructor authority, and encouraging students to see themselves as participants in an authentic community of writers and critics?

If peer review is designed to do these things—in short, to instill a sense of authority in students—it is important to expand our knowledge of how students experience and perceive it in their development as writers, especially since the bulk of research on peer review took place in the 1980s and 1990s and therefore cannot account for current student demographics or current institutional contexts. Fur-
ther, no recent scholarship takes a longitudinal view of peer review as a potential factor in writing development or considers it in terms of student perceptions. In this chapter, I use quantitative and qualitative data to trace conceptions of peer review over time and between the writing minor and nonminor groups, examining or analyzing what role authority—the extent to which students felt that their peers were authorized, by each other and by their instructors, to give feedback—plays in student perceptions of and experience with peer review. Further, what are the connections between audience awareness, authenticity, and authority? While my findings indicate that peer review can be a key aspect in writing development, stark differences emerged between minors and nonminors regarding their beliefs about and experience with peer review; as I show below, for the minor group, peer review was foundational to writing development, while for the nonminors, it played a less central and more complex role. I argue that these beliefs and experiences were shaped by notions of authority and authenticity in the classroom, so that the value of peer review in writing development was determined largely by how students viewed the authority of their peers relative to the authority of their instructors.

Most students perceived peer review as a useful developmental tool. As Natalie, a writing minor, put it in her entry interview, “Something about that class, it was like a workshop 24/7, which was a good development thing. I know it helped all of us.” Peer review, then, had durable consequences for students as they embraced a view of writing as a social process consistent with the threshold concepts in Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle’s Naming What We Know. By the latter stages of their college careers, both the minors and nonminors realized the value of peer review in the writing process, but they came to and practiced this realization in very different ways. A vital distinction arises here between two categories of peer review that emerged from my analysis: (1) “school-sponsored,” as I will call it, in which peer review was required by an institutional authority figure, and (2) “self-sponsored,” in which students sought to give or receive feedback outside of class from friends and family. Almost without exception, the minors located school-sponsored peer review as indispensable to their growth as writers and students. Almost without exception, however, nonminors were ambivalent about or disappointed in school-sponsored peer review. Instead, they turned to self-sponsored peer review, reporting generally that it was an important, though not vital, part of their writing development.

To illustrate these differences, I begin by analyzing what seemed like an apparent point of convergence between the minors and nonminors: the experience of frustration with peer review. While all of the participants acknowledged that school-sponsored peer review could be frustrating, minors and nonminors
explained their frustration in notably different ways. When the nonminors expressed frustration with school-sponsored peer review, they had an ambivalent and sometimes overtly negative view of it. On the other hand, the frustration of the minors was rooted in the recognition of how potentially useful peer review could be. As Celeste put it in her entry interview, “For me, [peer review] was a frustrating process because I feel like it didn’t have to be a frustrating process.” Other minors displayed a similarly confident attitude toward peer review, talking, for example, about gleaning valuable editing experience even when the reviews they received were not useful to them. As I detail below, despite their frustrating experiences, minors spoke enthusiastically about school-sponsored peer review as central to their writing development over time.

The nonminors, on the other hand, found school-sponsored peer review frustrating because they saw it as a “subjective” and fraught process of sorting through conflicting or unreliable feedback. As one nonminor, Stephanie, said in her entry interview, “I don’t know. I’ve grown to love and hate [workshops] simultaneously,” since, as she explained, although some feedback helped her see her own assumptions more clearly, she found the process of resolving conflicting feedback overwhelming. In her exit interview, another nonminor, Charlotte, made a similar point about her ambivalence: “I’m kinda torn about workshops. I like them and I don’t because I think that you get a lot of feedback at once and sometimes that’s too much.” These two students demonstrate a theme in the data: the nonminors remained ambivalent toward peer review over time.

A longitudinal comparison of nonminor entry and exit interviews supports this assertion. For example, in her entry interview, Dariella said, “It’s always kind of really dependent on the situation because when we do peer review, sometimes, most of the time, I don’t find it that useful.” In the exit interview, when asked about more recent peer review work, she said, “In terms of peer review, that’s a process that you have to go through in every single class at U of M. It is useful sometimes.” Here, “sometimes” is the key term. Dariella’s mixed experience was typical, though some students were much more negative about their experience. While nonminors recognized the potential of self-sponsored peer review to help them improve their writing, they did not perceive school-sponsored peer review as central to their development as writers over time. This difference between the minors’ and nonminors’ view of peer review’s potential to be frustrating demonstrates the divergent perceptions of its role in writing development.

Below, I present a brief theoretical framework before turning to a comparative analysis of the interview data, looking first at the nonminors and then the minors. Between these qualitative analyses, I present two “survey data interludes” in which I use
longitudinal and comparative statistical analysis to supplement my claims about the role of peer review in writing development. This quantitative analysis, the methods of which I detail below, is based on the survey responses of both minors and nonminors.

Authority and Authenticity in Peer Review

When, in college classrooms, instructors assign peer review activities to decenter their own authority and model a more social theory of writing, students often resist. This resistance is based in the notion that authority resides not in students, as novices, but in instructors, as experts, invoking the problematic cliché of the “blind leading the blind.” This view of authority depends on hierarchical and individualistic notions of not only the student-instructor relationship, but the process of writing itself—for example, an individual student writes for an individual instructor, who is authorized to assess that writing (Bruffee). Peer review, in nearly any form, begins to disrupt this dynamic. Yet instructors who seek to decentralize authority in these ways may find that students will de-authorize their peers, as some students did in this study.

This basic problem is related to larger questions around authority that have long concerned scholars in writing studies, where work on classroom discourse invites wider debates about authorship, capitalism, and intellectual property (Ede and Lunsford; Grobman; Mortensen and Kirsch; Penrose and Geisler; Spigelman, Across Property Lines; Trimbur). Authority is a vexed and vexing term, as Andrea Lunsford points out. On one hand, it suggests domination, institutional or individual, while on the other, it suggests the possibility of collaboration and knowledge-making, so that to authorize students is to empower them as writers in relation to both their peers and their instructors. The purpose of peer review, after all, is not to reproduce hierarchical power dynamics. Rather, one of its defining goals is to support discursive transgression; as Kenneth Bruffee writes, “By helping one another feel more comfortable crossing [discursive] boundaries, [students] initiate one another into the larger discourse communities they are joining” (47). Thus, collaborative learning strategies such as peer review empower students to “initiate” each other instead of relying on an instructor for this initiation. Following Peter Mortenson and Gesa Kirsch, Lunsford argues that to move beyond conceptions of authority as based in power, control, and individualism, instructors should attempt to model—through collaborative learning techniques such as peer review—a conception of authority based in knowledge, creation, and collaboration.

However, when the question of authority occurs in close proximity to writing,
as in the context of peer review, the relation between authority and authorship becomes more immediate and more problematic. If, as Candace Spigelman argues, “Classroom writing groups are, in fact, a way to help students gain textual authority by identifying themselves and each other as writers” (“Habits of Mind” 253), then the move to claim authority depends on students’ willingness or ability to identify each other as authors. Indeed, not all students in this study identified themselves or their peers as such. This suggests that authority in peer review is *relational* in the way it is claimed among students themselves. As Stuart Greene notes, authority is “always provisional” and it is “a relational term that calls attention to the fact that writers are always situated within a broad sociocultural landscape” (213). In the landscape of this study, I show how hierarchical and individualistic notions of authority competed with collaborative and communal notions of it. Since the contexts of school-based peer review—and perhaps self-sponsored peer review as well—were different for the minors and nonminors, students’ experiences with and perceptions of themselves and their peers as authors also differed.

I refer to *authority* in broad terms as the capacity to be seen as a competent source of knowledge and power in the writing classroom. To claim authority is to use this knowledge and power to persuade in peer review. Following the concern that Spigelman brings up about “textual authority,” I take up *authenticity* as the capacity to be seen as a “real” writing peer, as a “real” audience for writing, in short, as an author. The following questions loomed large in the data, as students explored their experience with peer review and its relation to their writing development: What counts as an *authentic* audience in the writing classroom? Who can be seen as an *authentic* peer? Who has *authority* in the context of peer review, and what kind of authority is it? These questions inform this chapter’s mixed-methods* comparison of student perceptions of peer review, weaving together an analysis based on data from entry and exit interviews and surveys to show how the minors and nonminors differed in their perceptions of and experiences with self- and school-sponsored modes of peer review. In order to address these questions, I turn first to the nonminors.

“Not My Favorite Process”: Nonminors on Peer Review

For many nonminors, school-sponsored peer review remained focused on surface-level concerns. When asked in her entry interview about what she would advise instructors to keep in mind in their writing pedagogy, Katie responded, “Get rid of the peer reviews—because I hate those. I’d rather them take a class day to just sit in
their office and we can go in there individually and talk with the teachers, than have our peers look at it.” Katie’s comment also previews a point I will focus on below: the ways many nonminors saw their instructor as the only person authorized to give them feedback. In the exit interview, despite reporting extensive practice with it, Katie seemed even more dismissive of school-sponsored peer review, this time citing students’ similar levels of grammar competency as the reason it was not useful:

I think it’s a complete waste of time. No one wants to do anything other than correct grammar mistakes and we argued. At UM everyone has pretty decent grammar so it’s a complete waste of time. No one wants to talk about how to make your idea better. . . . Teachers like it for some reason but we all end up talking about other things.

This student pointed out two challenges. The first was incoherent pedagogy. If instructors do not articulate the value of peer review—*why* instructors “like it”—students will not see its value. Moreover, if peer review is focused on grammatical correctness rather than “how to make your idea better,” it becomes a “waste of time” when there are few mistakes to correct, that is, when there is parity in grammatical skill, and no hierarchy to justify the claiming of authority. With no way to measure authority, the peer review devolved into counterproductive “arguing.” This view of peer review as a “waste of time” was representative of students in the nonminor group, though they offered different reasons for this view.

Other nonminors did not see their peers as “decent” in grammar. Instead, these students dismissed peer review because of a deficit-oriented assessment of their peers’ writing. The usefulness of peer review was then rooted in a calculus that equated authority in peer review with the perception of “strong writing,” so “good” writers could give “good” reviews and “bad” writers would give “bad” reviews, with “good” and “bad” describing grammatical correctness. For example, when asked in her exit interview about a recent encounter with peer review, Janie linked her perception of the low quality of her peer’s writing with the low value of class-sponsored peer review:

I hate [peer review]. Like I said earlier, I had [to review] a 15-page paper where every sentence started with “However.” That was probably one of the most miserable experiences in my life. I had over a— you know the review function on Word? Where you can count it? . . . I had over 100 comments and at that point I gave up on saying, “This is not how you use ‘however.’” It also makes you look extremely dumb to contradict yourself every sentence.
Several other students positioned their peers as unauthorized and deficient in relation to themselves. Indeed, Janie claimed authority in relation to her peer as she took on a teacherly stance to correct her peers’ writing. Janie saw class-sponsored peer review as an occasion to exert a traditional kind of hierarchical authority on her peers, whose writing she saw as needing correction. Where Janie thought she was authorized in this relational way, another student, Angela, argued in her entry interview that peer review was not useful because of what she saw as a collective de-authorization of herself and her peers:

[Peer review] is not my favorite process because it’s like we’re all students. . . . We’re all at the same; I don’t feel like anyone is so superior that they would be really giving me any great ideas nor do I think I’m so superior that I should be giving anyone great ideas. I guess it’s fine. I would never seek it out. I’ve never asked any friends to read my stuff.

But this view shifted in Angela’s exit interview, when her view of peer review became more deficit-oriented, much like Janie’s. Instead of a collective lack of authority, the problem became one of deficient instruction, or low writing standards, with the result that her friends were “not good writers.” At this point, Angela felt authorized to provide feedback to help her friends improve their “bad” writing:

To be honest, working with other writers—I mean, some of my friends have asked me to help them with their papers and help them with their essays, and they’re not good [laughter] . . . They’re not good writers, particularly their organization is really bad, which I feel like is a fundamental skill that you should’ve learned in high school. I don’t know how they got past high school without this. They’re really smart people . . . I’m like, “How did you get to this point?” . . . God, I sound condescending. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to sound condescending. They’re really great people.

Like Janie, Angela claimed to be authorized to give self-sponsored peer review to her friends, while her friends seem unauthorized to give feedback to her. Importantly, while Angela dismissed both school- and self-sponsored peer review in her entry interview, she at least acknowledged her involvement in self-sponsored peer review in her exit interview. When the interviewer asked if Angela’s practice with self-sponsored peer review had been useful for her own writing, she said she was “probably more conscious about my own writing” and that it “probably helped me a little bit.” While neither mode of peer review was central to Angela’s writing development, it had the potential to play a larger role, as it had already been somewhat helpful.

Even students who spoke negatively about peer review in any mode allowed that
it, as an idea—or ideal—could be valuable. For example, Janie, who spoke in very negative terms about peer review in both her entry and exit interviews, asserted “I was never taught how to peer review, so the way I peer review is a lot of editing for grammar” (“Entry”). Because grammatical correction remained the default mode for students in our study faced with their peers’ work, it is all the more vital for peer review to be taught as a recursive and reflexive skill. Without this training, the powerful urge to hunt for grammatical errors may continue to undermine peer review’s developmental possibilities. It is also important to note that Janie recognized that there are other, more useful ways to respond to writing, ways that remain out of reach. A clear finding, then, is that when students report that the purpose of peer review is unclear to them, they are likely to fall back on dominant ideologies regarding not only grammatical correctness, but, as I argue, regarding a transactional view of writing expertise that privileges instructor authority over student authority, undermining the stated goals of peer review.

The nonminors’ beliefs about peer review tended to be embedded in a deficit-oriented view of both writing and peer review, reflecting larger ideologies about authority as a hierarchical construct (Lunsford, “Refiguring Classroom Authority”) in which better writers can claim more authority, mimicking the traditional teacher-student power dynamic that allows them to correct their peers’ writing. The nonminors also tapped into crisis rhetoric about literacy and education, which positions most student writers as deficient (Rose). Given the durability of these ideologies, it is unsurprising that students embraced, and then enacted, these assumptions about peer review. For many nonminors, the experience with school-sponsored, and in Janie and Angela’s cases, self-sponsored peer review became evidence for the truth of these ideologies. Here, peer review acted as a constraint on student power by de-authorizing rather than authorizing students in relation to their peers and their instructors, or distributing authority in uneven ways.

If anything, as I will show below, the instructor took on an even more central role when students experienced school-sponsored peer review in ways that drove them to resist the notion of their peers as authorized. When they pushed back, they recentered and reified the authority of the instructor, correcting and assessing rather than connecting and critiquing. Indeed, for many students, being an authoritative peer reviewer meant enacting an authority based in power and control, rather than what Andrea Lunsford calls a “refigured authority” in which writers claim the right to develop their work in conversation with each other and out of mutual interest and respect.

How the students viewed their peers in relation to their instructors determined whether they embraced both self- and school-sponsored peer review, and whether
they embraced one over the other. The nonminors often spoke with distrust about their classmates’ authority as reviewers. “I think peer reviews are pointless. . . . I would’ve rather given a draft to my [instructor] because she’s the one who’s gonna be grading it,” said Lauren in her exit interview, continuing, “The suggestions that she gives me, I know are actually helpful.” Here, Lauren granted no authority to her peers and total authority to her instructor, a representative of institutional authority, who Lauren viewed as the real audience for her paper. Because she did not see her peers as the real—or authentic—audience for her paper, it follows that they should have no authority over it. Moreover, Lauren refused to participate in peer review, saying in her exit interview, “a lot of times, like when I was doing my peer reviews, I was just making stuff up so I could say something and get the grade for it.” In resisting peer review, Lauren de-authorized herself as well as her peers as reviewers, since students put little trust in their peers’ reviews if they themselves are “making stuff up” for a grade. For Lauren, school-sponsored peer review, as compulsory and graded, was a distracting and perhaps counterproductive step in the writing process, which elicited a fake engagement based in grades rather than collaboration. As Emily Wilson and Justine Post point out in chapter 1, in the specific context of an advanced screen-writing course, Lauren did develop her capacity to accept feedback from her peers. Nevertheless, Lauren maintained a stance of non-critical engagement with instructor feedback, alongside a general rejection of peer feedback. This instructor-centric view of school-sponsored authority and grading was representative of the nonminor group as a whole.

A central finding of this analysis is that since the feedback they received in school-sponsored peer review was unauthorized and unreliable, students turned to self-sponsored peer review. Their embrace of this mode of peer review was a marker of their writing development, since it acknowledged that writing is ultimately social: writers need feedback to produce valued text. For example, although Charlotte, a nonminor, remained wary of school-sponsored peer review, she developed an appreciation of self-sponsored peer review. In her entry interview, she asserted, “I haven’t found that workshop in college is as helpful just because, especially now, it’s really hard to depend on people to workshop your papers and do it in a good and well-reviewed manner.” As I have shown, many nonminors talked at length about their peers as unauthorized and untrustworthy reviewers, but they also talked about self-sponsored peer review as a key aspect of their writing process. Charlotte’s narrative from her exit interview is representative of this phenomenon:

Well, I do use peer editing as a huge thing. . . . I don’t really enjoy using peer editing in class . . . . I like using people who I know I can trust as far as peer editing, which usually happens to be my mom a lot, or my friends that work at the Daily or past teachers.
As Charlotte outlined the benefits of peer review, calling it a “huge thing,” she pivoted to the problem of authority and trust, addressing it through self-sponsored peer review. For Charlotte, peer review was an important part of the writing process, one that spanned the continuum of revision—from larger questions about audience, evidence, and structure to sentence-level concerns about grammar.

But it was process external to the classroom. In short, self-sponsored peer review allowed students to get feedback from an authentic audience, that is, an audience motivated to give trustworthy feedback that was not required by an instructor. In this sense, self-sponsored peer review was a social activity in which students authorized their friends and family rather than their peers. Importantly, the limitations of school-sponsored peer review that nonminors such as Charlotte saw were very real. When students were not invested, when they resisted the kinds of collaborative authority that school-sponsored peer review required by “making stuff up” for a grade, nonminors were making a savvy choice about how to best gather feedback on their writing. Yet as they disengaged from school-sponsored peer review, they reinforced the ideologies of traditional schooling, in which students transact knowledge with instructors but not with their peers, and authority remains a matter of power, control, and hierarchy.

**Survey Data Interlude One: Sponsorship, Practice, and Transfer**

This finding from the interview data—that nonminors valued self-sponsored over school-sponsored modes of peer review—was supported by an analysis of the survey data. Before I present statistical data and findings, a note on methods. The following analysis is based on t-tests of difference in means, a method used to determine whether differences in the average scores of two representative populations are real or rather the result of chance. The level of confidence in a t-test is estimated using a p-value, a number between 0 and 1 that reflects the odds of wrongly inferring a real difference between the groups. A lower p-value thus implies stronger confidence that the groups are truly different. The closer a p-score is to zero, the more statistically significant the difference is said to be; the closer to 1, the less significant.

In this analysis, the chosen threshold for statistical significance is a p-value of 0.05 or below. Therefore, the term *significant* means that there is a 95 percent certainty that a difference between the groups is not the product of chance. Thus, a p-score above 0.05 is deemed not significant, while a p-score of 0.00004 is very significant, indicating a nearly 100 percent chance that the difference is not random. Below, we performed t-tests on the means of specific survey questions to make an inference about the differences between the minors and the nonminors and differ-
ences over time. For each survey question $t$-test, I supply the $p$-score so that readers can gauge the level of statistical confidence in the group differences.

Two questions in the entry and exit surveys were focused on self-sponsored versus school-sponsored modes of peer review. The first question (Q.A.), which concerned the self-sponsored mode, asked students to report the number of assignments for which they sought feedback on their writing. Q.A. was as follows:

_During the current school year, for how many of your writing assignments have you received feedback from a classmate, friend, or family member about a draft before turning in your final assignment?_

The second question (Q.B.) asked students to report the number of assignments for which their instructors required in-class peer review. Q.B. was as follows:

_During the current school year, for how many of your writing assignments has your instructor asked you to give feedback to a classmate about a draft or outline the classmate had written?_

For both survey questions, students could then choose from the following answers: no assignments (1), few assignments (2), some assignments (3), most assignments (4), all assignments (5). A number of statistical inferences become possible by comparing how minors and nonminors answered these questions. It is also possible to compare the questions themselves within each population.

First, a comparison between the nonminors answers for Q.A. (self-sponsored peer review) and Q.B. (school-sponsored peer review) showed statistically significant differences in both entry and exit surveys for the nonminors, who reported seeking their own feedback more often than they reported being directed to seek feedback by their instructors. A $t$-test of the entry surveys yielded a $p$-value of 0.001, a highly significant difference. A $t$-test of the exit survey yielded another significant difference, with a $p$-value of 0.025, well within the 95 percent confidence interval. This suggests that more nonminors got feedback autonomously from their friends and family than from their classmates, a finding that supports the qualitative analysis above, in which nonminors demonstrated a distrust of school-sponsored peer review that made them more likely to seek and view favorably self-sponsored modes of peer review.

However, this is not to suggest that the nonminors did _more_ self-sponsored peer review than the minors. A comparison between the groups’ responses to Q.A. and Q.B. shows that the minors reported doing _more of both_ modes of peer review for
their writing assignments than the nonminors did during both years they were surveyed. A t-test comparison between the minors and nonminors’ responses to Q.A. showed a statistically significant difference suggesting that the minors received more self-sponsored feedback than the nonminors in both years they were surveyed, with a p-value of 0.031 comparing entry surveys and a p-value of 0.039 comparing exit surveys. On average, the minors reported self-sponsored feedback for “most assignments,” while the nonminors reported self-sponsored feedback for “some assignments.”

Using the same method, an analysis of Q.B. showed that minors reported a highly statistically significant difference compared to the nonminors, in both the entry and exit surveys, in school-sponsored peer review, the number of times instructors required them to give (and probably seek) feedback. Comparing entry surveys, there was a p-value of 0.003; comparing exit surveys, there was a p-value of 0.000. The minors were asked to give feedback on between “some” and “most” assignments, whereas the nonminors’ fell between “few” and “some assignments.” These significant differences between the groups in terms of how much self- and school-sponsored feedback they received demonstrates that minors had much more experience with peer review than nonminors.

The exit surveys show that in addition to practicing peer review more often than the nonminors, the minors reported learning more about peer review in general than the nonminors reported learning. The exit survey contained the following question:

Q.C. How much did you learn about giving and receiving feedback on writing-in-progress in your courses at the University?

Students could then choose from the following answers: very much (1), some (2), not much (3), and nothing (4). Comparing exit surveys yielded a p-value of 0.021, with minors reporting a mean closer to “very much,” while nonminors had a mean closer to “some.” This statistically significant difference was probably related to another: in the entry survey, the minors, more than nonminors, reported that they were able to transfer peer review skills they had learned in first-year writing to other courses. This assertion is based on a t-test of Q.D.:

How frequently do you use what you learned in your First-Year Writing Requirement course about giving and receiving feedback on writing-in-progress when writing for other courses?
To respond to this question, students could choose very often (1), sometimes (2), not very often (3), never (4), or I didn’t learn about this in my first-year writing course (5). Analysis of this question about transfer yielded a p-value of 0.049, just within the 95 percent confidence threshold to be called significant. The mean of the minors fell between “very often” and “sometimes,” whereas the mean for nonminors was very close to “sometimes.” Interestingly, this p-value suggests a less certain difference between the groups, which suggests, alongside the interview data, that both groups appreciated their experience with peer review in their first-year writing courses, particularly the nonminors, who reported good experiences with first-year writing peer review in their interviews.

To conclude this interlude, the survey data illuminate why and how the minors practiced more peer review, learned more about it, and used what they learned about it more often (after their first year) than the nonminors. Taken together, these differences confirm that minors found more benefit in school-sponsored peer review than the nonminors, though the minors seemed to value self-sponsored peer review as well. Paired with the data from the interviews, the data from the surveys also suggest a link between the frequency at which instructors ask students to perform semiautonomous peer review and students’ propensity to act autonomously. That is, the more students practiced peer review in class, the more likely they were to do it outside of class. Further, as is clear from differences in the interview data between the groups in terms of their perceptions of peer review, with practice seems to come a positive view of peer review. Below, I turn to the interview data to show how minors came to value school-sponsored peer review in such stark contrast to the nonminors, and how that valuing of peer review becomes a marker of writing development.

“Holistic Instead of Nitpicky”: Minors on Peer Review

While the nonminors positioned school-sponsored peer review as both focused primarily on surface-level correction and generally unauthorized—compared to instructor feedback and self-sponsored feedback—the minors as a whole described a developmental arc that began with surface-level revision and moved to an in-depth revision process that positioned peers as an authorized and authentic audience. As Kaitlin, a minor, put it in her exit interview, peer review became “more holistic instead of nitpicky.” This arc is clear in a comparison between Sidney’s entry and exit interviews. In her entry interview, Sidney’s description of peer review is generally representative of the minors’ entry interviews: “I really enjoy peer editing and breaking down in small groups to workshop things. I think that that’s very powerful. . . . I find that very, very helpful.” The focus is on the transactional func-
tion of peer review as a revision tool—that is, what peer review can give writers to help them improve their writing, often in terms of sentence-level corrections.

This statement stands in contrast to the function of peer review described in Sidney’s exit interview, which is more relational. In the exit interview, Sidney asserted that the minor curriculum allowed students “to write about really real things,” that is, to choose their own topics for their own reasons. Students wrote about authentic subjects, perhaps in ways that encouraged them to enact an authentic writing persona, to claim authorship, and to position their peers as fellow authors whose feedback was important. Sidney chose to write about depression, and described the peer review sessions as “constructive,” continuing, “they weren’t everyone [just] saying, ‘Oh, great job.’ You got honest feedback, but it was a safe space where people were also telling you what they liked, and you felt okay bringing big ideas to the table.” Wilson and Post (chapter 1) trace a similar arc in Sidney’s relationship with instructor feedback, showing how she moved from a transactional and noncritical acceptance of instructor feedback to a more collaborative and dialogic process. In her exit interview, as Wilson and Post argue, she started “to have these conversations with [herself]” about how to revise her writing, which suggests she had used the feedback processes from both instructors and students to develop her ability to revise her writing (p. 42).

Yet Sidney’s description of peer review captures another phenomenon of the minors’ relationship with peer review, one that extends beyond questions of writing improvement, assessment, or trust in their peers or instructors. For many students, peer review reached into liminal spaces in which students developed their awareness and respect for the experiences of others. The minors saw class-sponsored peer review as a dialogic process, energized by encounters with different points of view, different media, and different disciplines. As Natalie reported in her exit interview:

My project ended up being way in a completely different mode and displayed way differently because a girl that was like—she plays the bass, she’s in the music school—she’s like, “Oh, I’ve done this before and you should try this.” . . . It was very kind of push and shove kind of revision . . . I think my writing and me intellectually as a whole I think was pushed forward because of the people and the different array of measures and back-grounds I guess. That was really cool.

What “pushes” Natalie forward is not just the diversity of skill and the dynamics of peer review within the class, but dialogic contact with a diversity of experience. As in the excerpts above, Natalie positioned herself as a writer with an authentic audience, whose feedback pushes beyond the surface level. Natalie’s development,
as a writer and as a thinker, was driven by the contact that school-sponsored peer review afforded her. Other students spoke in similar ways about peer review: less as a means to an end—as a tool given to them by their instructors for the purpose of improving their grades—and more as a chance to incorporate new ideas from and connect with their readers. Sarah Swofford’s analysis of Natalie’s development (chapter 9) also highlights her relational and flexible disposition around writing. Indeed, her ability to connect with other writers in self- or class-sponsored peer review, Swofford argues, helped smooth her somewhat turbulent transition from secondary writing to postsecondary writing.

The minors not only positioned peer review as a key—and generally consistent—aspect of their writing development, they did so by highlighting the value of peer feedback in relation to instructor feedback, crediting both as useful in different ways. For example, in response to the question in his exit interview, “What have your experiences been of working with other writers throughout the minor?” Zach answered,

You get a lot from your instructor ‘cause obviously they’re professional teachers in writing and stuff, but there’s nothing quite like the feedback that people who are in the same situation as you have. [Peer review] was insanely valuable for learning how to frame it in ways that we as students wanted to frame it.

Zach positioned peer review as a unique kind of feedback that supplemented and decentered instructor feedback. Peer feedback, then, was useful in ways that instructor feedback was not, despite the fact that the instructor was a “professional teacher,” and thus authorized by the institution to give official feedback. Zach also described his peers as an authentic audience and peer review as a way to connect with that audience. Another student, Joy, positioned peer review in a similar way in her exit interview: “Honestly, my project wouldn’t have been as successful without the feedback, not only from [the instructor], but the other girls in the class. Because they were in my target market for the magazine that I was writing, so it was really nice to get firsthand feedback about what a reader would think about it. That’s been very valuable.” Like Zach, Joy positioned her peers’ feedback as in some ways more authorized than her instructor’s feedback.

Both of these students framed peer review as an activity that destabilized the traditional binary between instructor and student authority: here, students as peer reviewers had a degree of power in their position as both target audience, or authentic audience, and community member. They suggest that peer review, as practiced in the minor, allowed feedback to emerge from a community of writers rather than from a single authority figure. However, this is not to suggest that instructor
feedback was less developmentally important to students such as Joy. As Wilson and Post argue (chapter 1), when students engaged critically with instructor feedback, which often meant a “dialogic” engagement with their instructors, students had much to gain. In Joy’s case, argue Wilson and Post, her instructor’s practice of posing challenging questions acted as a “springboard” for Joy’s self-awareness and as a “catalyst for Joy’s development as a writer” (p. 43). Indeed, when instructors cultivate the kind of writing environment where peer feedback is valued, instructors might find themselves free to give a different kind of feedback—for example, to ask more challenging questions.

Most of the students in the minor group viewed their classmates and their instructors as valuable collaborators, even though they did not see themselves as engaged in collaborative writing per se. This suggests that these students did not see themselves as solitary writers pursuing solitary projects. Rather, they connected their production to the group it was composed in and for. Since their writing was no longer an individual transaction with their instructor, their peers became an authentic audience, not one placed awkwardly between themselves and the assessment of their instructors. Because they saw their peers as an authentic audience, students valued the feedback they received.

In other words, a connection emerged between authenticity and authority, so that an authentic audience of peers held a nonhierarchical authority, one founded on collaboration rather than competition, transaction, or control. This view of writing echoes what expert writers hope for when they imagine receiving feedback from their audience of peers: when an audience is not only a willing consumer of text but also an active responder, authority and audience are mutually constructed. These students’ relational view of writing and authority positioned them less as students and more as authors.

This analysis also suggests that the ability to appraise and critically revise one’s own writing, a crucial step of writing development, is intimately related to peer review. Many students made the connection between peer review and self-reflection explicit, like Shannon, in her exit interview:

The one skill that I’ve actually picked up in the Gateway course was self-reflective comments. . . . That’s just really, really helped me to define where I’m struggling in my papers. Then, also if I have a peer or an instructor look at my paper, I know exactly what areas I want them to address, so that’s been really helpful.

The term the student uses, “self-reflective comments,” is an embodiment of this movement from internalization and reflexivity to revision. When students were able to independently see their uncertainties and “define” their struggles, a recur-
sive process occurred in which they exercised autonomy in subsequent review sessions with both peers and instructors. The movement from external experience to internal, independent development seems connected to students’ skills in self-reflection. This movement from peer review to internalization, and from internalization to reflection, is clear in Shannon’s talk about “struggling.” Indeed, this struggle is indicative of the process of writing development.

The minors’ experience with school-sponsored peer review suggests a robust level of writing development. Indeed, they practice Andrea Lunsford’s conception of writing as

[b]oth relational and responsive, always in some way part of an ongoing conversation with others. This characteristic of writing is captured in what is referred to as the classic rhetorical triangle, which has at each of its points a key element in the creation and interpretation of meaning: writer (speaker, rhetor), audience (receiver, listener, reader), and text (message), all dynamically related in a particular context. (“Writing Addresses, Invokes, and/or Creates Audiences” 20)

Students in the minor were writing in these “relational and responsive” ways, with peer review as a key site for this work that allowed students to realize—make real—each side of the triangle. As Sidney’s example shows, where peer review started as a function of how to improve writing, it evolved into a vehicle for social relation in which students, as rhetors, wrote “real” rather than “mutt” genres, to invoke Elizabeth Wardle’s label for written genres that only approximate the genres at work in communities of practice. As Sidney suggested, the minors were able “to write about really real things,” which made the feedback more valuable. Jonah, another minor, put it this way in his exit interview,

It was nice to be surrounded by people who I was more comfortable in discussing my works with them and it didn’t feel like an exercise. It actually felt helpful and like I could get useful feedback. I think having us all together like that made the feedback feel more confident.

For Jonah, being “together” with his peers made the feedback more trustworthy. Therefore, when school-sponsored peer review was more than an “exercise”—when the rhetorical triangle was real, or authentic—peer review took on a new, more complex meaning, one that expert writers immediately recognize in their own writing practice. Without the presence of a trusted community, peer review loses much of its power.
Survey Data Interlude Two: Affect

Turning again to the survey data, quantitative evidence supported the notion that, for the students in our study, peer review was a relational activity that depended in part on the affective dimension that Anne Gere references in the introduction to this section. The data showed that although discussing their writing may not be a very enjoyable experience for most students, there were significant differences between our two study groups regarding this question.

First, in the entry survey, and again in the exit survey, the minors reported that they found discussing their writing with others more enjoyable than the nonminors did. In Q.E., students rated their agreement with the following statement: “Discussing my writing with others is enjoyable.” Students could then choose from the following answers: strongly agree (1), agree (2), uncertain (3), disagree (4), or strongly disagree (5). A comparison of the responses in the entry survey yielded a \( p \)-value of 0.010, with the minors and nonminors both falling between “uncertain” and “disagree.” The nonminors, though, were much closer to “disagree.” The same trend continued in the exit survey, where the \( p \)-value was 0.003, and the difference between the group was even larger.13 This statistical inference is consistent with the interview data so far presented in the chapter, where the minors spoke with such enthusiasm about peer review. Yet it is also notable that despite this enthusiasm, the minors still viewed discussing their writing with others in ambivalent and uncertain terms. The data certainly do not suggest that most students find discussing their writing to be an “enjoyable” activity.

Despite this, the nonminors experienced a greater difference between their entry and exit surveys: their enjoyment of talking about writing grew significantly over time, with the mean for the entry exam at 2.97 and the mean for the exit 2.64 (\( n = 45 \)), a difference that yields a 0.030 \( p \)-value. This was not the case for the minors, who, although they found discussing writing more enjoyable than the nonminors, did not experience a significant difference over time: enjoyment grew from entry to exit, but not in a statistically significant way, from an entry mean of 2.3 to an exit mean of 2.19 (\( n = 26 \)), a difference that yields a \( p \)-value of 0.052, just over the 95 percent confidence threshold required for significance.

Thus, while the minors showed more enjoyment in general, the nonminors’ ability to enjoy talking about writing grew more than the minors’. This finding might connect to the positive ways in which nonminors spoke about the feedback from their friends and family. As they advanced in their disciplinary discourses, they might have experienced more fulfilling experiences with self-sponsored peer review. Again, it is not that the nonminors did not experience peer review as a developmental tool; rather, they did so outside the confines of the classroom.
For the study group as a whole, including all minors and nonminors who completed both an entry and exit survey, students indicated that discussing their writing with others had become more enjoyable as they progressed through their course work. The difference was statistically significant over time, with a $p$-value of 0.030 ($n = 71$). This finding further supports Gere’s observation in her section introduction about the link between affect and writing development: that both groups of students found talking about their writing more enjoyable indicates that there is much to learn about the potential connections between affect, feedback, and writing development.

Conclusion

In their exit interviews and surveys, the minors displayed what I have argued is a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between writing and peer review. With their extensive experience in peer review, a mainstay of the minor curriculum, these students showed a marked change in their view of peer review over time, not only in moving away from a focus on surface-level editing, but in their fundamental stance toward the writing and revision process. For minors, peer review took place primarily in a classroom setting where students were able to choose their own writing projects and claim authority over them. Overwhelmingly, they perceived peer review as a highly useful and enjoyable experience.

Peer review emerged as a vehicle for recursive movement from group capacity to individual capacity: from peer review to self-review, and back again, so that reflexivity (awareness of self in relation to others) was a key element in writing development. Further, minors saw peer review as a dialogic process, during which they were energized by encounters with different points of view, different media, and different disciplinary perspectives. Peer review was seen less as an assessment tool given to them by their instructors to improve their grades and more as a chance to address an authentic audience whose feedback mattered. Indeed, there are parallels in how students such as Sidney developed their stance regarding instructor and student feedback. As they developed their self-awareness as writers, they also embraced a more dialogic and critical notion of feedback.

The nonminors had a very different way of conceptualizing the value of peer review over time. They did not experience a coherent peer review curriculum, and, by and large, they reported more negative experiences with school-sponsored modes of peer review. Because of these negative experiences, the data suggest that many nonminors relied primarily on self-sponsored peer review. This reliance grew out
of a sense of distrust of school-sponsored peer review. For some nonminors, this distrust and disappointment was intertwined with deficit-oriented views of their peers’ writing that, for example, equated a perception of mastery over Standard Edited American English with writing competence, and in some cases, a perception of a hierarchical authority in relation to their peers. Fluency and authority were conflated in ways that led to a continuing focus on surface-level concerns. In other words, when students saw themselves as authorized because of their “skill” in grammar, their writing development slowed.

The nonminors’ preference for self-sponsored peer review points to an opportunity to learn more about what self-sponsored peer review looks like. How might self-sponsored peer review offer the kinds of affective and dialogic rewards the minors spoke of? How do students reconcile self-sponsored feedback with school-sponsored feedback, including that of the instructor? How might students see self-sponsored feedback in relation to questions about authority? In other words, what kinds of authority are enacted in self-sponsored modes of peer review? Do they adhere to traditional notions of authority, or do they progress toward a collaborative and plural notion of both authority and authorship?

The question of self-sponsorship leads to another about equity. Not all students have friends or family willing or able to respond usefully to college-level academic writing. For example, transfer students, a growing demographic of students in higher education, often need to build a network of peers to use self-sponsored peer review; further, since transfer students may come from less privileged backgrounds or may be first-generation college students, their family connections might prove less useful for self-sponsored peer review than the connections of students whose parents hold advanced degrees (Gere et al.). For historically underrepresented or marginalized students, school-sponsored peer review may be the best option, in which case there is an urgent need for instructors to do a better job demonstrating its value and training students to use it effectively.

For both groups, the ways that students engaged with peer review often involved a litany of vexing questions about their peers’ authority. Students were essentially forced to engage critically with the feedback their peers offered. Often, at least in their first years, this critical engagement tended to dismiss rather than accept peer feedback; at the same time, as Wilson and Post demonstrate (chapter 1), inexperienced students often showed a propensity to accept instructor feedback uncritically. As they developed their capacity as writers, however, many students learned to engage critically with their instructors’ feedback, an engagement that Wilson and Post argue is a marker of writing development. This beginning asymmetry in students’ reactions to feedback is telling—in basic terms, the propensity to reject
peer feedback while accepting instructor feedback can evolve, certainly in the case of the minors, to a practice of engaging critically with both peer and instructor feedback. For the nonminors, this engagement with peer feedback might occur in self-sponsored rather than class-sponsored modes of peer review, which points to the need to open lines of investigation into self-sponsored peer review.

Further, the asymmetrical reception of feedback also seems to be linked to the competing notions of authority that students and instructors both grapple with. If a hierarchical notion of authority remains dominant, shaping student-student as well as student-instructor relationships to feedback, asymmetrical receptions of feedback remain the default. If a collaborative notion of authority gains traction, students empower themselves, their peers, and their instructors as critics and writers. Of course, a problem arises when instructors assign peer review, hoping to cultivate a collaborative and formative kind of feedback in the classroom, but then maintain the singular and summative authority to shape their students’ careers by stamping their papers with A’s, B’s, or C’s. If students are to engage critically—rather than dismiss—their peers’ feedback, instructors may need to reframe what Lunsford calls the “troubled authority” of classroom discourse—a hierarchical authority that maintains its power in part by authorizing students to de-authorize their instructors.

That is, despite the institutional authority that instructors may wield to require students to participate in school-sponsored peer review, that authority is actually quite tenuous; instructors cannot force students to carefully consider peer feedback. As the nonminors showed us, undermining school-sponsored peer review is not difficult. It is simply the choice to not listen, to do it only for the grade, or to dismiss it out of hand compared to instructor feedback. The extent to which peer review was a factor in writing development, then, might be correlated to the extent to which instructors have been able to frame peer review as a nonhierarchical, dialogic, collaborative form of authority-making, where peers are authentic audiences.

Reframing peer review is clearly possible, as the minors show us, yet as scholars who value peer review in our classrooms in part because we value it in our scholarly careers, we are at constant risk of under-theorizing it in our research. Charlotte Brammer and Mary Rees suggest that peer review, in both its professional and pedagogical applications, is “practically instinctive” (71) for many instructors. This renders it less visible as a research topic, since what is “instinctive” is generally harder to position as an object of study. Making the case to students about peer review as a worthwhile tool will mean continuing to research the enactment of collaborative kinds of authority in classroom discourse.
NOTES
1. In this chapter, I refer to student-to-student feedback processes simply as peer review, since it is the more general and widespread term. See Armstrong and Paulson for a discussion of terminology for peer review.
2. I use these terms based on Anne Ruggles Gere’s distinction between autonomous and semi-autonomous writing groups, where the former is compulsory, convened by an authority figure. The latter is voluntary, with no immediate connection to the authority of an institution.
3. I have chosen not to integrate this quantitative analysis into the qualitative analysis so that readers can concentrate on one methodological argument at a time.
4. With few exceptions, the qualitative and quantitative data are complementary, but they are not perfectly parallel. That is, since the interviews were semistructured, not every survey question has an equivalent interview question. However, as we detail in the introduction, students filled out an extensive set of entry and exit surveys that contained multiple questions specifically about peer review. The interview protocol also contained questions about collaborative learning and peer review.
5. Instructor feedback is seen as more valuable when grades are of paramount concern.
6. Entry: 3.01 on Q.A.; 2.53 on Q.B.; p-value: 0.0009; n = 67.
7. Exit: 2.72 Q.A.; 2.36 on Q.B.; p-value: 0.025; n = 61.
8. Freshmen year: minors: 3.51; nonminors: 3.01; p-value: 0.031; n = 104. Senior year: minors: 3.18; nonminors: 2.72; p-value: 0.038; n = 98.
9. Entry: minors: 3.21; nonminors: 2.53; p-value: 0.003; n = 104. Exit: minors: 3.16; nonminors: 2.36; p-value: 0.00004; n = 98.
10. Exit: minors: 1.35; nonminors: 1.64; p-value: 0.021; n = 101.
11. Entry: minors: 1.63; nonminors: 1.96; p-value: 0.049; n = 104.
12. Hyland and Hyland make a similar point: “Students can make their own revisions without feedback and improve their writing significantly. It is therefore important not to overlook the writers themselves as critical readers and reviewers of their own texts. . . . In fact, most writing teachers would acknowledge that the ultimate aim of any form of feedback should be to move students to a more independent role where they can critically evaluate their own writing and intervene to change their own processes and products where necessary. . . . To do this, students need to develop metacognitive skills” (86).
13. Entry: minors: 2.29; nonminors: 2.8; p-value: 0.010; n = 104. Exit: minors: 2.10; nonminors: 2.78; p-value: 0.003; n = 97.

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