Goals of the Study

Peer editing has been a useful tool in the traditional writing process, especially in recent years. This idea of revising the works of your peers and providing constructive criticism is wildly popular in high school classrooms as well as in entry-level college courses, and it is usually introduced at the early middle school level. The technique is applauded because of its ability to not only benefit the recipient of the edits, but also the editors themselves who learn skills such as assessing and offering justifiable comments (Crossman and Kite 2). It is also believed that peer editing encourages the student to write for a broader audience rather than solely for their teacher, resulting in more direct communication versus stiff, scholarly writing (Phillipson).

However, even with its evident popularity, there are some skeptics who believe peer editing has its downsides. Some of these arguments illuminate the fact that most students correct only trivial errors, such as grammatical ones. In one study from the University of Connecticut, more change was made from the initial copy to the final in the area of “writing conventions” versus that of “organization” (Crossman and Kite 5). Critics also acknowledge that it can be hard to find a “happy medium” in the amount of input given. Some editors lack the knowledge, confidence or interest to make a sufficient number of corrections, while others attack people’s papers and sometimes even provide them with erroneous corrections (Phillipson).

Because I have used peer editing for most of my academic life, I have come to my own conclusion about its pros and cons and which may outweigh the other. But I was interested to know if my peers’ opinions matched my own. I believe peer editing has limitations and needs alteration in several areas if it is to be a useful tool for improving writing. To learn more about the views of others, I decided to explore how beneficial they found peer editing based on their own experiences with the process. The aim of this study was to provide insight into the peer-editing process as it exists now and ultimately provide information that could improve the process and better students’ writing. This research study addressed two major questions: (1) how beneficial is peer editing to college undergraduates in entry-level writing courses? and (2) can the peer-editing process be improved upon? I chose to survey and interview undergraduate freshmen in their first semester at James Madison University because I felt they would have roughly the same level of exposure to the process and would not have completed any college-level classes that could use methods more advanced than the grade-school level.

Design of the Study

This study took place in the 2010 fall semester at JMU. Thirty freshmen were surveyed via a freonlinesurveys.com link sent to their email accounts. The survey was composed of thirteen multiple-choice questions on peer editing in general, as well as questions about the individual’s unique experiences with the technique. Ideally, I would have liked to study an even number of males and females to avoid potentially gender-biased data; however, since this was a voluntary sample of students, it was impossible to control the distribution of the responders. The survey data represents the responses of eighteen males and twelve females. Of these thirty students, I interviewed two males and two females about their survey responses in an effort to obtain more detailed answers.
The interviews were casual and not held in a lab setting. Observation studies were not used because I was unable to create an accurate peer-editing scenario.

Survey Analysis

The online survey summary provided me with percentages and counts for responses to each question. This was helpful in immediately seeing which response was most popular for any given question, and the margin by which the answers differed. Almost every response to the survey questions alluded to flaws in the peer-editing process. The broadest question, “On a scale of 1 to 5 how helpful do you consider peer editing?” showed that about 40 percent of the students gave the process a “3,” therefore finding it moderately helpful. Only 7 percent found peer editing “vital to their writing process,” contrasted with 4 percent who viewed peer editing as “absolutely no help.”

It seems peer editing has merit, but perhaps is not a fully evolved tool as would be evidenced by more responses of “4” and “5.” Moreover, 60 percent of students said they do not include peer editing in their writing process if they are not formally assigned to do so in the classroom. An astounding 90 percent reported they tend to change mostly surface errors when peer editing, and only half focus on the actual concepts in the paper (Stubbe).

Some possible explanations for these responses could be topic related and/or dependent upon whose paper they are editing. My survey results showed that 80 percent of editors gave more input when they were reviewing a paper about a topic they were interested in. Seventy percent felt that they were more effective peer editors when they were reading the work of someone they know versus a random classmate. Overall, the surveys provided a good summary of the attitudes toward certain components of peer editing (Stubbe).

Interview Analysis

During the interviews, I read the questions one by one to the four freshman participants and recorded their answers. The detailed answers were much more insightful than the one-word responses received from the survey. The two males I surveyed seemed to have strong opinions regarding how disadvantageous they found peer editing to be. The males’ overall attitude was that they were more confident in their own writing versus those of their peers. Both men also commented on the amount of time the process took. On the other hand, the two females saw peer editing as an important step in their writing process. One female gave peer editing an overall “5,” meaning she found it “vital to the writing process” (Zell). They both agreed that having the viewpoints of their peers was advantageous to pinpointing errors that may have gone unnoticed to them. They also found it helpful to hear where readers needed more clarification in their writing.

The survey revealed that females appear to give more input than males when peer editing. Three out of the four subjects found peer editing easier when they were reading about something they found interesting. One of the females reported that “if the paper is boring, I will give more grammatical corrections, but if it is interesting then I am more likely to comment on the content itself” (Hooe). Another interesting point made by one of the males was, “If I feel like an authority on the topic, then I am much more comfortable making changes to a paper” (Ridgway). All four of the subjects agreed that they are more critical/helpful when it comes to a friend’s paper because they know their friend is less likely to take their comments personally. Lastly, one of the males made an
insightful assertion that “extroversion and confidence of students affects both the amount and type of input they give and receive” (Ambrose).

Secondary Research

A similar study at Columbia Center for New Media Teaching and Learning at Columbia University was conducted on the process of peer editing. Their findings both supported and differed from my own. The study found some of the same pros and cons mentioned earlier in my report and outlined ways to improve upon the process. Some suggestions included providing a “set of codes” to guide the students in the process (Phillipson). My research reinforced this point, finding that 80 percent of editors found it helpful when a teacher provided a rubric to follow. Depending on how the guidelines are set up, they could be useful in directing editors’ focus on the areas that are usually neglected. Another suggestion I thought effective was asking students to provide a short “editorial notes” section to their final draft (Phillipson). The majority of students I observed expressed a concern for incorrect comments or corrections to their paper; this notes section could be a place to express what was liked and disliked about peer editing and could be used to improve upon the next session. However, one of the center’s suggestions was to consider pairing editors randomly, thus making the paper they were to edit an involuntary decision (Phillipson). This proposal was contradicted by my own study, which shows a high number of students reporting a better outcome when editing papers of those they know. Therefore, I would advise allowing the students to voluntarily pair with one another, so long as they stay focused on the task at hand.

Summary of the Findings

Many academics assume that peer editing is a valuable and worthwhile process, which explains its prevalence in the classroom. My own view, however, has long been that peer editing is not that beneficial to students’ writing, and my experiment bolsters this claim. The surveys and interviews both suggest a lack of confidence from students in the process, thereby creating useless “going through the motions” types of corrections. If teachers are devoting entire class periods to this method, it should benefit the students’ writing. Studying how the students responded, I can assume that the idea of peer editing is good but the execution of the system is flawed.

How then can the process be improved? Based on my findings, it appears that several areas could be improved upon to make the process of peer editing a more effective tool. First, it could be helpful to allow students to voluntarily pair up with an editor rather than being randomly grouped. If the students are comfortable working with one another, they may have more confidence when critiquing. Second, because my experiment evidenced that editors focused more in papers of interest, students could give a brief summary of their topic or argument prior to choosing whose paper they would like to edit. In addition to these suggestions, guidelines could be implemented such as providing justifications for corrections being made, therefore avoiding wrong advice, and requiring that the entire teacher’s rubric be filled out in class and not merely skimmed over. Overall, this research study adds weight to the argument that peer editing has its limitations and needs to be improved upon in order to guarantee the success of student writers.
Works Cited

Hooe, Ann Greer. Personal Interview. 12 Nov. 2010

Survey Questions for Peer Editing Feedback
Survey conducted through freconlinesurveys.com in November 2010

1. Are you male or female?
2. If you are not formally assigned to peer edit, do you include this step in your writing process anyway?
3. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being “absolutely no help” to 5 being “vital to your writing process”) how helpful do you consider peer editing?
4. Explain why you answered the way you did in question 3.
5. As a peer editor, do you believe there is a correlation between the topic you are reading about and the amount of input you give?
6. Are you a more effective peer editor when you are reading the work of someone you know versus a random classmate?
7. Do you normally make a fair number of changes after receiving comments from a peer editor?
8. Do you ever disagree with corrections or comments received from peer editing?
9. Do you tend to change mostly “surface errors” (punctuation, trite words, awkward sentences, etc.) when peer editing?
10. Do you focus on the actual concepts in the paper?
11. When peer editing, do you find it helpful when the teacher provides a rubric to follow?
12. Would you find peer editing any more helpful if the editors followed and referenced all areas on the teacher’s rubric?
13. Are you apprehensive about questioning the writer’s purpose or direction?