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Building Scholarly Writers: Student Perspectives on Peer Review in a Doctoral Writing Seminar

MARGARET ELLEN ADAMEK
School of Social Work, Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Peer review was used as a primary pedagogical tool in a scholarly writing course for social work doctoral students. To gauge student response to peer review and learning as a result of peer review, the instructor used narrative analysis to organize student comments into themes. Themes identified included initial trepidation, "no pain, no gain," and writing as relationship. Students transitioned from cautious reluctance about peer review to embracing it as a necessary part of the writing and publication process. As a profession that values collaboration, social work doctoral programs may benefit by encouraging peer support to enhance student writing and scholarly productivity.

KEYWORDS collaborative learning, doctoral students, peer review, writing skills

Quality scholarly publication is critical to the status of social work as a professional discipline. As early as 1915, Abraham Flexner asserted, "The evolution of social work toward . . . professional status can be measured by the quality of publication put forth in its name" (as cited in Sellers, Smith, Mathiesen, & Perry, 2006, p. 139). Despite the importance of scholarly publication to advancing knowledge of social work policy, practice, and education, studies of such publication in social work demonstrate unevenness in writing productivity. In essence, a relatively small group of social work scholars are very productive, whereas the larger group struggles to "do enough" (Fraser, 1994; Green, Baskind, Best, & Boyd, 1997).

These disparate patterns of productivity have been documented across disciplines (Furman & Kinn, 2011; Silvia, 2007). Citing a national survey of

Address correspondence to Margaret Ellen Adamek, 902 W. New York Street, Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA. E-mail: madamek@iupui.edu

40,000 faculty members conducted by the UCLA Higher Education Research Institute, Belcher (2009) reported that only about one fourth of faculty write regularly. Despite the widespread nature of writing struggles, some academics have a misperception that they are unique in their "writing dysfunction" (Belcher, 2009, p. 185). Apparently, the majority of academic writers resort to "binge writing" to accomplish necessary writing expectations (Furman & Kinn, 2011), an approach that has proven much less productive than ongoing scheduled writing (Boice, 1989).

Despite its importance to advancing the social work knowledge base and thus the professional status and contributions of the discipline, scholarly writing remains a silent struggle for many social work researchers. In their recommendations for promoting diversity in social work doctoral education, Schiele and Wilson (2001) called for doctoral programs to infuse content on scholarly writing in the curriculum. The centrality of publication to social work scholarship led one major Midwest school of social work to design and offer a doctoral course focused specifically on scholarly writing. A primary pedagogical tool used in the course was peer review.

Empirical studies conducted in the humanities have affirmed the value of peer review in the teaching and learning process (Ching, 2007; Flynn, 2008; Yang, 2011; Yuehchiu, 2007). Based on a historical analysis of peer review as a teaching tool, Ching (2007) pointed out that its use in composition classes dates back to the late 19th century. Peer review has been used successfully as well in a wide variety of courses including English as a Foreign Language (Yang, 2011), English composition (Ching, 2007; Chiu, Wang, & Wu, 2007; Yuehchiu, 2007), psychology (Cho, Schunn, & Charney, 2006; Covill, 2010), and educational leadership (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Doctoral students in educational leadership who participated in evaluating one "Scholarly Writing Project" in fact identified peer review as the most influential aspect of the course and of their learning about how to write for publication (Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Examining peer review in an English writing course in Taiwan, Yang (2011) found that despite initial doubts about their peers' abilities, most students positively evaluated peer reviews of their writing. Students may also have reservations about their own reviewing ability (Chiu et al., 2007). Based on in-depth interviews with students in an English composition course, Yuehchiu (2007) concluded that multiple-draft revision is an important aspect of the peer review process and that students could benefit from training in peer response. In contrast to other studies, Covill (2010) found no difference in students' writing quality in an undergraduate psychology course under three conditions: formal peer review, self-review, and no review. Yuehchiu appropriately noted that there may be some cultural differences in students' acceptance of peer review.

Although peer review has been empirically supported as an effective pedagogical tool in several disciplines, its emergence in social work is more recent. A few social work educators have applied composition theory to

teaching writing to social work students; however, the use of peer review was not emphasized (Dolejs & Grant, 2000; Waller, 2000). Nonetheless, one study conducted in a social work senior capstone course concluded that "peer mentoring techniques such as peer review and peer teaching appear to be a promising pedagogy that assists students in improving their writing skills and integrating their professional knowledge" (Badger, 2010, p. 16).

Combining their expertise in English and social work, Dolejs and Grant (2000) applied key concepts of composition theory in teaching writing to social work students. The concepts they identified were "writing to learn," "writing as process," and "writing as social act." Although the use of multiple drafts incorporates the concepts of "writing to learn" and "writing as process," peer review is aligned with the concept of "writing as social act." Writing to learn acknowledges that writing itself is a method of inquiry and thus a means of learning about a particular topic. Writing as process entails the understanding that good writing is fashioned over time and evolves in stages from a rough draft to a refined final product. Although the scholarly writing course described in this article used all of these three concepts from composition theory, this analysis focuses on peer review, and thus "writing as social act."

Further, other social work authors have reported that informal peer support through writing groups outside of the classroom is a helpful tool for promoting the scholarly productivity of both social work doctoral students (Page-Adams, Cheng, Gogineni, & Shen, 1995; Stratton, Upton-Davis, & Johnson, 2009) and faculty members (Bibus, Link, Rooney, Strom-Gottfried, & Sullivan, 1999). In a systematic review of factors facilitating dissertation completion specifically among social work doctoral students, Liechty, Liao, and Schull (2009) found that social support from both mentors and peers was critical to students' success. Although their analysis did not address peer review of writing specifically, Liechty et al. (2009) did point out (drawing from Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of learning) that "all learning occurs within the context of social interaction imbedded in a particular culture" (p. 487). Hence, peers, in essence, may become part of a "hidden curriculum" in doctoral programs (Liechty et al., 2009).

This inquiry focused on social work doctoral students' responses to using peer review in a course focused on scholarly writing. The project received an exemption from the university Institutional Review Board committee in February 2012 because data collected were part of the educational process, so informed consent was not required.

METHODS

Since 2001, the author has taught a three-credit doctoral-level scholarly writing course every year. As of fall 2011, the course has been offered 12 times

to a total of 81 doctoral students (58 female, 23 male). Those taking the course included 13 international and 13 racial minority students. The aim of the course is to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and motivation to be successful academic writers, including writing for publication. The primary assignment for the course is a progressive concept paper that students write in stages, beginning with a proposal. Early in the semester, students bring a one-page topic proposal to class to be circulated for review and comment. This ungraded assignment is the first opportunity in the course for "low-stakes" peer review (Elbow, 1997).

Prior to conducting in-class peer reviews, the instructor engages the students in a discussion of what constitutes constructive criticism. Students share their views about the type of feedback they most appreciate and that would likely be most helpful to them in the revision process. This discussion of the nature of constructive feedback establishes the expectations and guidelines students will follow in conducting a peer review. In addition, the instructor distributes several examples of reviewer guidelines from prominent scholarly journals. Likewise, students bring reviewer guidelines to class from a journal that may be a potential publication outlet for their paper.

Following Lamott's (1995) recommendations for writing, the instructor has the students produce a "down draft," or a first cut of their concept paper, with the notion of just getting something down. Students bring multiple copies of their down drafts to class for a peer review session. Students read and comment on each other's papers during class and take home one peer's paper to do a more thorough review. The following week, students submit the peer review they completed to the instructor and to the writer. Although students receive feedback and points on their written peer reviews, the down draft itself also is considered low-stakes writing (Elbow, 1997) and so is not graded. (Low-stakes writing includes drafts, concept mapping, outlining, and other forms of prewriting that are not subject to outcome evaluation.) Students revise their first drafts based on feedback from both their peers and the instructor. In a similar fashion, second drafts, or the "up draft" (Lamott, 1995) are brought to class about 4 weeks later for an in-class peer review. For a third time, therefore, students leave class with specific feedback from multiple peers. Each student conducts a second written peer review of another student's paper as a homework assignment. The final or "dental" draft (Lamott, 1995) is submitted to the instructor at the end of the semester for a grade. Lamott's use of the label "dental draft" implies the detailed editing of a final draft, cleaning up around all of the nooks and crannies. Thus, each student has at least three opportunities to receive input on his or her writing from peers, as well as from the instructor, as the papers progress from one draft to the next. In each case, the feedback is not anonymous, allowing students to follow up with their reviewers if they chose to do so. In some semesters, the instructor allowed class time for such "critical conversations," where student writers had a chance to discuss feedback

with their peer reviewers. Given that this course is typically taken in the first semester of doctoral study, submitting the manuscript for publication is not a requirement. Nevertheless, a number of manuscripts that started out as concept papers in the course went on to be published, which is a desirable outcome (Burdge, 2007; Busch & Folaron, 2005; Deka, 2007; Lewis, 2007).

To examine student perceptions about peer review, the instructor conducted a careful review of students' written feedback about participating in this peer review process. First, students' written comments about peer review that were posted in online forums, in student self-evaluations of their writing progress, and in end-of-semester course evaluations were reviewed. Similar to the approach used by Cafferella and Barnett (2000), student comments were compiled, illustrating their reactions to peer review before, during, and after the peer review process. Next, content analysis was used to organize student feedback about peer review into themes. Representative student comments then were selected to illustrate each point of view. Ten themes were grouped under two broad categories: *challenges* of peer review and *benefits* of peer review. As might be expected, the challenges came mostly near the beginning of the peer review process, whereas the benefits typically were realized during and by the end of the course.

In considering the outcome, readers should remember that the student comments were not anonymous. The instructor's enthusiasm for peer review as a teaching tool in the scholarly writing course therefore could have influenced students' feedback. Moreover, because the students' comments noted in this paper were drawn from a convenience sample of social work doctoral students from one university, they cannot be considered representative of the views of all doctoral students regarding peer review as a learning tool.

FINDINGS

Challenges

Initial Trepidation

At the outset of the course, students seemed to have low expectations of peer review. Comments included "opening myself up to others seemed threatening" and "feeling uncomfortable receiving feedback from my peers." Feelings of stress, anxiety, apprehension, and vulnerability were common early on in the course. Some students were concerned about their peers' ability to give constructive feedback and expressed reluctance about the prospect of giving negative feedback to their peers. Of interest, students were fine with the instructor reading their work, because that was expected, but considered the idea of having their classmates read their papers "an extra level of pressure."

"No Pain, No Gain"

Several students acknowledged that, despite the initial affective response that came with receiving constructive criticism of their writing, their papers did improve as a result. As one student stated, "Honest feedback, although sometimes painful, has lead not only to refinements, but to gains." Although the first reading of peer feedback may have been difficult for some students to accept, they came to see the value of having multiple reviewers. "Getting past my initial twinge reaction, I can now listen to what is being said." Another opined, "The peer review process, although initially painful, provided a preview of the probable reaction from other reviewers. Although the feedback proved valuable in reworking the paper, the experience was not for the weak-hearted." In time, however, students learned to "get past the emotional impact of the review."

Students noted that their initial reaction to constructive feedback often was negative, even when both positive and negative feedback were given. As one student shared, "I noticed how sensitive we are to anything that seems negative, zeroing in on the one or two [critical] comments while glossing over the encouragement and support." Appreciation for peer comments improved over time. "Each time I received feedback it became a little easier, but I still struggle with remembering that the point is to help improve my writing so my message can be clearly delivered."

Transformation in Thinking

After multiple experiences with peer review during the course, student reactions transitioned from initial trepidation to becoming appreciative, and even enthusiastic. Several student comments reflected their change of heart about receiving feedback on their writing from their peers. One observed, "A willingness to participate in peer review has improved as experience has underscored the importance of the process." Students increasingly saw the supportive nature of critical comments. As one stated, "Each [peer review] experience will improve my ability to see criticism as a kindness extended by a peer, not to be taken as some type of personal attack." Students' affective response to peer review changed as well: "My comfort level and confidence in allowing others to review/critique my writing increased." Judging by students' comments, it seems that multiple opportunities for peer feedback were integral to bringing about the transformation. One sensitively stated, "So much feedback has caused a de-sensitization to having others read my writing which was the source of much of my anxiety," whereas another remarked that "this kind of constant peer review is taking away a lot of the 'sting' or 'vulnerability' experienced in the past when putting my writing on the chopping block." One doctoral student summed it up well: "The more I experience the process, the more natural it seems."

BENEFITS

Student comments about peer review, especially toward the end of the course, revealed benefits of the process that students generally did not anticipate at the outset. These perceived benefits were grouped into seven subthemes: appreciation/mutual support, gaining insight about one's own writing, producing a better written product, broadening one's perspective, heightened sensitivity to one's readers, seeing writing as a relationship, and excitement about making an impact in the future.

Appreciation/Mutual Support

Despite their initial expectations, students came to appreciate feedback from peers and to conceptualize it as a form of mutual support. As one student shared, "I did not expect to feel the mutual support . . . given through encouragement and feedback that others were willing to give." Some students were pleasantly surprised by the helpfulness of their peers' comments: "Going back to the comments at a later time, I found them very helpful." Students began to realize that they did not have to fear their peers' input: "The reviewer's extensive feedback was supportive and some recommendations matched the instructor's [advice]." They came to appreciate the opportunity "to correct some of the beginner's mistakes without consequences."

Gaining Insight About One's Own Writing

A second benefit identified from students' comments was the opportunity to gain insight about one's own writing style. One student acknowledged that "the feedback could be used as a gauge in terms of how well I expressed my thoughts." Based on input from peers, students came to recognize specific shortcomings in their own writing. For example, one student acknowledged that "(reviewer) questions challenged me to look at sources or concepts more closely and to decide if clarification or support were needed." Another noted that peer review "helps me to be more mindful of clarity." "Through the peer review process, I have learned that my writing has some vocabulary, construction, and logical flow-related issues that make assimilation of my ideas difficult for the reader." In addition, students began to positively appreciate the contributions they were capable of making through their writing.

Both aspects of the peer review process—receiving feedback and providing feedback—were noted by students as avenues for strengthening their writing: "Having to edit others' work has increased my ability to write in a concise manner." Another shared, "Having my peers read and review my writing, as well as having the opportunity to read the work of others,

has helped me to identify strengths and areas for improvement in my own writing. . . . I am better able to recognize [my] flaws and mistakes."

Producing a Better Product

As students continued to rework and revise their concept papers, based on input from peers, they came to realize how much the feedback they received helped them to produce a better written product. One student noted, "I have found that the input they gave can be invaluable in editing my manuscript and further polishing a finished product." Peer feedback was credited by students for "achieving greater clarity" in their writing and "strengthening" and "improving the final outcome" of their papers. Along with this process, the class discussed the statement, "All writing is revision," and thereby came to view revision not as a remedial task to shore up weak writing but as a necessary and inevitable step for producing clear and powerful prose. Students acknowledged developing a deeper respect for revision: "I knew [revision] was important, but I generally thought I was meticulous enough . . . to not have to go back and spend much time with revision. I now have a deep respect for peer review and the power of revision." Given the opportunity to incorporate input, from both peers and the instructor, on multiple drafts, students generally felt more confident about the quality of their final papers. The instructor as well noticed marked (and sometimes remarkable) improvements in students' writing from the first to the final draft.

Broadening One's Perspective

Peer review also offered the doctoral students an opportunity to broaden their perspective about their own topics. Many acknowledged that the peer critique process helped them "to gain additional perspectives" and "offer a fresh viewpoint." Some realized that their own writing could be strengthened when it incorporated other perspectives they had not anticipated. As one student noted, "There were several ideas presented by my classmates that I had not previously considered. Their input will help me facilitate a critical review of my proposal."

Heightened Sensitivity to Readers

An additional benefit of peer review was a heightened sensitivity to readers. Peer review was acknowledged as "a way to test the waters and preview what the reaction might be from a larger audience." Questions on their drafts challenged students to consider that "the reader might not understand" their underlying premise or subject matter. One student wrote, "I think it is very natural for writers to assume that they have clearly stated their point when in fact the reader may be confused about their stance." Students became more

mindful when writing for an audience. As one stated, "Knowing what the reader is looking for or expecting is a great advantage to writing in a more impactful way." As another student noted, "I want to write for my reader. I want it to be well-understood and to inform—perhaps even enlighten."

Writing as Relationship

Although the tendency of academic writers is to view writing as a solitary process, via peer review, students came to see that "professional writing skills are developed through interaction with others." Although acknowledging that "scholarly writing is technical," students noted that "it also requires an integration of personal and creative thoughts." They acknowledged a change in their perception about writing from an activity that is "isolated, technical, and personally detached" to involving "shared learning, creativity, and personal connections." Although they all were writing solo-authored papers, students came to conceptualize their peers as partners in developing their writing skills. In contrast to their initial reluctance to receiving peer feedback, students came to see fellow students as writing allies: "I am beginning to feel that my classmates and I are on the same journey and that we are trying to encourage one another and help each one of us to be successful." This perception and feeling is a tribute to what group workers would term the power of mutual aid.

Excitement for Making an Impact

As they experienced the benefits of peer review, students became increasingly eager to seek out peer support through writing groups and accountability partners, beyond the 15-week semester. They often noted the value of peer review for their future scholarly efforts, including the completion of their degree: "The shift in my relationship with peer review will serve me well as the PhD process continues." Students' growing appreciation for the value of peer review sparked hopeful attitudes about their future scholarly endeavors: "Instead of being afraid to disappoint someone, or looking unintelligent, I hope to gain feedback on my writing so I can one day become published." Similarly, another wrote, "Developing comfort with peer review and constructive criticism will also prepare me for my future publishing efforts." Further, one student put it this way: "My competition is not with my classmates. My competition is with me—to become a better writer and to write ideas that someone wants to read and that can have a positive impact on someone's life." In considering the larger context of scholarly writing, one student commented,

> We represent not only ourselves in our work, but our profession as a whole. I have learned that we need to be careful and conscientious in

how we present our ideas, not only in word choice and flow, but in structure. I am inspired to imagine my work as exemplary of our social work profession, creating a positive impact in people's lives.

DISCUSSION

A one-semester course on scholarly writing offered to social work doctoral students saw most students transformed from reluctant participants to enthusiasts for peer review. Despite some resistance to the initial acceptance of the peer review process, the benefits of peer review, as illustrated by students' own comments, proved to be multiple and varied. As indicated by students' own reflections, the advantages of peer review in terms of promoting clarity and critical thinking in students' written products appeared to outweigh the challenges of incorporating peer review into the course. In the process of revising their writing, students obtain feedback from more than one perspective; the instructor's perspective is not considered as the only valid one. As Bender and Windsor (2010) acknowledged, social work doctoral students clearly offer new perspectives, energy, and enthusiasm to the scholarly writing process.

The value of peer review should be further investigated and confirmed through research at other universities. Although the use of students' own comments about peer review was one of the strengths of this study, further exploration is needed to examine the impact of peer review on the quality of social work students' writing and scholarly productivity. In addition, this study was not able to document whether the use of peer review in a class setting led to the pursuit of peer review to support writing beyond the course itself. Although several students offered both verbal and written comments about their hopes to continue to actively participate in peer review, their later actions in this regard were not tracked.

CONCLUSION

Peer review is highly recommended as a strategy to enhance doctoral students' scholarly writing. Based on comments from participants, this inquiry leads us to believe that peer review may be an effective mechanism for supporting student writing. Students here transitioned from fearing the feedback of their classmates to viewing their peers as allies in the writing process. They learned to push past the initial twinge reaction to input, perceived as critical, to welcome and even seek out the feedback of peers. As students accepted that peer review was a critical avenue for clarifying and strengthening their writing, they became more sensitive to writing for an audience, an approach that is integral to successful scholarship (Hyland, 2001). In this

sense we incorporated principles touted by Gopen (2004) about writing from the readers' perspective. Instead of being a lonely endeavor or "silent struggle," it was shown that scholarly writing could become a shared effort involving mutual aid and collegial support. Moreover, through interaction with peers, the challenges of writing, rather than being perceived as unique, were normalized.

As a profession that values collaboration, social work can encourage peer support of writing—both in classroom exercises and on manuscripts for publication. In their evaluation of the helpfulness of peer comments, Cho et al. (2006) noted that peer review promotes "an active writing community" among students (p. 280). Peer support and collaboration may thus promote the dissemination of scholarly contributions of a broader range of social work scholars, beyond the usual small set of prolific writers. The profession will benefit when a wider range of perspectives is voiced through published work. In sum, peer support of scholarly writing in doctoral programs may serve to advance and enrich the social work knowledge base, thus strengthening the stature and contributions of the profession.

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