Online Peer Review to Promote Reader-Writer Interaction
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Abstract

Online peer review has become popular as a tool to help students simultaneously focus on process and product, and to connect them with an audience outside the classroom. This technological possibility coincides with new approaches to writing pedagogy that try to incorporate the diverse social, historical, and political contexts in which writers and readers interact. This paper looks at these new approaches to writing, sometimes called post-process approaches, and the role that online peer review has in these approaches. After reviewing the theoretical basis of the post process approach and online peer review, a description of how peer review can be implemented in the classroom is given. This is followed by a look at possible challenges in implementing online peer review and possible solutions.

Introduction

The use of network applications in education has risen rapidly over the past few years, corresponding with a change in second language writing theory. Taking over from the dominant process approach of the last 20-30 years, a new post-process, socio-cultural approach to writing is being explored and formulated (Atkinson, 2003; Hyland, 2002; following Trimbur, 1994). It seeks to move beyond the more strictly experimental, process-based approach with its focus on expression and the process of creation, and the more traditional, form-based approach that focuses on correctness and product. While many believe the process approach had the greatest effect on teaching methodology of any other change in the history of writing pedagogy (Matsuda, 2003), this new, post-process approach aims to situate the writer, the activity of writing, and the audience of the text in their social, historical, and political contexts and relationships (e.g., Atkinson, 2003; Canasavae, 2007). This approach to writing can be enhanced greatly by networked computers and can drastically alter the landscape of writing pedagogy, if they have not already. The ability to network online fits in well with various models of socially sensitive writing approaches, and opens doors previously unavailable.

One of the most important uses of the computer for second language writing is the ability for writers to exchange drafts and give and receive comments on each other's work. Different online applications have been utilized in the past two decades for peer review, including e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, and more recently, blogs. This paper will explore the theoretical foundations that connect second language writing peer review activities with these applications. I will then discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each of these tools for peer review. Extending from this discussion, I will look at blogs more deeply and discuss how they can be used to do online peer review with students. Lastly, the challenges of doing peer review with blogs will be explored. Throughout this paper, explorations of the relationship between the writer and audience will be explored as it is a central theme in the emerging post-process, socio-cultural writing approach.

Process Writing and Peer Review

Although actual classroom practices vary, a dominant theoretical approach to first and second language writing for more than two decades has been the process writing approach (Reid, 1993). Central to the process writing approach is a move away from writing as a linear, "plan-outline-write" process ending in a finished product (Silva, 1990, 16). Instead of being a linear process with a fixed ending, writing became more of a discovery process (Reid, 1993), relying on feedback and subsequent revisions to help learners find and create meaning for themselves. Teachers are no longer constrained to teaching proper imitative habits, with a focus on grammatical accuracy (Silva, 1990). Instead, a teacher's job is to allow students to discover their voice (Brown, 2007), by helping them develop viable strategies for getting started, for drafting, for revising, and for editing (Silva, 1990).

However, the process writing approach faces a major challenge as it is implemented. As the approach calls for an increased number of drafts and revisions, a teacher who follows this approach in the classroom has to spend more time reading and responding to student papers. As many teachers are already overburdened with work, spending more time reading and giving feedback on drafts is just not possible. One way this problem has been overcome is through the use of peer review.

Peer review has been an important element in the process writing approach (e.g., Reid, 1993; Atkinson, 2003; Matsuda, 2003). However, much of the research on the effectiveness of peer editing has been mixed, confirming some of the concerns skeptical teachers initially had about it. They question whether students can really give effective feedback to each other, and if they do, whether their classmates would trust them enough to incorporate it (Wu, 2006; Ware & Warschauer, 2006). While research into these questions has yielded mixed results, many teachers still felt the interactional benefits of peer review compensated for any loss of grammatical correctness. As studies on peer review improved, it became clear that students were capable of giving effective form-based feedback if they were properly trained before doing peer review (Berg, 1999; Rollinson, 2005). As a component of process writing, peer editing has grown in popularity and research findings have supported its usefulness as a component of classroom feedback, when used alongside traditional teacher to student feedback (Ware & Warschauer, 2006; Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang 1998).

Despite the successes of the process approach in breaking up the rigidity and teacher dominated atmosphere of product-based writing classes, new concerns arose as to the nature of this approach. First, many educators and researchers feel that writers and classes have become too focused on the process, and not enough on the product (Brown, 2007; Hyland, 2002; Casanave, 2004; Silva, 1990). No matter what benefits the process may have, the goal of writing is still, in some sense, to produce something that will be read in some community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Because the goals and needs of different kinds of writing are embedded in the social context for which they are produced, losing sight of the goals and the final product of writing may prevent students' from creating socially appropriate and meaningful writings. Second, although peer review is used in process writing and

so, arguably, students can see their writing from multiple perspectives, the interaction between the writer and the audience is limited. While the process writing approach attempts to free the students' writing and thinking from the absolute discretions of the teacher, the writing process and product cannot be fully socially situated if the teacher is the sole target audience. Eventually, despite the peer input (which mostly focuses on form, as the research on peer review reported above shows), students' writing in process writing is addressed to the teacher and evaluated by the teacher as the ultimate authority. It is this lack of attention to writing as a socially situated activity that motivated the start of post-process approaches.

Post-process Approaches

Originating from Bakhtin's idea that language is dialogic in nature (Lye, 2008), and growing further with Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, which asserts that knowledge is socially constructed and is inseparable from context ("Theories of Learning," n.d.), the idea that writing is also a very situated act grew. Situating writing in this sense extends beyond the narrow, traditional sense where the teacher and school context provided the only situation and audience the writer had to consider. Although the focus in the process writing approach on allowing students to find their voice and write expressively certainly had its merits, if knowledge is truly a social construct, then not establishing a concrete context or situation for students to write in meant they were, consciously or unconsciously, still writing for the teacher (Casanave, 2007).

This emphasis on knowledge as a social construct and writing as a situated act has put a new emphasis on the writer-reader relationship, and expanded the idea of the active role of the reader in the writing process (Silva, 1990). Writing is no longer a matter of right and wrong, but a matter of effectiveness. In some contexts and for some readers and communities, certain kinds of writing will be more effective than others. The situation that is created between one reader and writer pair is different than another. According to Nystrand (1993), a discourse is formed between a writer and a reader.[1] Each brings prior knowledge, goals, and attitudes to the written discourse as the writer and the reader try to balance their purposes. The act of drafting and giving feedback is a chance for negotiation and adaptation to further each party's goals (Hyland, 2002). While this may have been a presupposition of more traditional writing pedagogy approaches, the emphasis on the teacher as the correct or ultimate audience led to problems. In this dialogic perspective, a teacher is only one of a potentially large number of possible readers for students' writings. Other potential readers are not only desirable, but theoretically necessary if knowledge is a construct of social forces.

As the classroom, school, community, and society a writer lives in are all active forces in the idea of what any individual reader may think of a writer's work, it is important to situate writing in the larger community as well: "The writer is neither a creator working through a set of cognitive processes nor an interactant engaging with a reader, but a member of a community" (Hyland, 2002, p. 40). While the notion of community is not always clear, the idea of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is often used to make an abstract idea more concrete. According to Lave and Wenger, a

community of practice is a community formed by people who share common endeavors, social ideals, and needs. As a result, members of a community of practice share ways of thinking, behaving, and linguistic repertoire. Most of us are involved in several communities of practice simultaneously. For writers, the idea of a community of practice helps situate a writing task in a somewhat definable community with certain forms and genres, while providing enough flexibility to allow students to have a unique voice. It is not hard to imagine what a community of practice might be like for lawyers, teachers, or most other professions. As they share common needs, concerns, and writing practices to accomplish their goals, introducing a student writer to the community and its expected forms and genres provides a powerful framework to write in.[2] The real world needs and goals of the community can be naturally motivating for writers, as they see the success of their writing linked to the outcomes of the group. Further, connecting writers to the world outside of the classroom in a clear, contextualized way helps learners develop new identities as they reformulate their ideas with respect to different readers (Cummings, 2004). This process of writing for a certain community, or a well defined group of readers, also helps bring the product back into the writing process, but in an interactive, socially situated way, as learners are forced to see their work through the eyes of others.

However powerful it may be for a writer to have a clear idea of what community he or she is writing for, the problem of finding readers becomes problematic for classroom-based writing. No matter how clear the genres and standards of the community are to the writer, without someone from the community to give feedback and interact with the writer the process is hindered. Having an authentic audience has become a main tenet of effective second language writing instruction (Brown, 2007; Hyland, 2002), partially to bridge the divide between student learner and real world community. While there is disagreement about who the audience should be, the amount of learning time that should be spent writing for an audience, and what an authentic audience really is (Casanave, 2007; Hyland, 2002), the benefits of having some feedback from someone within a situated community are manifold. First, writing for some kind of authentic audience is motivating as students draw connections between their classroom work and the world outside of the class. Display writing, while possibly having benefits for academic reasons, can easily de-motivate students as they struggle to fit into pre-ordained conventions which may or may not be relevant to their own needs. In contrast, real writing (Brown, 2007), or writing activities where students are genuinely searching for information and meaning and are going to communicate what they find with some kind of interested audience, has been shown to reduce anxiety and increase motivation (Reid, 1993; Dennen & Jones, 2006). Further, if meaning is always dependant on the discourse community and socio-cultural context students find themselves in, without some kind of audience and feedback, it would be very difficult for students to identify and understand that audience (Silva, 1990). As researchers and teachers worked on developing ways to expand the audience for student writing, networked computers were first being developed, providing a medium with numerous possibilities.

Computer Tools to Promote Writer-Reader Interaction

Over the past few decades the growing realization that some kind of authentic, diversified, and contextualized audience is necessary for student writings caused a great increase in in-house and local publishing done by teachers in the form of school newspapers, flyers, pen-pal letters, etc. In different forms, many of these in house publications took an important step towards an authentic audience; they were made for someone outside the immediate classroom, even if it was only for other students or teachers. Unfortunately, this kind of publishing is time consuming and requires resources often unavailable to teachers and schools. Further, getting feedback on this kind of work, both during and after the writing process is also difficult. The power of networked computers to link students to the readers and communities that they need to develop effective writing strategies and skills for has been one of the focal points of computer-based writing since networks were introduced. The internet in its early stages offered new ways of distributing student writings via web pages, e-mail, or online bulletin boards. However, web pages were hard to create, as they required specialized knowledge. E-mail, while being easy to use, had few graphical features, did not support group interaction well, and lacked the visibility of other forms of online publishing. Online bulletin boards also lacked graphics and were often expensive to set-up. Further, these bulletin boards and similar applications, such as WebCT® were always run or owned by the teacher, the school, or some external body. Students only posted on this external owner's site, never having real ownership. Further, students usually could not continue posting on the school or company owned electronic bulletin board after the course ended (Jones, 2006). Blogs, the latest development in applications usable in the classroom, help overcome these drawbacks as they are free and have easy to use, customizable graphical, audio, and video features, can be used by either a limited or unlimited number of people, and can be set up and run completely by the student(s). Because of these features, blogs are gaining ground in both a wide range of academic and conversational ESL and EFL language programs (Jones, 2006). For these reasons, I will focus my next section on describing how blogs can be used in writing activities.

How to Use Blogs for Peer Review

As with other forms of computer assisted language learning, it is crucial that teachers keep a clear, consistent, and pedagogically related focus when setting up a blog activity (Egbert, 2005; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Keeping a pedagogically related focus may be even more necessary with blogs than with other forms of asynchronous technologies like forums, WebCT®, and email because blogs are much more attractive graphically, and can handle multimedia better, which may easily distract students. Further, keeping a clear and consistent focus is important for students who may not be used to using computers, and may not be sure how they are benefiting from their blogging activities. In a study of graduate students in Australia using a blog in an MBA course, Williams and Jacobs found students were qualitatively and quantitatively in favor of using the blog after using it for one semester in a graduate level writing course, although not

overwhelmingly. The authors stated that the results clearly would have been more positive had "there been greater direction at the beginning of the project as to how one went about blogging, and what students could expect to get out of it" (Williams & Jacobs, 2004, p. 246). Other studies on peer review also point to the need for students to be given clear objectives as to why they are doing peer review work. This is especially true for students from more hierarchical cultures. As many students are not used to peer review or blogging, teachers have to work on setting pedagogical goals for both the peer review activities and the use of the blog. For both blogs and peer review, setting goals and explaining the importance of these tools is an important first step and part of the training process.

However, before a teacher begins training with students, a number of important pedagogical and technical decisions must be made. These options will decide the path of training, and include:

1. Will students be focusing on form or content, style or organization, or all?

2. Will there be a face-to-face component of the peer editing process?

3. What will the privacy settings be?

4. Will students use their real name or a pseudonym for their blog?

Content or Form
This may be the biggest question a teacher needs to answer when it comes to using the blog. The words content and form may be misleading or oversimplified, as teachers may wish to look at many different aspects of writing like structure, rhetorical features, style, etc., that do not

fall neatly into one of these categories, but for the purpose of training with the blog there are two main ways to approach it. If students are going to focus more on content or global features, it may be enough for students to reply to each others' blogs, just as native speakers do in the millions of blogs online. However, many well established blogging sites that offer free server space have also developed commenting tools, similar to Microsoft Word, for people wanting to edit or do collaborative work. If students are going to comment on grammatical errors in their peers' writing, students will need training on how to use these commenting tools. Depending on the site used, the training may differ slightly. Free sites that offer commenting tools include, e.g., Blogger, Blogs.Free-ESL.com, Livejournal, MO'TIME, Tabulas, tBlog, SchoolBlogs, and Xanga (Jones, 2006).

One successful strategy for a teacher wanting the students to focus on content and organization and not form is for the teacher to tell the students that the teacher will do the grammar or form editing, and the students are only responsible for more global features of their peers' writing (Digiovanni, 2001). Or, different students can have different roles in a given blog activity, and students can take turns focusing on form and content as the course goes on.

Face-to-Face Element
Another major consideration is whether or not students will follow up their online peer editing with a face-to-face peer editing activity. Some researchers have suggested that the face-to-face element is crucial to maximize the benefits of online peer editing (Liu, 2003). While studies have shown that students make more comments in online peer editing activities,

many feel that the face-to-face element will make students more motivated to read their peers' work well. In addition, as developing communicative skills is usually at least part of the objectives of many programs, the practice students get in explaining their comments and negotiating to explain and justify their comments provides invaluable practice (Liu, 2003). Another study found that students make more global comments in face-to-face communication and more specific, form-based comments in the online mode (Tuzi, 2004). As both form and content are goals of most writing classes, combining face to face instruction with blog-based peer review will offer the best chances to maximize the benefits of peer editing (Ware & Warschauer, 2006).

Privacy Settings and Audience
One important decision for the teachers is deciding whether to make a blog public, keep it among the class, or limit the audience for each student to the teacher and their peer reviewer. This decision is largely a matter of deciding what the specific objectives of the peer review activity as well as what the individual preferences and skills of the students are. By having a public blog, students are exposed to an authentic audience and may receive feedback from multiple perspectives, the benefits of which were discussed above. However, being exposed to too wide an audience may make students more apprehensive in their writing (Reid, 1993). The same may be said by for having the blog viewable by the whole class (but not the public). When their writing is viewable for the whole class, students may have a greater sense of audience and be more motivated to write. However, students may also be more apprehensive as they fear losing face

(Jones, 2006). One way to overcome this apprehension is to organize the students in pairs or small groups, and have the blogs viewable only with this pair or group and the teacher. This may help more apprehensive students feel comfortable writing. On the downside, it will obviously reduce the size of the audience, probably reducing the authenticity of the context and possibly lower motivation for some students as they lose the feeling of being connected to the world outside of the class. These decisions will be important for training, as the teacher will have to instruct students how to join a private blog, and how to control privacy settings if students are setting up their own blogs. It is probably best for the teacher to set up the blogs for students and control the privacy settings if their students are completely new to blogging, and the teacher wants access restricted.

Pseudonym or a Real Name
Much of the discussion above is relevant in deciding whether or not to use a pseudonym. Just as having too large an audience may cause apprehension by shyer students, having the students use their real names may cause some apprehension. On the other hand, using their real names may motivate students to write well as they have something to lose (Guardado & Shi, 2007). As with considering how large of an audience to have, there is no right or wrong answer in choosing whether or not to use a pseudonym, but it is important for the teacher to gauge the students feelings in the classroom, and try to determine how comfortable and confident they would be if they use their real names. If the teacher is using pseudonyms, it will be important to go over this in training and have

students sign up for anonymous email addresses or hide their email address on the blogs.

Training Procedures

Once the above decisions are made, a teacher can begin designing training activities. Training is very important because the novelty of both blogging and peer review activities for many students can lead to frustration and a lack of participation. In traditional face-to-face peer review, studies on the effectiveness have shown mixed results. However, many of the negative results have been linked to a lack of proper training and preparation (Berg, 1999a; Rollinson, 2005). With proper training and preparation, other researchers have found that students do make meaningful comments that are accepted by their peers (Berg, 1999a). Jacobs (1998) and Berg (1999b) have laid out guidelines for training with peer response. Collectively, their suggestions include the following:

- Share models of successful peer comments
- Teach students to use positive feedback
- Explain the value of feedback
- Teach appropriate terminology for giving feedback
- Provide sample peer review feedback forms
- Model activities
- Focus on specific issues

There are some excellent resources with pre-made rubrics to help teachers get started (see O'Malley& Pierce, 1996).

Aside from training in giving feedback, training in the technical aspects of using a blog is also vitally important, as many students are unfamiliar with using the internet. Even when there may only be a few students who are unfamiliar with using the internet, many have never blogged. And even among those that have used blogs before, many may not be able to use them effectively enough to give clear feedback (DiGiovanni, 2001). Before training, a teacher has several choices to make about the way the blog will be set up.

Challenges and How to Handle Them

If students are more likely to make more comments on their peers' work in online peer editing, the question of authorship becomes more of an issue than it did when peer editing was done on paper and comments were fewer and more global in nature (Breuch, 2004). At what point are the comments and feedback a student receives actually feedback and not some form of re-writing? Where can teachers draw the line between collaborative authorship and individual authorship? Or, if collaborative authorship is a goal, how much collaboration is desirable? The answers to these questions may lie in recognizing the strengths of collaborative writing and the importance of individual authorship, and then setting guidelines for students to follow. On one level, online peer review makes the line between these two extremes more blurred as students respond more to each other's work and because comments are easier to incorporate in computer-based writing as students can just copy and paste. However, blogs also make monitoring the process easier. As teachers are able to view all of the interaction between writers and reviewers or readers on a blog, and print out and access records, blogs make oversight possible in a way that paper

based peer editing did not (DiGiovanni, 2001; Jones, 2006; Tuzi, 2004). This oversight will allow teachers to control the extent to which papers are collaboratively written. Of course, if a teacher decides that a collaboratively written paper is what they want, a blog is a helpful medium. Authorship and agency may not be so much a problem or challenge in that case, but it is something to consider, set guidelines for, and implement (for a theoretical discussion on this issue see Kramsch, A'Ness, & Lam, 2000; Breuch, 2004).

A second major challenge teachers face is attitudes about the use of technology and doing peer review (Wu, 2006). While using blogs may be easier to use than many other applications, many students who are not used to using computers may easily feel discouraged, or not understand how they can benefit. Literature abounds on the issue of student attitudes towards computer assisted language learning, and many new studies are exploring student attitudes towards using blogs. In a recent study, Armstrong and Retterer (2008) found that in a second language Spanish writing course utilizing blogs, 85% of students reported that they felt the blogs were helpful for their writing (although not specifically for peer review). In the most in depth study to date, Jones (2006) reported on a group of community college students using blogs to do peer review. Before the activities began, a questionnaire was given out and the comments students gave when asked about their feelings on using the blogs included "worried, confused, excited, frustrated, anxious, frightened, fearful, and optimistic" (Jones, 2006, p. 72). After a few weeks of using the blogs there was a strong shift, as students reported that they felt "good, fine, confident, very good,

comfortable, better, and it was easy"(Jones, 2006, p. 72). As discussed above in talking about how to set up blogs, proper training before using the blogs seems like the biggest factor in promoting success and overcoming student resistance or anxiety about using them. Further, continued support is crucial as students work through the project. Although the major sites are extremely stable, server problems and/or computer problems can easily lead to frustration.

As discussed above in the section on peer editing, students may also have negative attitudes or anxiety about peer editing, completely separate from their concerns about using a blog. Implementing two new methods of teaching writing at one time will require careful training and pacing. Even if the training is thorough, it might be important to reduce the amount of work expected of the students depending on their familiarity with peer review and blogging. While this may reduce their overall output, it might also help them feel comfortable with this more interactive form of writing, give them time to read their partners' work more carefully, and enable them to develop better comments.

Another strategy for dealing with students who feel that peer review is not helpful is to have periodic, small group or whole class sessions where students' comments and the original work are printed out anonymously and discussed. This could help to reinforce any training the students had, clarify any comments that are hard to understand, and highlight good work done by a certain group of students. It is important for the teacher to join in these review sessions to help the students overcome any feelings that peer

review is not as helpful as is feedback coming from the teacher (Guardado & Shi, 2007).

Conclusion

While setting up blog-based peer review may be as new for many teachers as it is for students, this study and others like it will hopefully make it a little easier for inquiring educators to understand both the theoretical foundations of using blogs and the practical steps needed to start using them. As writing pedagogy moves from a process approach to some form of a post-process approach, writing that is situated in a community or genre becomes important. Keeping the good aspects of the process approach and its tool, peer review, and applying new technology to connect reviewers, readers, and writers is productive and promising but not without its drawbacks. The ease of use, attractive display, and interactive elements of blogs have eliminated many of the drawbacks of other online peer review applications. However, many students are simply not used to using the internet for learning. With proper training, steady guidance, and realistic expectations, even the most technologically inexperienced student should be able to use a blog to do peer review successfully.

Notes

[1] In Nystrand's view, this reader may be present and known to the writer, or imagined by the writer.

[2] The Genre Approach to writing is one example of a post-process approach (Atkinson, 2003; Hyland, 2003)

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