Peer Coaching for Adolescent Writers

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments

A big “thank you” to two Carols simultaneously: Carol Collins, my editor at Corwin Press, for her faith in this project from the onset. That initial phone call from a very busy desk with other phones ringing in the background led to some creative, collaborative thought, and then a brainswell of ideas later: *Peer Coaching for Adolescent Writers.* Then Carol Poole, a very needed life raft as I lay afloat in a sea of words and many good ideas, but a teacher without a life raft is only as good as her students without a teacher; we needed each other! Carol Poole was my peer coach, and over numerous buddy sessions, she assisted with and contributed to the many ideas that make this book so teacher friendly. Sometimes, peer feedback is brutal, often sending us back to the writing table, but we are always better for it in the end—especially our writing. I thank both Carols for their (occasionally brutal) honesty and for allowing me to revisit the writing table again and again. This book is better for it.

I would also like to thank all of the young writers that influenced me throughout my teaching career and that continue to teach and inspire the writer I will always be—my daughter, Miranda (her poem *I Can Hear the Leaves*), and Kate Moynihan in particular; for her unwavering dedication to the written word. It is this influence that informs my every next step regarding this book, future books, and what I know about how writing works for adolescent writers and about how it worked for me. Not a lot has changed; our pens and keyboards, creative ideas, a few coaching buddies, someone to believe in us—all simple ingredients to those writing life constants. To my students: Keep writing!

Publisher's Acknowledgments

Corwin gratefully acknowledges the contributions of the following reviewers:

Diane Barone, Foundation Professor of Literacy Studies, University of Nevada, Reno, Reno, NV

Marsha D. Baumeister, PhD, Assistant Professor, Street, Maryland

Tracy Taylor Callard, English Language Arts Teacher, Wichita Public Schools (Hadley Middle School), Wichita, KS

David Callaway, 8th-Grade Language Arts Teacher, Highlands Ranch, CO

Dr. Barbara Smith Chalou, Professor, University of Maine at Presque Isle, Presque Isle, ME

Carrice Cummins, Associate Professor, Louisiana Tech University, Ruston, LA

Pamela F. Summers, EdD, Associate Professor, Literacy Department, SUNY Cortland, Cortland, NY

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Introduction

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Helping Adolescents Take Responsibility for Their Writing

> What hasn't changed since 1973 are adolescents themselves. They still crave meaning . . . They still want their writing and reading to matter to them and to matter now, not in some nebulous someday.
>
> —Nancy Atwell, *Adolescent Literacy: Turning Promise into Practice*

Long before I became a teacher, I was a writer. And, like many adult writers I know, writing saved my life. Writing—not a club, or involvement in a school newspaper, or even a specific teacher—but the fact that I wrote, wrote regularly, and exercised the art of my own expression. And like many kids today, my life as a child contained some unique, and some not-so-unique, challenges. While my friends were sneaking out of their bedroom windows and hanging out in shopping plazas (we didn't have Digg, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, DandyID, or any type of Web presence then), I wrote. When nothing made sense about the world, my writing did as I typed away on my old Smith Corona, the noise and clatter drowned by heavy keystroke and thought—my first poem was written at the age of eight and titled, *The Stranger I Once Knew* (my mother). My writing *was* my salvation.

Writers Need Other Writers to Make Their Writing Better

Along my path to the writing life, I quickly discovered that writing in isolation only worked to the extent that a piece of writing was produced. I needed my writing to be heard and validated in order

to move it forward; I needed to hear what other writers wrote about and what they thought about my work—we needed each other. As an adult, I sought out feedback through writing groups—evening coffeehouse meetings with other writers, all coming together to coach and support one another unconditionally in our writing effort. As a new teacher, I quickly realized that there was really only one difference in the knowledge and effort adults writers brought to their writing and what students brought to peer coaching in the classroom: That difference was in the pedagogy needed to get them from Point A to Point B; the steps to be taken along the way.

Simply put, writers need other writers in order to really make their writing better, especially our 21st-century adolescent writers who now take advantage of highly technological tools to communicate with each other expediently, regularly, and conveniently. Indeed, our teens seem to be hard-wired for instant communication, and certainly they have readily available media to accommodate them—far more than we had as kids. While their *means* of communication have changed, their *need* to communicate hasn't. What is more, they still want to matter, and they still want what they do to matter in an immediate sense (Beers, Probst & Rief, 2007).

What must change is not students' need to communicate nor their desire to matter; rather, the change must come in the *methods* we as teachers of writing use to teach them to respond to each other's needs. Those of us who think and write seriously about the craft of writing have been expressing that need for change since the sixties, demonstrating it through numerous models—student conferencing, peer feedback, peer review—all of them taught for decades as effective writing practice beginning with the introduction of Murray's (1968) process writing models, then moving on to Elbow's (1973) Center of Gravity method and teacherless writing groups. Shortly after, Graves (1983) gave us writing with purpose and peer-response groups. That same year, Lucy Calkins (1983) worked with peer conferences, and 15 years later, Nancy Atwell's (1998) reading

and writing workshops developed the ideas further. Her work led us to Fletcher and Portalupi's (2001) Author's Chair and response groups, and three years after that, Kirby, Kirby, and Liner's (2004) self-evaluation writing processes added their input into the process. This review contains only a few examples of the literature focused on peer review functioning as a tool in the teaching of writing craft to adolescent writers, always emphasizing that writers need other writers to make their writing better.

Student peer coaching is a means, an interactive process adolescent writers use to develop an internal, permanent, and intuitive dialogue for reviewing and editing their work through the use of a three-step intensive review process. Using specific protocols throughout each step, students of *peer coaching* establish writing goals, articulate needs, listen actively, and give and take feedback to employ a method of communication and decision making that leads to the production of polished, finished writing products. The student peer-coaching protocols are rooted in what research says, and has always said, about process writing, high-stakes writing demands, and the need for peer feedback when editing one's own work. Research has shown that development and practice with peer coaching or similar methods results in better performance when writing independently, especially when writing on demand for high-stakes assessments.

Adolescent Writers and the Need to Teach Peer Feedback Explicitly

The need for adolescents to talk and interact with each other has never been greater, and their enthusiasm for communication has never ceased—not in the sixties, nor the seventies, certainly not now as facilitated by the technologies they interact with daily and that are growing by the minute—Live Spaces, Facebook, Bebo, MOG, Twitter, Loopt, Youtube, Friendster, Safebook, iMing, blogging, and whatever else becomes the latest adolescent social networking platform. While these venues allow students to express themselves, they aren't formal and often lead to nothing more than

social chatter, or empty discourse, requiring nothing close to the oral or written skills necessary for high school graduation and beyond.

To move student writing forward, students need to be taught what to write and how to write it. *We* need to do that. Taking adolescents through a process that shows them how to respond to one another's writing—what they need, what to look for, what to listen for, how to phrase feedback—provides them with interactive skills to make the more formal discourse work *for* them. Understanding that talk is the most natural thing we do (Beers, Probst, & Rief, 2007) and certainly that our adolescents do, we need to teach them how to talk about their writing, so it too becomes a natural process. As their teachers, we need to show them the steps to reach these goals; we need to teach them explicitly and emphatically how to arrive there.

The Need to Listen Explicitly

While writing is the heartbeat of student peer coaching, listening is the valve that keeps the blood circulating and the words flowing. An adolescent's ability to listen effectively flows from the nerve center in the brain that houses all feedback response, informing listeners what to respond with and writers what to do next. With training, students master listening actively and with intention for what writers have stated they need. Donald Graves (1994) says that when students can listen to themselves, they become reflective; he goes on to emphasize that the conditions we teachers set up in our classrooms, and through our instruction, is pivotal to the development of student listening abilities. When adolescent writers are able to shift back and forth between listening and reflecting, they become effective responders of important feedback, developing a 21st-century skill crucial to moving forward in life outside of our classrooms.

High-Stakes Assessment Performance and Student Peer Review

Welcome to the world of high-stakes assessments. Never before in our nation's history have students, teachers, and administrators been held so accountable for academic performance. So accountable, in fact, that federal and state funding, enrollment, and graduation hinge upon the result of performance assessments. High-stakes writing tests expect students to perform, in a window of time usually no longer than 20 minutes, a writing task that could take up to a week under normal circumstances. *And* they are expected to be successful. *Or else.* Unless they've internalized a dialogue that will advance their writing, they are alone in this effort, without an internal mechanism to inform them. Outside of the assessment venue, they may have lots of resources: teachers, peers, organizers, check-lists, rubrics, models of good writing, and generic variations of student peer coaching, but can they transition from these resources to a write-on-demand session of 10 to 20 minutes? Making that transition is a significant result of any peer-review effort.

Recent research suggests strong ties between process writing, peer-feedback practices, and increased student performance on high-stakes assessments. Studies have shown that the internal dialogue and application of the intrinsic process for writing, resulting from peer-feedback instruction, is crucial to developing independent writers (Hawe, Dixon, & Watson, 2008; Moran & Greenberg, 2008; Simmons, 2003).

In the Moran and Greenberg (2008) study, students were trained to become what they called "Meta-Editors" (or peer editors). The position was taken that unless time was built into the class day for the teaching of structured feedback, students were unlikely to transfer revision or editing strategies when writing on demand. At the end of the study, interviewed students felt more confident about their ability to edit and screen for useful rather than less useful feedback. Not only did they express greater confidence in their writing ability, these students scored in the accelerated

range on the 2007 Ohio Graduation Tests (OGT's) demonstrating the extent of growth of their writing skills. Another similar study coming out of New Zealand (Hawe, Dixon, & Watson, 2008) was instrumental in producing a National Assessment Strategy which offers specific directives for assessing students in their use of targeted feedback, goal setting, peer and self-assessment.

Another very important study by Simmons (2003), considered high school students across a range of socioeconomic and geographic variables (urban, suburban, rural) over a three-year period in their use of peer feedback. All college bound, the study proved conclusively that students needed considerable practice in models of peer review that exceeded the traditional semester or even year-long writing course, that they wrote better when using peer feedback that taught them to look for and respond to more than grammar and usage. While one group of students edited and revised according to written teacher comments, the other was taught specific models of peer feedback, including substantial commenting on content, or "strategies of readers and writers" (Simmons, 2003, p. 689). As with the previous studies, students who received feedback training felt their writing improved and that they had become better writers. In addition, the high school students who used peer feedback averaged more than 6 on a 2 to 8 grading scale. Students revising with only teacher comments scored lower, at 5.67. This study determined that

> The most academically talented students don't necessarily make the best reviewers of their peers' writing. Students need to practice reading one another's work while giving and receiving feedback before they do more than edit or offer global praise . . . they write better when using peer feedback and attending to the effects of their writing on readers and themselves. (p. 684)

As shown in the above studies, research continues to demonstrate that when adolescent writers respond to their peers with a focus on meaning and substance, including needs and goals

rather than usage and grammar, writing skill advances significantly and quickly. In addition to improving writing skill, adolescents take ownership of, and responsibility for, their writing through goal setting, trouble shooting, listening actively, and giving and taking feedback—crucial undertakings for any peer-review effort.

Navigating This Book

This book is designed to be a complete resource for full classroom implementation of all aspects of student peer coaching. Part I is devoted to the theory and research support for student peer coaching in grades 6 through 12, offering insight on the needs of adolescent writers, along with the author's experiences as a young writer. Important studies on models of student feedback as they apply to high stakes performance and state assessments are integrated with insight on the need to explicitly teach peer feedback. In Part II, Chapter 1 is comprised of the "how to's" for understanding and teaching the roles, steps, and protocols students must use to effectively employ the student peer-coaching methods in this book. Included are descriptions of the four student roles, the three steps with their protocols, model lessons, and tools for implementation. Chapter 2 describes two alternative peer-coaching methods: *silent peer coaching* and *peer coaching as questioning.* Chapter 3 outlines the important process of scaffolding responsibility to students, and Chapter 4 provides direction in facilitating and evaluating all of this effort for teachers as well as adolescent writers. Chapters 5 through 7 get into the nuts and bolts of student peer coaching, beginning with Step One in Chapter 5, Step Two in Chapter 6, and ending with Step Three in Chapter 7. Included in these chapters are specific instructions on executing each step in the two most pivotal roles: writer and responder. Each of these chapters closes with a series of lessons geared toward teaching students the skills they need to become masterful peer coaches. Finally, Part III contains all the reproducible

resources—checklists, organizers, rubrics, and posters teachers and students need for implementing each step and each protocol within the steps. Rubrics for teacher evaluation of students, peer self–evaluation, and peer-to-peer evaluation are included for implementing an ongoing, informal assessment.

Approach this book as you would any new reading task: Preview the table of contents, the list of reproducible classroom resources in Part III, the charts and graphs, and even take a quick glance at the model lesson plans in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. Then, read with an open mind and heart, from beginning to end.

Like all the teachers before me who have nurtured writers, including Mrs. Niblack to whom I dedicate this book, and all the authors of writing craft who have given and continue to give us more reasons to believe in our students, my hope—my dream, my wish—is that the student peer-coaching process in this book will help to nurture a community of writers in your classrooms. Happy peer coaching!