

The TEXTures of Digital First Year Writing:

Virtual Peer-Review

The first year writing classroom is many texts simultaneously. For students, the idea of “text” is often the duality of consumption and production: “I read my textbook and write some paper to pass this class.” For instructors, text involves the entire process of creative output: brainstorming, conversation, and peer-review. Our panel is examining the evolution of texts that are created when students interact and revise using collaborative technologies. As my fellow presenters have and will discuss, we are focusing on a moment within first year writing process that is complemented with the use of interactive technology. Even though these technologies literally increase the amount of text via writing spaces on message boards and other communications, we hope to emphasize that the use of digital spaces aid in the creation new textual, writerly identities.

My presentation, then, suggests that as new college students enter the writing classroom, they often approach the environment fearful of outside judgment and personal inability. For first year writers, the peer-review process can be especially daunting. However, online peer-review platforms are changing the structure of critical response by creating a safe environment for peer-to-peer evaluation. In this presentation, I will examine the efficacy of online peer-review, look at the specific online platform InSite, and finally suggest a model that allows for more honest and critical student responses. One of the benefits of online peer-review is the ability for students to remain anonymous while still providing detailed and helpful critique. One of the downsides lies in the same technology. For the first year writing classroom, the online peer-review helps new college writers make the critical shift from

uncertain reviewers to confident and insightful responders.

Before jumping straight into an analysis, I want to spend some time reviewing what's been said out there about virtual peer-review. Surprisingly, there's not much there. In fact, there's more in the sciences about collaborative peer-review than there is in our own field. I find this problematic, not because the sciences are talking about writing in ways we're not (we can and should look towards each other for innovative ways to collaborate and improve the ways we provide feedback at all levels); I'm troubled because while our field champions writing, writerly exchange, and revision, we haven't spent too much time talking about digital peer-review. In 2004, Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch's *Virtual Peer Review: Teaching and Learning about Writing in Online Environments* hit the market, but there haven't been any subsequent texts focusing specifically on virtual peer-review. A few articles have been published in journals like *Research and Teaching* and *Written Communication*, but these articles, too, use psychology or biology courses to gather the meat for its quantitative analysis.

And even though our field is talking about evolving the peer-review process for academic journals, and lots of (digital) ink has been spilled challenging academics to take a stand on rolling submissions and open-access publishing, we have yet to focus these discussions on our own classrooms. I want to question whether we need to adapt our peer-review processes from the spoken F2F models we've been working with for so long, or whether we need to experiment with more asynchronous systems that allow for different types of conversations and different types of movable texts.

This is problematic because interactive technologies call for more than just uploading our offline activities to Internet spaces; we need to figure out how best to use collaboration to

improve the process of peer review. The example I will be discussing, InSite, is certainly not problem-free, but I argue that these platforms lead us toward a peer-review model that will combine the best parts of F2F peer-review with newer forms of feedback systems that we can incorporate into our classrooms.

I want to take a moment to describe the InSite program. InSite is a platform developed by Cengage Learning's Wadsworth division. I should point out that while InSite is meant to function as a Course Management System, I'm going to focus solely on the Peer Review (or what they call "peer mark") portion of the site. My university uses the open-source Sakai as our CMS and it functions really well, so I didn't see the need for my students to utilize a separate CMS just for this one class. One of the most flexible options of using InSite for peer-review is that the peer-review process can take place outside of class. In fact, once we did the first peer-review in class, all subsequent sessions were held on the students' own time, thus allowing for more in-class instructional and writing time. Students are required to submit a draft in order to participate in InSite's peer-review process. After the students had submitted their drafts for review, they were randomly assigned a number a papers to review (the instructor selects how many each student must read and respond to). I have my students read three other papers, but unlike the F2F version, the students could start-and-stop reviewing anytime before the deadline. (So, for example, if peer review was open from Friday morning until Monday morning, a student could work on the peer review process anytime throughout the weekend. It did not have to be completed in one sitting.) As the professor, I could choose questions from the generic bank of questions InSite provided (such as "At which point did you feel most interested by this piece? When least? Explain." and "Could the writer of this paper

have omitted certain passages to make this paper more concise? If yes, which ones?") or generate my own specific to the assignment ("What did you learn or come to understand differently about the author by reading the reflection? or List the example(s) used in this essay. Which one is your favorite AND least effective? Why?"). Additionally, the students could comment directly on the paper as you would with Google Docs or Word. They could also use drawing tools to "write" directly on the paper. I commend InSite for trying to simulate the F2F environment as closely as possible. There were, however, several problems that I'll talk about in just a minute. Finally, students could view their comments the day after the peer-review session closed--all they had to do was log into the site, click on the assignment, and review their peers responses to all the questions and any additional notes that were made by a reviewer.

As I mentioned, this platform is not without its fair share of problems. As the semester continued, my students and I racked up a wishlist of features we wanted a peer-review platform to have (again, more suspense, 'cause I talk about these in a minute). Onto the major issues. In order to participate in peer-review, InSite would not let a student comment on or provide feedback for another student if he or she didn't submit his or her paper to the program. For me, this is where the first red flag went up. Even if students don't have a draft to exchange, I often will encourage those students to read drafts and provide feedback for their peers--not only does it give the writers additional input, but the students without a draft see what their classmates are writing. In fact, and I'm sure this is not just my experience, some of my students who don't have drafts really want to just see one more example before they start writing their own. There's some hesitation in bringing one's own copy before knowing if the

assignment was completed correctly. This is one drawback with online peer-review platform like InSite--if the students don't have a draft, they are locked out from the process from the start. Another fallback is that students have to access this site directly in order to get the feedback. Sure the students could print out the reviewed paper, but that kind of defeats the process of the digital space. But going to the site wasn't the issue--it was the contained nature of it. For example, had my students been using a platform like Google Docs, there would be more flexibility to incorporate the comments in the same space as the draft. On InSite, there's no way for the students to alter the document they've already submitted--they must flip between screens to make adjustments. To me, this is the major constriction of existing peer-review platforms. In 2004, Breuch faulted peer-review conducted via e-mail for the same reason, stating virtual peer review doesn't equal collaborative writing because you're not writing a text together. Like e-mail, the back-and-forth nature of switching between screens is laborious for experienced writers, yet alone first year writers who are already struggling with the ways to create texts. During F2F peer-review, writers construct the text together--they are able to share comments, frustrations, and encouragement on the document and through affective responses. The affective responses are mostly eliminated from the virtual peer review session, and for a lot of first year writers who lack the confidence, this omission is troubling because they end up feeling alone.

These are not new concerns, as Breuch mentioned in her 2004 book *Virtual Peer Review*, but ones that as a discipline, we haven't addressed fully yet either. As we've learned in other writing spaces (I'm thinking of the recent MLA and HASTAC discussions about evaluating digital publications effectively), we need to avoid using the same models of F2F peer review

when we do digital peer review. They are different and treating them as the same techniques is detrimental. Instead, Breuch and others have suggested a “pedagogy must drive technology” framework for successful appropriation of the F2F model into a digital environment.

In order to make this transition, Breuch suggests looking at the pedagogical aims first before deciding on which technology will best suit the exercise. I know I’ve been trapped the other way around--finding a new, fun technology and making an assignment where I can use it (and the usually ends up failing!). But if we go about it the correct way--as in making sure we know the teleological trajectory of the exercise and the technology--virtual peer review can be just as effective as what we’ve been doing in person.

Breuch recognizes that the F2F peer review is an exercise in conversation whereas the virtual peer-review becomes an exercise in writing (p. 68). She questions: “What happens when writing is no longer secondary, but primary, as in the activity of virtual peer review? What happens when conversations truly become written, as they do on the internet?” (69). That line of thinking is just being stuck in the mode of transferring the same things offline and incorporating them into online spaces; instead we need to use the technologies in different ways online than we would F2F. We can’t and shouldn’t expect the same results from the two methods. We can, however, use the same aims.

Like F2F peer review, Breuch notes that virtual peer review deals with three modes: time, space, and interaction (p. 50). Time is split up into the following categories: synchronicity, durability, concurrency, and convenience; Space is split up into: social cues, interpersonal presence, and hyperpersonal presence; and finally interaction can be broken into: text-based, fixity, response structure, and reach. I’ll spend a little time talking about how we can adapt

these three and their components for successful virtual peer review

The one comment I heard repeatedly from my students was the double-edged sword of time: they really loved being able to complete peer-review on their own time, but they also forgot about it, often until the last minute (thus, negating the benefits of starting and stopping at their leisure). The convenience of online peer-review became tedious, because they had to find additional time outside of the already existing demands of classwork, jobs, and other commitments. And it wasn't time spent consuming feedback, but virtual peer review via InSite was solely focused on the production of feedback. As first year writers, this is especially problematic because they need that ability to consume and use feedback.

Space is the tricky one because the space of the online peer review takes many forms: iPads, dorm rooms, library computer labs, smart phones. There is no one space (like the classroom in F2F sessions) where the virtual peer review can be completed. My students wished they had the ability to chat (virtually through IM-ing or Skyping) with each other to access spatial cues more immediately--or even at all. They also noted that they didn't feel the ability to comment effectively. I heard a lot of "I know how to explain it, I just don't know how to write it." To me this is a troubling response from first year writers. I hear similar calls all the time as they are preparing to write--"it's in my head, I just don't know how to get it on paper." InSite didn't facilitate these moments effectively, and I wish that I could find or adapt a program that could incorporate these ideas.

This leads into the final mode: interaction. Compared to the physical classroom, the interactive nature of InSite was minimal. In fact, another double-edged feature was the possibility of remaining anonymous. Many of the students originally liked the idea of remaining

hidden, or in their words, not being held responsible for giving “bad” feedback. The “bad” feedback was, of course, anything critical which is what you’re looking for in a peer-review session. The first session or so, the students liked the anonymity because they could give critical responses without their damaging their classmates’ psyches. By the end of the semester, they also realized that they could leave lousy feedback and not have to feel the frustration from those same classmates for not being helpful. As the professor, I could read all the comments in all the exchanges (you can put word counts minimums, but those were too easily side stepped)--and I also felt a little too micromanage-y.

To conclude this talk, I want to leave the space open for conversation about possible routes and methods that have worked successfully for you. I’ve shared my experiences and frustrations with one program, and I’m quite interested in hearing about some of the platforms you’ve developed or used facilitate effective virtual peer review. I’ve put my e-mail and twitter addresses on this last slide so please feel free to keep this conversation going. Also, we’ll have a bit of time at the end here to discuss any ideas that have been useful for you. Thanks!