

Among Friends

Effective Peer Critiquing

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The students in my class that trains education majors how to teach writing did an illuminating writing project this semester. I asked the students to write about either their best classroom experience with writing or their worst. I wanted all of us to discover under what conditions students write well, and under what conditions students write poorly or with inhibition.

The result of the project was a three-page list of classroom environments, pedagogical practices, and teacher characteristics that were either positive or negative influences on writing instruction. The major lesson was that the most potent influence on writing instruction is the atmosphere of the classroom rather than the techniques that are used. The single strongest positive influence, according to my cohort of forty students, is the presence of smiles and laughter in the classroom. And the one who determines the presence or absence of these is the teacher.

My students gave resounding support to a statement by psychologist and educator Haim Ginott, quoted by Ralph Fletcher in our textbook, *What a Writer Needs*:

I have come to the frightening conclusion that I am the decisive element in the classroom. It's my personal approach that creates the climate. It's my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher, I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. (9)

What is needed, my students suggest, is not nonstop hilarity and frequent jokes but simply a classroom in which both teacher and students are fully human—sharing their real selves; admitting their mistakes; enjoying, supporting, and encouraging one another.

An example of an area in which atmosphere is more significant than technique is the common practice of

peer critiquing. This practice is highly recommended as a way to help students develop the sense of audience that writers need, but the way in which it is handled makes it either a positive or a negative influence on writing instruction. Among the negative examples of peer critiquing in the essays my students wrote in response to this assignment was Tasha's description of a creative writing teacher who "made the class a very uncomfortable place to be" because it seemed "she was not there to be of assistance to us but to show us that she knew more than we did. She dominated and there was no other way. . . . When students dared to express their feelings about their writing she went against them."

Jessica wrote about a class critique session during which students and professor laughed at sarcastic comments about her paper made by members of the class. She laughed along with the others, not wanting anyone to know that it was her essay they were critiquing. She felt embarrassed and ashamed about what she had written.

Trisha's emotional account recalled the possible negatives of peer critiquing:

He would bring sample essays that he had kept from prior students, and we would go through them and pick out all the grammatical errors, clichés, and anything else that seemed to be wrong with it. As we practiced butchering these papers, I got more and more depressed about writing.

One day her own paper on her four-year struggle with anorexia and bulimia was reviewed by the whole class. This was her reaction:

I can hardly remember most of what went on in that particular class period. After about five minutes of the whole class picking apart my paper for any mistakes, I was not interested in hearing any more. I drowned out

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the voices of my classmates while my teacher coaxed them to claw away at any self-esteem I had left.

Encouragingly, however, the ratio of good writing instruction to bad in the experiences of my students is very high. What really makes the difference in peer critiquing is whether students are encouraged to be error hunters like those in the previous cases or whether the teacher models a truly human response to student writing.

Jordan describes an admired teacher who allowed students to “teach each other by learning from each other’s mistakes,” but in a gentle and humane way that made the class a place students wanted to be. There were “open-ended discussions and the freedom to speak your mind.”

Jodi’s best writing experience occurred in a “friendly” classroom where “the teacher would walk in with her smiling face and her ‘ready to go’ attitude.” When Jodi wrote her first essay, the teacher asked her, gently, to rewrite the superficial draft to be one that “made me grapple with my thoughts.” Jodi then wrote an emotionally harrowing account of the deaths of two of her friends. When the papers were copied and distributed to be read, Jodi noticed “tears welling in their eyes” as her classmates read her paper, and afterward she “received a few hugs.” “They congratulated me on being so brave and told me they felt ashamed because they had not written so deeply about themselves. I will cherish this experience for life.”

Kristina recalled a “magical” classroom with walls “filled with extravagant canvas paintings of sunflowers, picnics, and sunsets.” When the teacher asked Kristina to read her essay to the class, she was hesitant until the teacher assured her that she had “written a really great piece.” As Kristina read, she “was astonished to see the expression[s] of [her] classmates.” The tears in their eyes told her that “my story had touched their lives. My teacher and the class clapped when I was done. I felt so good inside!” The experience “allowed me to open up and share my life through words.”

Lynn described a class in memoir writing:

[It] felt like a wonderful release to write about my life and share with my classmates. They shared their lives with me as well and that is what made the experience rewarding. We built trust. Each member of the class was put into a vulnerable situation by exposing his or her past. At first, sharing our writing with each other felt as embarrassing as standing in front of the class naked. After a few days, the entire class became “nudists.”

One additional element is essential to effective peer critiquing: the opportunity to revise the paper after the critique is completed. Without this, students see no

point in giving attention to the comments of others on their work. With it, they get a real sense that their classmates are their collaborators in producing a good paper.

Jared described a writing class in which rigorous peer critiques were the main class activity. They were seen as a positive force because “the idea behind group analyses was to help prepare our works for a final grade.”

Jason wrote about a short story–writing class whose smiling teacher made the class seem “calm and relaxing” even though

the atmosphere in the classroom seemed to get intense when each student became the center of attention when their story came up to be reviewed by the class. The story was then revised and resubmitted with the original story and the process of critiquing was repeated. A final grade on the project was given after the process was completed.

Debbie’s writing class had a comfortable atmosphere in which tapes of Mozart and Bach were played and in which the teacher freely shared stories from his own life with his students:

I had no reason to have any inhibitions in this classroom. We were always split into groups in order to share our writing. I appreciated the constructive criticism I received from my peers. I could tell they were thinking about my work and wanted to help me along. I trusted the advice I got and incorporated the suggestions into the piece.

A colleague who won the title of Distinguished Teaching Professor several years ago said in his acceptance speech that the classroom should be “emotionally comfortable and intellectually uncomfortable.” This seems exactly right. Self-expression flourishes in a place where people are welcomed into the conversation rather than pounced on for flaws and mistakes. It flourishes where students can be fully human because the teacher is fully human, not in a place of intimidation and harsh judgment. No one writes or speaks freely in that kind of place.

My students say they write better in classrooms where people care about one another and expect the best from one another. The attitude of friends—“I know you can do better, and I’ll help you to do it”—permeates effective peer critiquing and effective writing instruction.

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REFERENCE

Fletcher, R. 1993. *What a writer needs*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.

