Addressing Instructor Ambivalence about Peer Review and Self-Assessment

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on survey and focus group data about instructor perceptions of peer review and self-assessment in first-year writing classrooms. We find that the concerns of graduate-student instructors, which have sometimes been characterized as resistance, might more productively be understood as thoughtful and considered ambivalence. Our participants acknowledge that peer review and self-assessment promote a democratic classroom and a genuine attention to audience, but they also reasonably characterize these practices as difficult to teach as well as challenging to their authority as new instructors. We conclude that WPAs who believe in collaborative assessment models of writing feedback, as we do, should engage instructors in ongoing conversations about peer-review and self-assessment that include discussions of their own experiences as students giving and receiving feedback to peers and assessing their own writing. We provide several suggestions for making such faculty development conversations effective.

> I think we all struggle. This is something we talk about around the water cooler or the coffee machine at the Writing Center. Which is, how do we teach peer review? How do we model it? How do we teach it? Not just, why it's useful, but how to actually do it. I mean, we've had so much trouble finding an effective way to teach it.
>
> —(Graduate-Student Writing Instructor)

INTRODUCTION

"Around the water cooler or the coffee machine," much of the talk about peer review and self-assessment at our writing program seemed tinged, if

not saturated, with frustration. We heard about the peer who could only say "great job!," the student who felt "dissed" by fellow students, and the writer who self-castigated instead of self-critiquing. These disaffected figures seemed to be to a new generation what the bespectacled, red-pen-wielding instructor and enforcer of grammatical correctness was to the compositionists of the sixties and seventies. As junior writing program administrators at a research-extensive university, and members (more or less) of our instructors' generation, we sympathized with them—but we also wondered why there seemed to be such a disparity between their view and that of the composition and rhetoric literature and lore that informed our program.

Like many first-year writing programs, ours had a deep commitment to peer review and self-assessment. We followed in the tradition of the University of Minnesota Writing Workshops, where heavy stress was placed on modeling the professional peer review process. We also followed the same collaborative principles in assessing our program as a whole that we followed in assessing and developing student writing, so we sought feedback from the undergraduate students in the first-year writing class as well as the graduate-student instructors teaching the class. Our preliminary studies—broadly distributed surveys—suggested that instructor concerns about peer review and self-assessment might run deeper than doubts harbored by students. We thus dug more deeply into instructor attitudes on teaching collaborative assessment by conducting focus groups of instructors and interviews of the program director and the Instructor Training Coordinators (ITCs) responsible for their pedagogical training.

This paper employs our findings about instructor attitudes towards collaborative assessment to argue that WPAs must more actively engage instructors of first-year writing in honestly expressing and addressing their own attitudes towards peer review and self-assessment. Our instructors and ITCs show an active and thoughtful ambivalence that results in part from an underestimation of the degree to which students and/or other instructors value collaborative assessment as a goal, and in part from legitimate concerns about the viability of these teaching practices. Finally, we provide discussion of nine themes that can be productively deployed in faculty development to discuss instructor ambivalence about collaborative assessment.

This article is not about whether first-year writing programs should or should not utilize peer review and self-assessment. We assume that the learning goals of most such programs include the abilities to critique one's own writing productively as well as that of others. Whether we teach critique of others' writing through an activity called "peer review" or though "collaborative writing," "writing groups," "workshops," or other methods, we ask students to review each other's work, and whether we call critiquing

one's own writing "self-assessment," "reflective writing," an exercise in "self-efficacy," or simply an aspect of revision, we surely want students to do it. The authors, and in general their participants, do not doubt the necessity of these goals or activities. But we do believe that instructors' doubts about peer review as it is actually practiced in many classrooms are serious and worthy of careful consideration and dialogue.

Engaging these doubts must begin by teasing apart and defining peer review and self-assessment. In the program in which both of us worked, peer review and self-assessment, along with instructor feedback, were closely linked in what we came to think of as "collaborative assessment." We liked—and still like—this collaborative assessment model and the ways in which it embodied give and take between writers and readers. Yet our results suggest that instructors' concerns sometimes result from a hazy view of the distinctions between the responsibilities of a peer reviewer and those of a self-critical writer. Seemingly opposite but deeply similar problems of definition may face programs that teach peer review and self-assessment separately and do not link them to instructor feedback; students in such programs may not learn to define the roles of writer and different kinds of readers in relation to each other.

Literature Review

Collaborative assessment is based on the principle that dialogue produces better understanding and evaluation than a single perspective. Much of the literature on peer review and self-assessment values these practices for their potential to remove the instructor from the position of sole authority on student writing, an element our instructors warmly embraced in discussing their teaching philosophies. Since the 1960's, peer review and self-assessment have been major elements in efforts to foster "writing without teachers" (Elbow), to displace "teacher talk" and the morbidly ossified academic discourse dubbed "Engfish" (Moffett), and to introduce students to the "conversation of mankind" (Bruffee). Increasingly, theorists have argued for giving students a more substantial, consequential voice in writing assessment (see, for example, White, Huot and Inoue).

On the other hand, peer response has been critiqued by those who value maintaining the instructor's centrality. "A teacher's definition of 'better writers,'" as Brooke, Mirtz and Evans note, determines the relative importance of student and instructor feedback in meeting course goals. David Bartholomae, they observe, argues against peer response because he believes the function of composition is to make writers "better" by leading them towards greater mastery of the conventions of academic communities, and

peers who are equally deficient in knowledge of these conventions cannot lead each other towards such a goal. For Brooke, Mirtz and Evans, on the other hand, "to be better writers means...to understand the ways in which writing can be useful in many areas of one's life, as well as to have experiences which adapt writing to any of those uses" (9). For these goals, small groups and peer response seem indispensable; they act as "invitations to a writer's life," allowing students to experience authentic communication with readers (12).

Constructions of students' individuality have concerned some scholars examining aspects of collaborative assessment. For instance, Candace Spigelman studies student responses to show how peer review in writing groups uncomfortably conflicts with the ideology of individual ownership, even though it is ultimately productive in challenging students to recognize the social dimension of writing. Similarly, Susan Latta and Janice Lauer ask whether the "selves" under review in formal self-assessment exercises may find themselves subjected to scrutiny that limits their expressive freedom and heightens their writing apprehension. Additionally, Peggy O'Neill argues that self-assessment, when required but not dialogically engaged by peers and the instructor, degenerates into what Michel Foucault would describe as "ritualistic discourse"—a rote confession, invoked as part of a regimen of evaluation, classification and discipline—not as an organic part of revision and learning. Consequently, O'Neill agrees with Glenda Conway that "required reflection is ethical only if it exists as an ongoing component of a course and if the teacher of that course openly discusses his or her reactions to reflections with students" (Conway 92). All these compositionists are concerned with the subjectivity of the student; none fully addresses the question of whether collaborative assessment undermines or conceals a teacher's authority—a very real question for many of the graduate-student instructors with whom we worked.

These concerns also resonate in Jane Bowerman Smith and Kathleen Blake Yancey's collection of essays, which attends to self-assessment on the part of both students and instructors. Thomas Hilgers, Edna Hussey and Monica Stitt-Bergh note that "teachers embrace the theoretical promise of self-assessment, although few devote much time to its practice" (9), marking a need to return attention to the now decentered instructor. While Hilgers et. al, along with several other authors in the collection, focus on students' assessments of their own writing, others focus on instructors' self-assessment of pedagogy. Sandra Mano, for example, recounts the story of her own need for self-assessment in the process of engaging with, and ultimately transforming, a culture of teaching assistants around pedagogical practices. Mano reports difficulty in compelling new graduate-student

composition instructors to adopt a process-based collaborative pedagogy, including peer review; new instructors questioned her authority and expertise and clung to their own prejudices about how to teach. Mano's own self-assessment alters her approach to teaching the pedagogy of collaborative assessment when she realizes that student concerns about collaborative assessment must be met with a willingness to "share power with the graduate students" (164).

We agree with Mano that self-assessment is a critical element of pedagogical transformation, and in our study we invited instructors as well as students to collaborate in the program's self-assessment. Any study that draws on voices of students, instructors and administrators to assess an aspect of a writing program will inevitably be a study *in* collaborative assessment; by making it also a study *of* collaborative assessment in the classroom, we thematize the problem of collaboration rather than allowing it to be marginalized.

Our attention to instructor attitudes about collaborative assessment extends recent work in the field. In their study on attitudes towards peer review, for example, Charlotte Brammer and Mary Rees administered companion surveys asking faculty about their use of peer review in the classroom, and asking students about its effectiveness and their voluntary use of the practice outside the classroom. Although they report briefly on faculty responses, most of Brammer and Rees's analysis focuses on student attitudes as they make recommendations for ways in which faculty can provide more effective contexts for successful peer review. They acknowledge the importance of instructor attitudes, to be sure: "Students seem to take their cues from instructors. If we stress the importance of peer review, our students are more likely to do so, but if we just go through the motions, perhaps passing out recycled handouts, our students will pick up on our lack of dedication and act accordingly" (81). Their productive analysis of student attitudes sets the stage for an equally productive analysis of instructor attitudes. How can we explain the phenomenon of instructors just going through the motions? Why might instructors lack dedication to peer review? In Lynne Belcher's informal survey of 31 writing instructors regarding their practices and experiences with peer review, she provides more questions than she answers. Belcher finds that although 30 of her 31 respondents recommend peer review as a teaching strategy for new instructors, their responses to individual questions about specific aspects of teaching peer review were far less positive.

Methods

We conducted our study at a research-extensive university in which the first-year writing course was the only required course for all undergraduates. The course was supervised by a free-standing writing program and taught almost exclusively by graduate students, most from English and some from other departments. Instructors designed individual course topics and syllabi within broad program requirements that included instructor feedback in dialogue with peer review and self-assessment. Collaborative assessment was incorporated into all components of training, including the five-credit writing pedagogy course in the summer before instructors began teaching, the two-credit pedagogy workshop (in the form of small mentoring groups) in their first year of teaching, and several brown-bag pedagogy meetings open to all instructors. Instructors were free to choose from among existing models of peer review and self-assessment or to design their own.

In a survey, students rated self-assessment 2nd and peer review 14th out of fifteen writing skills targeted by the first-year writing course (see Appendix 1 for the relevant portion of the student survey). In terms of the value of the skills to their future writing, students ranked self-assessment 5th and peer review 15th. Since the program philosophy explicitly linked peer review and self-assessment, we found the disjunct in how students saw the two skills surprising, especially when we considered that the program had been emphasizing peer review longer than self-assessment. We had an anecdotal sense that not all instructors felt comfortable teaching these elements of writing, so we designed a companion survey that asked instructors to rank their ability to teach the fifteen skills and their perception of the value of these skills in students' future writing (see Appendix 2 for instructor survey). In ranking their own ability to teach the fifteen target skills, instructors ranked self-assessment 14th and peer review 15th. In terms of the value of the skills to students' future writing, instructors ranked self-assessment 9th and peer review 15th. In trying to understand why peer review was ranked so low across constituencies while self-assessment was ranked rather high by students but very low by instructors, we turned to student focus groups, where we heard relatively positive feedback about both peer review and self-assessment. We recognize, of course, that student responses may lack reliability, especially when students are speaking in person with a focus group leader who may be perceived as an authority figure. Nonetheless, it seems telling that in both student focus groups, students included peer review in response to the opening question, "What was most helpful about your writing class?" It seemed that students viewed self-assessment

and, to a degree, peer review more positively than their instructors did, and we wanted to understand why.

We used selected quotations from student focus groups in designing focus group questions for instructors. The resulting questions were designed to elicit more detailed responses about collaborative assessment (see Appendix 3 for focus group questions). These focus groups were moderated by psychology graduate students with focus group experience who were not writing instructors but who worked at the Writing Center (as did some of the focus group participants). We also conducted interviews of the faculty member who directed the Writing Program and three Instructor Training Coordinators (ITCs) who had been advanced graduate students when they served in that role, although one was a professor at another institution by the time we interviewed her (see Appendix 4 for ITC interview questions). All study instruments had IRB approval, and participant names have been changed to preserve anonymity.

This paper provides a qualitative analysis of the focus groups and interviews, discussing the attitudes of a small number of people (nine participants in total: five instructors, three ITCs and one program director). We chose this approach over broader assessment tools like surveys because, like Eubanks and Abbott, we believe that focus groups allow us to "bridge the gap between potentially superficial quantitative methods and potentially subjective naturalistic methods" (33). Our results, based on intensive study of the comments of this small group of instructors and administrators, are deeper than they are wide, but from our perspectives as WPAs now working at different institutions, we are confident that the ambivalence reflected by this small group of participants at a single institution is hardly unique. After all, this institution has a deep commitment to collaborative assessment; this study itself results from that commitment. Doubts reflected within this program might be even more pronounced in other institutional contexts.

We did three separate strands of analysis to better understand our data. In our quantitative coding, we used the utterance as the basic unit. For the focus groups, all utterances were under 140 words, since participants interrupted each other often. For the interviews, we occasionally broke up the longest monologues (several were over three hundred words) into two or three utterances based on their content in order to count them more accurately. To determine significant utterances, we counted as trivial any utterance asking for clarification such as "could you repeat the question?" and any utterance that didn't specifically address elements of collaborative assessment, such as "I used to be a grant writer." In the focus groups, we also removed utterances that marked only agreement, i.e. comments whose

entirety was "yes," "right," "I agree," etc. We found our focus group members to be highly supportive of each other's statements, with 20% of all utterances and 32% of non-trivial utterances marking simple agreement. Although the program director and the graduate-student ITCs were asked the same interview questions, we report on them separately since their responses tell quite different stories, perhaps unsurprisingly given their different institutional positions. We analyzed a total of 743 codeable utterances, 379 from instructors, 311 from ITCs, and 53 from the program director.

In processing the transcripts, the two investigators separately coded all utterances and then met to adjust to a single set of codes. This activity simultaneously allowed us to develop a useful set of robust quantitative data and to more deeply interrogate each of the utterances that had been made; in short, this tedious process made us extremely familiar with our transcripts. We report here on three sets of codes: a relatively simple identification of positive/negative attitudes in our participants, a count of adjectives referring to the attitudes of others, and a more nuanced identification of recurring themes. We coded utterances as "positive" or "negative" when they expressed commitment or skepticism, respectively, about either the process or the results of peer review, self-assessment, or instructor feedback that responded to peer review and self assessment. Thus, we coded as negative utterances such as "I find that students don't really engage with self-assessment" or "peer review always makes me feel bad." We coded statements neutral when they described collaborative assessment practices without value judgments or evaluation; for example, "I put my students in pairs for peer review," or "In my class, peer review is worth 5% of your grade." We coded as mixed those utterances that included both positive and negative attitudes towards collaborative assessment, such as "I think peer review is helpful to students, but it's very hard to teach."

In coding for respondents' own attitudes about peer review and self-assessment, we found that we had to separate their characterizations of the attitudes of others carefully. We found these characterizations interesting in their own right, so we coded for perceptions of undergraduate student attitudes on the part of instructors and ITCs, and of instructor attitudes on the part of ITCs and the program director. As an index of these attitudes, we compiled a list of the adjectives used to describe them. Finally, we identified recurring themes underlying our participants' discussions of peer review and self-assessment, and we coded for mentions of those themes.

Results and Discussion

Our main finding is a deeply-rooted ambivalence about collaborative assessment in graduate-student instructors and administrators, in contrast to a much more serene commitment to this practice in the full-time faculty member directing the program. While we recognize the limitations of comparing the views of a single person to those of a small group, the director's views are representative of the predilection in favor of collaborative assessment common to many WPAs, as shown in our literature review. The contrast between the program director and the graduate-student ITCs and instructors can be seen quite starkly in Table 1.

Table 1. Positive/Negative Attitudes towards Collaborative Assessment by Group

	Positive	Negative	Mixed	Neutral
Program Director (1 participant, 53 utterances)	54.7% (29)	3.8% (2)	22.6% (12)	18.9% (10)
ITCs (3 participants, 311 utterances)	29.3% (91)	15.1% (47)	38.9% (121)	16.7% (52)
Instructors (5 participants, 379 utterances)	24.5% (93)	28.5% (108)	34.8% (132)	12.1% (46)

Note the significant difference between the director and the graduate students, especially in the fact that over half the program director's comments are based in positive attitudes towards collaborative assessment, while only about one quarter of utterances made by graduate students are positive. There are also differences between the graduate students who serve as administrators in the program and those whose duties are only instruction; most notably, almost 30% of instructor utterances about collaborative assessment reflective negative attitudes, nearly double the percentage of those made by the ITCs charged with teaching them. Note too that over one third of comments by graduate students—instructors and ITCs alike—reflect mixed attitudes. In many cases, the mixed label refers to a participant articulating a benefit of a practice in the same breath as an anxiety about teaching it. For example, in describing as effective her practice

of modeling reader comments for her students, Ann immediately added, "I mean, assuming that I do it properly or well."

Separating our data by participant yielded one insight: the one male instructor in our sample had an attitude profile far closer to that of the program director than to his peers (his 25 utterances were 44.0% positive, 16.0% negative, 32.0% mixed and 8.0% neutral). Obviously, we cannot generalize based on such a small sample size, but the impact of gender on (graduate-student or other) instructor attitudes may be ripe for future research.

Further separating our data by element of collaborative assessment discussed (peer review, self-assessment, or both) showed similar attitudes towards each element. However, instructors were more likely to speak of peer review and self-assessment separately, with only 13.1% of their utterances addressing the two practices working in concert, while those responsible for their training more often linked the practices (28.9% of ITC utterances and 34.0% of program director utterances). This suggests that the theoretical links between peer review and self-assessment may not always translate fluidly into classroom practice.

In attempting to better understand the ambivalence of our participants, we counted the number of times they characterized the attitudes of others. Our transcripts revealed characterizations of student attitudes that resonated with conversations we've had with each other and with faculty at this and other institutions. We found 107 instances in which graduate students characterized undergraduate student attitudes, with 70 of these characterizations falling under negative valences, 33 under positive, and 4 under neutral. The most repeated terms are: hated (9 mentions), comfortable (6), resistant (6), disliked (5), critical (4), frustrated (4), not mean (4), and trusting (3).

These characterizations tell an interesting and somewhat contrapuntal story. The majority of terms were mentioned only once or twice, and so we grouped the terms based on their contexts in three categories: general attitudes towards collaborative assessment; dispositions towards collaborative assessment; and attitudes about the outcomes of collaborative assessment. Broad-strokes characterizations of students' general attitudes towards collaborative assessment are quite negative, with students described as "hating" or "disliking" collaborative assessment a total of 14 times, while they were described as "loving," "liking," or "enjoying" it only 4 times.

In terms of student disposition towards collaborative assessment, we find a less significant gap between negative and positive characterizations, although the negative terms chosen seem more charged than the positive ones. The 31 negative characterizations can be broken into three main

categories: 11 mentions of aggression (which includes antagonistic, competitive, critical, harsh, mean, and uncivil); 10 of resistance (inattentive, lost, reluctant, resistant, and uninvested); and 10 of fear (anxious, dreading, fearful, hesitant, insecure, intimidated, nervous and touchy). The 25 positive characterizations can be broken into four main categories: 12 of comfort (comfortable, not in danger, safe and trusting); 9 of civility (civil, honest, nice, nonjudgmental, and not mean); 3 of willingness (cooperative, game and open-minded); and 1 of happiness ("students are happy to do peer reviews").

While instructors showed an active ambivalence about the value of collaborative assessment in the face of its difficulty, their perceptions of how students saw the outcomes of peer review and self-assessment were quite negative. Here we get 18 negative characterizations and only 5 positive ones. The negative descriptors can be divided into categories of injury (chastised, demoralized, devastated, exposed, horrified, hurt, sick, traumatized) and fatigue (annoyed, frustrated, hassled, overwhelmed, and "self-assessed-out"). While these negative adjectives tend towards the dramatic, those we categorized as positive represent an emotive range: excited, enlightened, appreciative, not offended, and surprised (that it worked).

The tendency of instructors to see student attitudes as largely negative may well be underestimating student buy-in of collaborative assessment. At this institution, after all, student surveys ranked self-assessment quite highly in terms of effectiveness of instruction and future usefulness, and despite lower survey rankings, peer review came up spontaneously as one of the most effective writing tools in student focus groups.

Similarly, those responsible for training writing instructors may also be underestimating instructor buy-in of collaborative assessment or interpreting ambivalence as resistance. We hope that this article, like Belcher's informal survey of instructors on peer review, will be useful to WPAs in understanding the complexity of attitudes instructors may be bringing to teaching collaborative assessment. The WPAs in our study characterized instructor attitudes more negatively than did the instructors they were working with. Their characterizations of instructor attitudes included 26 mentions of negative attitudes, 9 of positive attitudes, and 3 of neutral attitudes. The most common negative attitudes were resistant (9 mentions), overwhelmed (4), and skeptical (3). Negative attitudes were discussed in fairly strong language, including anxious, fearful, struggling, frustrated and hating. Only two of the positive attitudes were mentioned more than once: embracing and converted. Other positive attitudes were described in fairly weak language: accepting, good-hearted, hard-working, inspired, and surprised that it worked.

Faced with what they saw as resistant and skeptical cadres of new instructors, the director and ITCs were focused more on the problem of persuading these instructors of the benefits of proven pedagogical methods than on collaboratively reevaluating these methods. The positive characterizations suggest something about the trainers' goals; they wanted new instructors to good-naturedly accept the prescribed methods, and to be so pleased with the results that they would even "convert." Gretchen recalls her own "conversion experience" when she first taught in the program: "You know, I'd never worked with this model, and it took me a while. I was skeptical…I tried a couple of times, failed a couple of times. Eventually, one day it was a success, and I said, wow, this is great, this could work, and I was converted at the point." This missionary language was used lightly, not to elevate the ITC above the new instructors, but to identify with them. Helen, the incumbent ITC, recalled an exercise in which these concerns were addressed head-on in training. She and the director asked new instructor trainees to reflect on their best and worst experiences of receiving feedback on their writing. She shared her own most prominent memory of writing feedback, in which a faculty member had told her that, by summarizing too much and not critiquing enough, she was reducing herself to the state of a "mechanical tour guide." Recalling this sensitized her to students' anxieties about receiving each others' feedback—and to instructors' anxieties about requiring such feedback. By having instructors discuss their own experiences, she hoped to help them understand and perhaps transcend the personal origins of their own ambivalence about using collaborative assessment in their classrooms. At the same time, listening to the instructors' stories might inform the program's continuing efforts to reassess and readjust its approach to collaborative assessment.

The instructors' ambivalences are located, we found, in nine key issues, and we provide discussion and analysis of these themes so WPAs can use them as points of departure for discussions with instructors. While three themes were predominantly discussed as negative (difficult, superficial, deception) and three were almost always positive valenced (audience, democracy, transfer), the others were more complexly characterized. Table 2, which shows the number of times each group mentions a specific theme, reveals the depth of ambivalence our participants experienced in thinking about collaborative assessment.

Table 2. Mention of Themes, Ranked[1]

	Director (1 participant, 53 utterances)	ITCs (3 participants, 311 utterances)	Instructors (5 participants, 379 utterances)	Totals (743 utterances)	Rank
Difficult to teach	8	83	105	196 (26.4%)	1
Audience (CA helping students think about audience)	12	40	55	107 (14.4%)	2
Democratic classroom (CA distributing power)	4	38	65	107 (14.4%)	3
Transfer of skills to future writing contexts	3	23	39	65 (8.7%)	4
Superficiality of comments	0	24	36	60 (8.1%)	5
Instructor Negative Experience	1	9	37	47 (6.3%)	6
Instructor Positive Experience	0	7	33	40 (5.4%)	7
Grade	1	17	15	33 (4.4%)	8
Instructor Invisibility	2	14	13	29 (3.9%)	9
Deception (Instructor deceiving students)	0	5	11	16 (2.1%)	10

Theme 1: The Difficulty of Teaching Collaborative Assessment

As the most prevalent theme in our study, mentioned in over one-quarter of all utterances, the difficulty of assessing writing—whether one's own or a peer's—must be central to conversations about teaching collaborative assessment. As revealed by the literature and by studies such as Belcher's, collaborative assessment has many benefits. And yet, it is also very hard to teach, and instructors should be aware of that and should be encouraged to discuss the challenges it poses in the classroom without feeling that they have failed. Our participants identified several specific sites of challenge: the difficulty for students to take on another person's perspective, the over-whelming nature of the material generated by collaborative assessment, its interconnectedness with other portions of the course, and ambiguity about the instructor's role.

In one of the focus groups, Carla articulated a difficulty students often face when receiving peer feedback: "And you have to put yourself now in that person's [the peer's] perspective, kind of outside, and try to understand what they don't understand." Ann agreed, noting that students sometimes find it harder to respond to a good peer review than to produce one: finding a problem is the easy part, but then the writer must ask, "'how do I revise, if I just found out that my paragraphs just don't make sense, how do I actually make it operational?'" The challenge of getting students to respond effec-tively to feedback is often equally present when students receive instructor feedback, and having students consider multiple readers—the instructor, the peer, and the self, at minimum—we hope prompts student writers to develop broader perspectives on the quality and presentation of their own arguments.

These multiple perspectives were, as ITC Fiona said, both "great" and "overwhelming;" they complicated the writing process even as they enriched it. The only way to resolve the complexities introduced by one round of self-assessment or peer review seemed to be another round of self-assessment and peer review, ad infinitum. "But," Ann said, "I'm not advocating a third synthesis of each paper. And the second peer review. And having peers read everything." To which Carla responded, "But ideally, that's what needs to happens." Ann and Danielle agreed; to teach collaborative assessment well seemed to require teaching it forever.

And it also seemed to require teaching peer review and self-assessment constantly and integrating it into every part of a course. As Carla said, peer review involves "all of those things that have to do with what we think of as reasoning and writing." To which Ann replied, "Gosh, and we throw it in in, like, week two or three." The conversation went on to consider whether

peer review should be taught only later in the semester, with instructors coming to the consensus that although peer review may call upon more skills than students have early in the semester, it is also essential in helping them build those skills.

Despite this commitment to collaborative assessment, though, instructors sometimes faced anxiety in defining their own role, as Fiona articulated: "is it [the instructor's role] just to facilitate the comments that come from the writer him or herself and the peer reviewer, or actually serve as an arbiter of who's right and who's wrong?" This challenge is one of the instructor not only defining her own role, but also maintaining a careful balance where student input on their own or each others' writing is respected but also "corrected" as such corrections help students improve writing.

THEME 2: ATTENTION TO AUDIENCE

The most frequently mentioned positive characterization of collaborative assessment, unsurprisingly, celebrated its ability to help students engage with audiences, real and imagined, in their writing. In thinking about audience, one instructor cited Linda Flower's work on moving from writer-based to reader-based prose, a philosophy consonant with that of the program director, who recommended an approach where reader-based prose could be achieved through peer review, self-assessment and instructor feedback all working together to create a complex sense of audience for students. Multiple perspectives, the program director said, "help them see that there are different minds out there, and get to the heart of an important communication principle, which is that each mind is unique, and that our goal as a writer is to do our best to communicate as clearly as possible our text to whatever intended audience we might have."

THEME 3: DEMOCRATIC CLASSROOM

Our participants were attracted to using collaborative assessment to build a democratic classroom, but also saw in it some inherent tensions. For example, in explaining the potential of collaborative assessment to empower students in the classroom, Carla referred to a teaching philosophy she had recently composed: "…writing about how my students always had more interesting things to say than I do, in every class period, and how I think that's the goal of this kind of community that you create, with a student-centered work, that you [the instructor] would start to become less and less the voice, and how there are all these other voices that are equally valid." A confident instructor might be comfortable with admitting that students provide feedback superior to the instructor's, but this position might be dif-

ficult for a newer instructor whose authority still feels tenuous. And creating the kind of community Carla espouses, which means deconstructing the hierarchy students expect, is what she sees as "the hardest part of teaching peer review." Danielle agreed with Carla's assessment of both the difficulty and importance of getting students beyond a hierarchical model of writing in which only the instructor's assessment is valued, characterizing the process of getting students "dependent on their own instincts in terms of giving and receiving feedback" as "weaning" students from the instructor. Through this move, students who have completed the class "can still be reflective about their own writing, which is what peer review is supposed to help them do." Although this connection of the student-centered, democratic classroom to the transfer of writing skills into future contexts is clearly discussed as an ideal of collaborative assessment, some anxieties over this approach lingered with instructors, as seen when they mentioned instructor effacement and invisibility.

Theme 4: Transfer of Skills

Collaborative assessment's transferability as a skill that would be useful in other contexts and future writing was mentioned in almost 10% of all utterances, not only as an ideal, but through a variety of examples that might be helpful to other WPAs in training instructors. Helen, one of the ITCs, recounted a successful experience in which a former student from her first-year writing class had asked for feedback on a personal statement for medical school: "And he, at a certain point, without any comment from me, he had sent me his first draft, and he gave me a self-assessment. I was like, 'it works, I did it, oh my gosh!'" Danielle, an instructor, reported that requiring formal self-assessment from her students had transferred into her own writing practice, explaining that she now writes a little self-assessment statement to her advisor every time she submits portions of her dissertation for feedback.

The potential of self-assessment to transfer to contexts outside the classroom was more often mentioned than that of peer review, and two participants specifically mentioned that students were less likely to participate in peer review after the class was over. This view is at odds with the finding in both Brammer and Rees and in our student focus groups that students report that they do participate in voluntary out-of-classroom peer review.

Theme 5: Superficiality of Comments

The concern that students make only superficial comments on peer reviews and self-assessments came up so often we separated it from the broader issue

of the difficulty of teaching collaborative assessment, although the two are clearly related. Carla and Danielle particularly worried about the stronger students in their classes, using their own experiences as strong undergraduate writers who were frustrated by superficial peer feedback in explaining that "the better writers don't necessarily get the depth and width they need. They know they'll get it from you, which is why they wait for it" (Danielle). Our participants connected the concern of superficial comments to the larger skill of critical reading, noting that responding to writing requires students to read critically, and might even help them develop that skill.

It seems to us that faculty development workshops with concrete examples of questions that lead students to engage more deeply with the writing they are reviewing—whether their own, a peer's, or a published author's— would be useful in providing instructors tools to combat the challenge of superficial comments. We also wondered if writers were expecting too much direction from their peers. Perhaps instructors were not fully distinguishing the goals of peer review from the goals of instructor feedback and self-assessment. Perhaps the "depth and width" students hoped for from their peers included specific edits that would solve their problems, whereas simply pointing out certain problems might have been a more reasonable expectation.

Theme 6: The Grade

Although we did not ask about grades directly, they were mentioned 32 times by our participants, in a variety of keys. Our participants worried that the importance of the grade had the potential to undermine the value students placed on collaborative assessment, since students would pay more attention to instructor feedback than to their own or their peers' critiques. This problem can be mitigated, some instructors suggested, by grading the collaborative assessments themselves. Although all agreed that such grades should be worth a relatively small percentage of the class grade, discussions about how deeply integrated assessment strategies are with writing development led some instructors who had not previously graded peer reviews and self-assessments—or who had graded them under the rubric of participation—to consider putting a higher numerical value on these activities.

Theme 7: Instructor Effacement

The idea that collaborative assessment allowed an instructor to be "as invisible as possible" (Danielle) in her own classroom came up almost thirty times, and these references were not easily categorized as positive or negative. Members of one focus group expressed agreement at Danielle's

approach on peer review days of effacing herself in favor of creating "a day that's just about them and their writing." Much later in the same focus group, Ann imagined peer review and self-assessment working in an idealized way and asked: "So I mean, who needs an instructor at this point?" For these graduate-student instructors, relatively new to teaching, effacing themselves seemed at once philosophically resonant and perhaps all too easy. After all, they were approaching teaching from near the bottom of the academic hierarchy, and they may not have felt they had much power and authority which they could share with students.

Theme 8: Instructor Deception

In 2% of utterances, instructors and ITCs admitted that they fear they are deceiving students; this percentage is small, to be sure, but even sixteen mentions of such a delicate matter seem worth exploring. In explaining the principle that all readers are valid in a model of teaching writing that embraces peer review and self-assessment alongside instructor feedback, Gretchen expressed a concern about the potential clash between principles and realities: "I admit that I'm deceiving them. I say, I'm just your reader, but I'm in essence ultimately giving them a grade, so I know that this is difficult to balance." A similar concern came up in one of the focus groups when instructors discussed the ways in which they used student self-assessments as "almost like evaluations all year long." Danielle said "I have to say, it's almost a little selfish as I think about it. But the self-assessments I've had them do so far, I think, are more useful for me necessarily than they are for them…I don't know what they're getting out of it!" It may seem clear to administrators that students actually "get a lot out of it" when instructors closely monitor their progress and respond accordingly. However, to Danielle, this benefit seemed indirect, and thus, requiring self-assessments does not seem truly student-centered; as a result, she admitted, she doesn't always require this practice despite the program mandate to do so. Instructor concerns about "deception" and "selfishness" suggest that their resistance does not merely come from an unwillingness to engage in difficult practices; it grows out of a well-reasoned and considered concern about the trade-offs inherent in creating a collaborative classroom.

Theme 9: Instructor Experiences with Collaborative Assessment

Our graduate-student instructors knew the collaborative classroom from both sides, and they often referred to their own experiences as students. Participants mentioned positive experiences, especially in considering recent experiences of tough but supportive dissertation groups and the use

of self-assessment to communicate more effectively with advisors. In thinking about their undergraduate experiences, though, they focused largely on the negative, and they used quite strong language in doing so. Ann, for example, characterized her undergraduate experiences as "demoralizing" and "traumatic." Carla, in agreement, described undergraduate writing classes in which peer feedback was "either completely useless or incredibly hurtful," saying that she was left feeling that "I'm never going to let anyone see my work ever again as long as I live." Even now, as she neared the end of her doctoral program, Carla said: "I'm just absolutely deathly afraid of anyone reading my work," adding, "except my adviser." For Carla, processing these personal experiences was important as a teacher, since these allowed her to monitor her student reactions. As she said, "I don't want my students to be leaving my class and think they never want anybody seeing their work again. That's absolutely the worst possible scenario."

Our participants also described negative experiences with self-assessment. Ann said she doesn't do self-assessment as a graduate student, "unless you consider harsh, brutal, self-criticism to be self-assessment." Her colleagues did. For Danielle, who was an undergraduate education major, formal self-assessment was a common assignment, and her recollection of the experience was blunt: "I hated writing them as a student, so as a professor, I feel that it's just mean." This observation led to a discussion of resistance summarized by Carla: "Yet even if you try to sell it [self-assessment], it comes through—all the resistance, it comes through."

The resistance to peer review and self-assessment instructors recalled from their undergraduate days was based in different challenges. They tended to see self-assessment as tedious or boring, but characterized peer review as carrying the potential of harm and even "violation" (Ann). Although the two practices have deep philosophical links, such different reactions emphasize the need to also provide instructors with tools to discuss them separately. Our participants' often negative undergraduate reactions to collaborative assessment were mitigated by more positive experiences as graduate students and by seeing both peer review and self-assessment work in the classes they were teaching. It seems likely that discussing such reactions with other instructors—and perhaps even with first-year writing students—would be beneficial in helping instructors move collaborative assessment into their comfort zone.

Conclusion

In analyzing our instructor focus groups, we find that instructors, through their own collaborative self-assessment, can productively revise their atti-

tudes towards collaborative self-assessment by recognizing how those attitudes are rooted in their own experiences and prejudgments. We also find that instructors' complex reactions to collaborative assessment—a continuing tension between embracing and resisting the approach—are founded in thoughtful and principled self-assessment and peer review which should be heard out by administrators.

And the communication must be two-way. It is important that WPAs, where possible, share local assessments with their instructors. On a more general level, articles about the theory and practice of collaborative assessment in pedagogy classes might be productively accompanied by studies of student attitudes. For example, Brammer and Rees' study suggests that student attitudes tend toward the mixed rather than the negative. They find, after all, that despite complaints, only 7.3% of their student participants "preferred not to participate in peer review" (77). This correlates with our more anecdotal findings through student focus groups, where they characterized collaborative assessment practices in a number of ways, ranging from "boring" to "very helpful," and where they reported often engaging in informal peer review by asking friends and roommates for feedback on papers.

Rather than pure dislike, we found in instructors true ambivalence: not a lukewarm acceptance or an indifference to these practices, but strong attraction coexisting with strong aversion. On one hand, instructors were drawn to collaborative assessment because it provided a productive context for students to address issues of audience, it promised to shift from them the burden of evaluative power and create a less hierarchical classroom, and they believed it to be a transferable skill that would help students in future writing. On the other hand, they doubted collaborative assessment because it was inherently difficult to teach, it threatened to erode their necessary authority in the classroom, and it concealed their real power rather than honestly distributing some of it throughout the classroom. Instructor attitudes were also heavily inflected by memories of their own often negative experiences with collaborative assessment as undergraduates. Overall, their ambivalence about peer review and self-assessment reflected a sober and realistic view of the risks of collaborative assessment from their perspective at the margins of academia.

For example, despite the program's solid philosophical basis for integrating peer review and self-assessment, perhaps instructors are prudential in separating these practices as they reflect on their teaching experiences; perhaps they have found that the two practices pose different problems, and WPAs should provide instructor training that allows for conceptually distinguishing them instead of (or in addition to) collapsing them. In order to

model rhetorical understandings of writing as communication from writer to reader, programs and instructors should provisionally define the roles of writer and reader. Peer reviewers, as readers, can be told that they are not responsible for "fixing" or reconceptualizing the paper, but for telling other writers what they find clear and persuasive and what they do not; the self-assessors, as writers, can be told that they remain "in charge" of the paper and are not responsible for addressing every whim of every reader.

We say "can be told" because models of the reader-writer relationship are many and various; therefore, writing programs should neither rigidly define peer review and self-assessment for everyone, nor allow these terms to remain undefined or hazily defined within each classroom. Writing programs should recognize that instructors—and particularly graduate-student instructors, who may still be negotiating with their committees over ownership of their own writing—may have their own anxieties and misgivings about sharing their own work or explicitly evaluating it for themselves, and may therefore have difficulty asking students to share or self-evaluate without carefully delimiting those activities to create protective boundaries. And other instructors may passionately believe in intense, almost unbounded collaboration between readers and writers. Therefore, we recommend that programs ask instructors to define and delimit the responsibilities of peer reviewers and self-assessors collaboratively within broad parameters informed by the literature (and perhaps using exercises similar to the focus group conversations we used in our study) and that programs also help instructors more specifically define those responsibilities for their own individual pedagogies and courses.

We argue that instructors concerned about possible negative reactions from students should reconsider whether these concerns stem from their own ambivalence about peer review and self-assessment, and that those training new instructors should actively engage with such ambivalence, recognizing its validity without abandoning commitment to the ideals of collaborative assessment. While our graduate-student instructors were ambivalent about teaching collaborative assessment in first-year writing courses, they showed confidence in the value of the conversation they were having, which was essentially a form of collaborative assessment of their own pedagogical practices. For us, the focus groups demonstrated the need for instructors to work together collaboratively and supportively to examine their own experiences and attitudes as writers—particularly in terms of collaborative assessment—and the ways in which these shape their emerging identities as instructors.

Notes

1. Some utterances were counted under multiple themes, while others mentioned none of these themes. The percentages are calculated by the number of utterances mentioning the theme over the total number of utterances (743).

2. The questions on this and other instruments in the appendices have been edited slightly to remove the name of the university and specific names and numbers of courses.

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APPENDIX 1. RELEVANT PORTION OF STUDENT SURVEY[2]

This survey was an extensive assessment tool comparing two versions of a first-year writing seminar. For more detail about its results, please see Bedore and Rossen-Krill. The relevant portions of the survey asked students to compare several skills addressed in the course. N=75

1. How successfully did your writing class focus on satisfying your needs regarding the following skills:

	NOT AT ALL				SUCCESSFULLY
Reading critically	1	2	3	4	5
Thinking creatively	1	2	3	4	5
Developing a topic	1	2	3	4	5
Formulating a thesis	1	2	3	4	5
Composing an argument	1	2	3	4	5
Engaging counterargument	1	2	3	4	5
Organizing ideas	1	2	3	4	5
Drafting	1	2	3	4	5
Peer reviewing	1	2	3	4	5
Assessing and improving your own work	1	2	3	4	5
Revising	1	2	3	4	5
Editing for correctness and style	1	2	3	4	5
Writing to audience	1	2	3	4	5
Researching	1	2	3	4	5
Using sources effectively	1	2	3	4	5

2. How useful were skills developed in your writing class to writing assignments in future classes? (skills listed as above)

Appendix 2. Relevant Portion of Instructor Survey

All instructors who had taught the first-year writing course during the semesters assessed by the student survey were given the following survey electronically and on paper. Appropriate spaces were provided for participants to fill in responses. N=19 [several questions collecting demographic data are removed]

1. Thinking back to your most recent first-year writing teaching experience, which skills do students display most strongly when they enter your class?

2. What are the skills they need most work on when they enter your class?

3. Rate your ability to teach the following skills: (skills listed as above)

4. How helpful do you think your class will be to your students in the future?

    NOT AT ALL   1   2   3   4   5   VERY HELPFUL

5. Where do you expect students to use the writing skills developed in the first-year writing class? Please circle as many as applicable.

A. In courses

B. In future research projects (including senior thesis)

C. In applications (ie. for internships, graduate or medical school, scholarships, etc.)

D. In their professions

E. I don't know

6. In your opinion, how useful will skills developed in the first-year writing class be to your students' future writing? (skills listed as above)

7. Do any of the skills listed in question 6 seem unnecessary to a college writing class? Please explain.

8. Are any skills that you focus(ed) on in your class missing from this list?

9. Please describe one cycle of a paper process in your class, indicating the timing of self-assessment, peer review, and instructor feedback.

10. If you use peer review, what is its purpose in your course?

11. If you use self-assessment, what is its purpose in your course?

12. Does self-assessment factor into your grading?   Yes   No
    Please explain.

13. Does peer review factor into your grading?   Yes   No
    Please explain.

14. What kind(s) of strategies, if any, do you use to teach peer review?

15. What kind(s) of strategies, if any, do you use to teach self-assessment?

APPENDIX 3: INSTRUCTOR FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. How do you define peer review?

[If not answered above, prompt:] Do you think of peer review as a goal? Skill? Assignment? Strategy?

2. How do you define self-assessment?

[If not answered above, prompt:] Do you think of self-assessment as a goal? Skill? Assignment? Strategy?

3. What are your own experiences as a writer with peer review and self-assessment?

[If not answered above, prompt]: Have you been explicitly asked to engage in peer review and self-assessment? In what context(s)?

[also prompt]: To what extent, as a writer, do you seek peer review from other writers?

4. We'd like to get your response to a number of quotations from students about peer review and self-assessment and their relationship to instructor feedback. Please take a look at the handout and share your opinions of these quotations based on your own experiences as instructors.

5. Student Quotations Handout. This included seven quotations about peer review, self-assessment, and the relationship between the two from recent student focus groups. If interested in this handout, please contact the authors, who would be happy to share it.

APPENDIX 4: INSTRUCTOR TRAINING
COORDINATOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How do you define peer review?
    1a. [If not answered above, prompt:] Do you think of peer review as a goal? Skill? Assignment? Strategy?
2. How do you define self-assessment?

    2a. [If not answered above, prompt:] Do you think of self-assessment as a goal? Skill? Assignment? Strategy?

3. What are some of the different models of peer review used by instructors in the Writing Program? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

4. What are some of the different models of self-assessment used by instructors in the Writing Program? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?

5. What do you see as the relationship between peer review, self-assessment and instructor feedback?

6. In what ways do/did you address peer review and self-assessment in the pedagogy class? In the practicum?

7. How do/did students respond to peer review and self-assessment in the pedagogy class? In the practicum?