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Five Instructional Practices to Optimize Peer Feedback Activities among Adult Learners

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Abstract

There is a significant need for adult learners to improve their writing proficiency within a variety of contexts. Thus, postsecondary instructors require effective research-based writing strategies to support adult learners hone their writing skills. While studies on peer feedback abound, little has been done to date to consider ways in which postsecondary instructors design quality peer feedback activities within their courses. The purpose of this article was to describe five instructional practices that optimize peer feedback activities among adult learners.

Introduction

Whether teaching adult learners in an online, hybrid, or face-to-face environment, peer feedback can be a valuable teaching and learning tool. Peer feedback provides adult learners with an opportunity to check the accuracy of their learning and modify their understandings (Mory, 2004). Although adult learners may be apprehensive about providing their peers with feedback (Wong, 2016), postsecondary instructors can implement effective instructional practices that support impactful peer feedback experiences. For this article, we combined available literature and our own postsecondary teaching experiences to identify and describe five instructional practices that optimize the use of peer feedback activities among adult learners. These instructional practices are: (1) create a supportive writing community; (2) chunk

writing tasks into shortened assignments; (3) provide mentor texts; (4) offer timely and consistent peer feedback; and (5) focus on content first and conventions later.

Create a Supportive Writing Community

Writing is a social act that combines an individual's historical knowledge, past writing experiences, personal experiences, and social values (Cremin & Myhill, 2012). Among adult learners, this social act can evoke feelings of fear and apprehension during writing, particularly when they undertake a form of writing with which they are unfamiliar or unskilled (Pantelides, 2012). In the early stages of writing, the creation of new types of texts is often messy, consisting of a mixture of opinions, undeveloped thoughts, and unstructured texts (Rodriguez, 2014). In order for adult learners to be willing to share their writing with peers, they must be part of a supportive writing community. Thus, postsecondary instructors must work to establish supportive writing communities among adult learners enrolled in their classes. As noted among andragogical adult learning principles, adult learners must believe that writing activities are purposeful, enhance the mastery of course content, and improve their communication skills (Knowles, 1984; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012).

Postsecondary instructors establish a supportive writing community among adult learners by fostering the notion that writing is important (Elbow, 1990). Postsecondary instructors must also exhibit teaching practices among adult learners to convey that their ideas expressed through writing are significant, and as writers, they maintain control over their learning (Applebee, 1996). A supportive writing community values the voice of each member and transforms the classroom dynamic from instructor-lead to instructor-guided. In such a classroom environment, postsecondary instructors empower adult learners to actively participate in the feedback process with peers, which with guidance, can be deemed as extremely valuable (Wong, 2016).

Once a supportive writing community has been established, postsecondary instructors must first inform adult learners of the primary purpose for peer feedback activities and how they will be utilized. We highly recommend communicating clear expectations and establishing routine procedures for peer feedback activities. For

example, consider setting a predictable schedule that provides adult learners with time to engage in a cycle of write, review, and revise (see Figure 1).

During the writing phase, adult learners compose a writing draft for a specific topic. During the review phase, adult learners exchange and review each other's writing drafts and provide one another with helpful feedback. During the revise phase, adult learners use the feedback provided by a peer to create a revised writing draft. The phases of this cycle may be repeated multiple times in order to provide adult learners with frequent opportunities to improve their writing (Sommers, 1980).

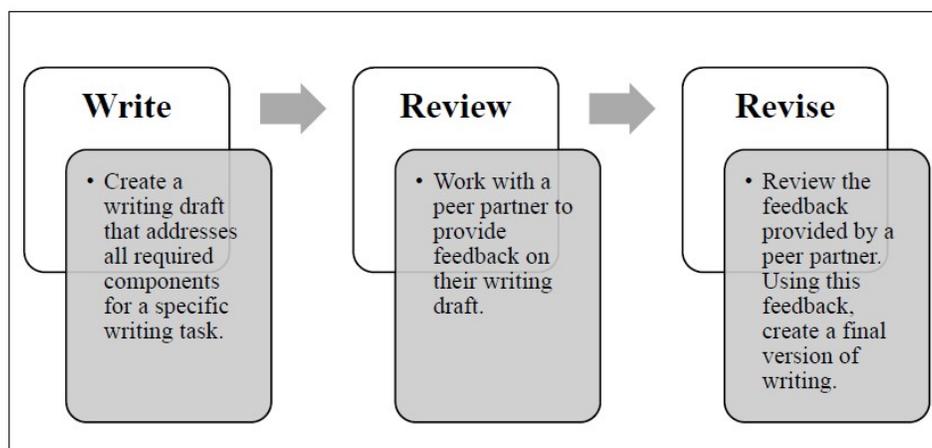


Figure 1. Adult learners must engage in a cycle of write, review, and revise with writing tasks.

Completing peer feedback activities in a timely manner is critical in a supportive writing community because feedback becomes useless when the writer has little or no time to consider and use it to guide revisions of their writing. Postsecondary instructors must also emphasize expected behaviors during peer feedback activities, particularly regarding the language used during peer feedback activities. According to Pajares (2003), peer feedback language has a direct impact on a writer's sense of self-efficacy, which in turn, affects their writing motivation and skills. Therefore, peer feedback language must be goal-oriented (Parajes, 2003) and free from criticisms (Bomer, 2010). We have provided examples, as well as non-examples, of desired peer feedback language in Figure 2.

Finally, we highly recommend that postsecondary instructors provide adult learners with a peer review checklist to use while reviewing the writing of peers. Peer review checklists provide adult learners with a tool that promotes the provision of feedback focused on enhancing the quality of writing and limits feedback focused solely on surface-level corrections, such as issues with grammar and spelling (Eli

Review, n.d.). We have provided an example of a peer review checklist as Appendix A. We also encourage postsecondary instructors to ensure every adult learner is a contributing member within a supportive writing community by assigning grades for peer feedback activities. Grades should be performance-based and represent the quality of peer feedback that was provided.

Non-Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporating math and science is a great idea, and one that teachers that teach all subjects have to do. • I do feel this would be well-suited in the body of a larger study. It is a good read, and I would like to see more like the second them than the first. Good job overall. • You did a good job putting the two paragraphs together. I can tell that you proved that they had credibility. Good try.
Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like how you are giving the reader background information about how literacy develops in early childhood. I noticed that you talked about literacy developing in four basic areas, but you only listed three. I think I know the one you are missing in that sentence. I would recommend changing your sequence to, “Literacy develops in learning and knowing these four basic areas of language: listening, speaking, writing, and reading.” • I noticed how you introduced the different viewpoints of parental involvement and the various types of parental involvement. In the first paragraph, you introduced the following paragraphs by writing, “. . . from teachers, students, and parents.” However, in the next three paragraphs the order is teachers, parents, and then students. I would recommend making the order of the introductory sentence and the following paragraphs the same, by either rearranging paragraphs 3 and 4 or by changing the sentence to read “. . . from teachers, parents, and students.”

Figure 2. Examples and non-examples of desired peer feedback language.

Chunk Writing Tasks into Shortened Assignments

While planning the instructional design of a course, postsecondary instructors must consider how to design writing tasks in a way that scaffolds the success of adult learners with the desired final product. Some writing tasks may be informal, low-stakes writing tasks that can be completed in a short period of time. These types of writing tasks help adult learners process information at a faster pace and provide postsecondary instructors with multiple opportunities to correct any misunderstandings early on (Zeiser, 1999). For example, adult learners may explore their initial thoughts about the topic under study, ponder about a discussion topic, or summarize what they learned through low-stakes writing tasks.

Some writing tasks, however, require more extensive engagement from adult learners. With extended writing tasks, we encourage postsecondary instructors to subdivide the final writing product into several shortened writing tasks. With each shortened assignment, adult learners participate in a cycle of write, review, and revise, thereby providing a significant amount of scaffolding to promote their success with the final writing product. In Figure 3, we have provided an example of how we chunked an extended writing task in a graduate-level course entitled Educational Research.

Week	Chunked Writing Tasks	
Week 1	<u>Write:</u> Create a writing draft that: a) Clearly states the education problem. b) Provides context for the education problem in an objective manner. c) Establishes the importance of the education problem.	
Week 2	<u>Review:</u> Work with a peer partner to provide feedback.	<u>Revise:</u> Review the feedback provided by a peer partner. Using this feedback, create a final version of writing.
Week 3	<u>Write:</u> Create a writing draft that: a) Provides a balanced and appropriately comprehensive review of relevant literature. b) Emphasizes primary sources. c) Attends to both historical precedent and more recent work.	
Week 4	<u>Review:</u> Work with a peer partner to provide feedback.	<u>Revise:</u> Review the feedback provided by a peer partner. Using this feedback, create a final version of writing.
Week 5	<u>Write:</u> Create a writing draft that: a) Proposes information about participants. b) Proposes information about procedures. c) Proposes information about data collection tools.	
Week 6	<u>Review:</u> Work with a peer partner to provide feedback.	<u>Revise:</u> Review the feedback provided by a peer partner. Using this feedback, create a final version of writing.

Figure 3. Example of a chunked extended writing task.

In this course, the culminating assignment is a research proposal that establishes context and significance for a specific education problem, provides a thorough review of related literature, and outlines an appropriate research methodology with which to explore the education problem. By chunking this large writing task into smaller writing tasks, we create a safe space for adult learners to take writing risks and grapple with new forms of writing. Furthermore, we have anecdotally noted a reduced level of writing anxiety among less confident writers.

Provide Mentor Texts

Mentor texts are model texts that provide adult learners with ideas or examples of writing components (Marchetti & O'Dell, 2015). Mentor texts may be an entire text that focuses on broad concepts, such as how ideas are structured. Mentor texts may also be smaller excerpts of text that illustrate a narrower concept, such as how to structure a paragraph or sentence. Mentor texts are especially beneficial to adult learners who are attempting a new form of writing or completing a writing task for which they feel unskilled.

Postsecondary instructors may locate mentor texts from published works available in their professional field, credible and valid resources on the Internet, or secure permission from a previous or current student who produced exemplary writing. In some cases, postsecondary instructors may choose to create an unpublished work or modify an existing text to serve as a mentor text that demonstrates a specific example. We strongly recommend that postsecondary instructors provide adult learners with mentor texts that contain examples of helpful comments during peer feedback activities. In Appendix B, we have provided an example of a mentor text we created to support our adult learners during a peer feedback activity. This instructor-created mentor text demonstrated examples of helpful feedback provided on a writing draft that established context and significance with a self-selected education problem.

Offer Timely and Consistent Peer Feedback

Mory (2004) stated that in order to be most effective, feedback must be timely and consistent. It is difficult for adult learners to be successful and improve their writing when they do not receive timely and consistent feedback. Thus, postsecondary instructors must avoid assigning extended writing tasks that are at due at the end of a semester and provide adult learners with no feedback prior to submission. As described previously, we encourage postsecondary instructors to subdivide extended writing tasks into several shortened assignments and provide adult learners with well-timed peer feedback for each writing task. By doing so, adult learners have access to more frequent opportunities to receive feedback and make use of all feedback provided to improve future writing performance (Gielen, Peeters, Dochy, Onghena, & Katrien, 2009).

Each time adult learners in our courses complete a peer feedback activity, we facilitate small group or whole group debriefing sessions. During a debriefing session, we may share examples of helpful and non-helpful peer feedback, clarify misunderstandings, or determine whether any explicit instruction needs to take place. Including debriefing sessions as part of peer feedback activities also provides us with rich opportunities to self-evaluate our own teaching practices and identify ways in which we may improve upon them.

Focus on Content First and Conventions Later

Before writing can be an effective way to communicate learning and present new ideas, adult learners must have a focus on writing. Regardless of how writers move from a big idea to a more focused topic (Smith & Swain, 2017), peer feedback plays a vital role in developing and clarifying the ideas that support the central message of the text. Sharing writing drafts during peer feedback activities provides adult learners with the opportunity to have another pair of eyes evaluate the clarity of their underlying message. During initial peer feedback activities, adult learners should analyze the writings of their peers strictly for content and limit the focus of their feedback towards content improvement.

Once the content in a writing draft has been revised to a point where the reader walks away with a clear understanding of the intended message, adult learners can then focus subsequent reviews to address improvement with writing conventions. Writing conventions include appropriate grammar usage, writing mechanics, and style preferences. When postsecondary instructors design peer feedback activities to focus on content first and conventions later, adult learners are strengthened as writers and develop the writing practices needed to be competent and effective writers (National Research Council, 2012).

Conclusion

Training adult learners to engage with peer feedback activities successfully takes a great deal of time and practice. In this article, we described five instructional practices to optimize peer feedback activities for use among adult learners. These instructional practices may be embedded into the instructional design of courses delivered in

online, hybrid, or face-to-face formats. While designing peer feedback activities, postsecondary instructors should first consider the end writing goal and consider the following questions: What do I want my adult learners to write? What content do I want my adult learners to learn through this writing experience? What skills do my adult learners need to develop throughout this writing experience?

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Appendix A: Example of a Peer Review Checklist

✓	Writing Aspect	Guiding Questions
	Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there a synthesis of ideas supported with valid literature throughout the writing draft? • Are all ideas fully explained? • Is the writing clear and concise?
	Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Throughout the writing draft, are there smooth transitions from one heading to the next? • Within each heading, are there smooth transitions from one idea to the next?
	Stylistics, Grammar, & Mechanics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are there issues with APA stylistics? (e.g., in-text citations, entries in the reference list) • Are there errors with grammar? (e.g., verb tense, subject-verb agreement, pronoun references, misplaced or dangling modifiers, adverb use, relative pronoun use, subordinate conjunction use, parallel construction) • Are there errors with mechanics? (e.g., punctuation, spelling, capitalization, italics, abbreviations, numbers)

Appendix B: Example of an Instructor-Created Mentor Text

Technology is everywhere. We are dependent on it. Within technology there are constant new developments that make technology ever-changing. Previous research suggests that when used effectively, it can enable ways of teaching that are much better matched to how children learn, as opposed to the resources of traditional classrooms (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2011; Morgan, 2014; Poole & Evans, 2009; Rochelle, Pea, Oadley, Gordin, & Means, 2001).

Technology allows for students to access mathematical concepts more often, build off of background knowledge, has the ability to “pre-teach” concepts of a lesson to children, as well as give review to previous learned concepts, and technology can add rigor to your curriculum.

The topic of this study is to decipher if teachers truly believe that technology is imperative in the elementary mathematical classroom. Since technology is a big part of human life, this study is to see what teachers are on board with technology being a staple in the classroom, and what teachers are hesitant to jump on board.

Commented [A1]: In this type of writing, the APA manual discourages use of first- and second-person unless you are referring to yourself.

Commented [A2]: According to the APA manual, use past tense when referring to what previous research stated.

Commented [A3]: This is a great point! Specifically, do you mean elementary-aged children? Middle school children? High school children? All of the above? This may be a great place to focus on scope of your proposed study.

Commented [A4]: In order to present the context of your educational problem and establish its significance in a clear and objective manner, you might consider revising the ideas in this paragraph using the following framework:

Paragraph 2: Synthesize and cite literature that described the use of technology in mathematics instruction.

Paragraph 3: Synthesize and cite literature that described affordances and hindrances of the use of technology in mathematics. Also, are you focusing on a specific grade-level? If so, be sure you only use literature that is relevant to this age group.

Commented [A5]: Since this is the topic of your study, be sure you incorporate literature that addresses teacher perceptions and perspectives regarding technology use in mathematics in the preceding paragraphs. You might even consider adding this as a 4th paragraph.