ABSTRACT

Christine Y. Fitzpatrick

PEER REVIEW IN AN ONLINE TECHNICAL WRITING COURSE

Peer review of writing is a vital instructional activity in college writing classes and is particularly important in technical and scientific communication. With the growth of online writing instruction, more needs to be known about effective practices for structuring and conducting electronic peer review. Research presents mixed results and offers little concrete guidance for course developers and instructors. This study is a mixed-methods, multi-case study of peer review activities in several sections of a technical writing course taught online at an urban research university. Research questions included (1) What are the strategies for accomplishing peer review in the online course? (2) To what extent and how do students revise their peer-reviewed documents between review draft to final copy? To what extent do their documents improve? (3) How does peer review in the online class operate for reviewers? and (4) Do student attitudes toward peer review become more positive as a result of participation in the online course?

Methodologies included direct observation of 12 student volunteers in multiple online sections, review of course artifacts, interviews with five students, and review and evaluation by independent raters of 15 sets of pre-review drafts and final documents. The peer review process observed was a highly-structured, systematic process incorporating instructor-provided tools and the students’ word processors. Document evaluation among three independent raters revealed 10 of 15 documents were revised significantly and improved following peer review. The greatest areas of improvement were addition of
details or support for the writer’s purpose, format, and audience awareness. Analysis of Patterns in Time (APT) was used to reveal events that were associated with writing improvement among this small sample. This analysis revealed that improved documents were more likely to be produced by students who also wrote at work and were more likely to emanate from groups that provided two peer reviews as stipulated by the course design. A peer response worksheet drove the process of review for reviewers, and also appeared to be helpful for self-evaluation. Students reported that peer review within the online class was “more honest” than face-to-face review and was useful for identifying errors and omissions in documents.