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ELECTRONIC PEER REVIEW IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

Samantha A. Hilton
Northern Michigan University

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ELECTRONIC PEER REVIEW IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

By

Samantha A. Hilton

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Samantha A. Hilton is recommended for approval by the student's thesis committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

Committee Chair: Dr. Elizabeth Monske Date

First Reader: Dr. Kia Richmond Date

Department Head: Dr. Raymond Ventre Date

Dean of Graduate Studies: Dr. Cynthia Prosen Date

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NAME: Samantha A. Hilton

DATE OF BIRTH: November 14, 1977

ABSTRACT

ELECTRONIC PEEER REVIEW IN FIRST-YEAR COMPOSITION

By

Samantha A. Hilton

This study explores technology's implications on first-year composition student writing through the examination of one element of the writing process: peer review, the process in which students submit drafts to be read and examined by their peers. Along with a discussion of the benefits, limitations, nuances, and practicalities of electronic peer review, this thesis evaluates the results from a pilot study that investigates how students perceive the activity of electronic peer review.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Tim, and my daughter, Annabel. Without their support and distraction, I would have never finished.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Dr. Elizabeth Monske for the insight and encouragement she breathed into the project—in the office, on the phone, and over coffee on Saturday mornings—and Dr. Kia Jane Richmond whose enthusiasm for teaching is inspiring.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Writing is a technologically displaced form of conversation.”

(Bruffee, *Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’* 1984, p. 641)

It has been established that the human art of writing is not an independent act but a collaborative endeavor (Bleich 43-61; Bruffee 635-52; Duin 315-23; Harris 369-83). People are social beings and while they may write privately at times, they write to learn, to explain, to reason, to discuss, and just to talk. Bruffee’s above quotation explains that the conversation may not be immediate, but it will eventually be shared. Computer technologies have shaped the act of writing and collaboration and further demonstrate that writing is, in fact, an exchange. The 21st century first-year composition classroom provides a clear example of this contemporary conversation. Through the examination of one element of the writing process, peer review—the process in which students submit drafts to be read and examined by their peers—this thesis will explore the 21st century first-year composition classroom. The literature review opens with a discussion of collaborative pedagogy, technology and writing, and a definition of electronic peer review. The rest of the chapter explores the benefits, challenges, and best practices of electronic peer review.

Collaborative Pedagogy & Peer Review

Collaborative pedagogy has come a long way since 1984 when Bruffee published his essay, *Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind.’* He made a passionate plea to literature and writing educators to organize collaboration in the

classroom effectively and efficiently in order to develop young members of civilization. He argued, like Michael Oakeshott, that the difference between human beings and other species is “an ability to participate in unending conversation” (638). Writing, like speaking, is part of the human conversation. Thus, it’s the role of educators to foster students’ voices as members of humankind.

Bruffee explains that through techniques like peer review (he called it peer criticism), where students share written drafts to be read and examined by their peers, educators can help their students develop and participate in the human conversation. It’s not just the practice of conversation that Bruffee argues is beneficial for students, but student writing actually improves “from the activity of helping” (638). Prior to this essay and after, peer review has been well established in the composition classroom. Scholars have found that peer review helps develop critical thinking, organization, accuracy, confidence, and a sense of audience for student writers (Gere and Abbott, Berkenkotter, Gebhardt, and Spear qtd. in Harris 371-2).

Traditionally, peer review is practiced in the physical classroom. Instructors organize small group peer review workshops in class, and students discuss face-to-face the strengths and weaknesses of peer writing. Most peer review research discusses the “social interaction that occurs specifically through oral communication” (Breuch 1). But twenty-five years after Bruffee’s appeal to collaborative pedagogy, the way composition instructors incorporate peer review into their first-year courses has changed with the increased use of computer technology, which includes computers, software applications, and course management systems like Microsoft Word and WebCT.

Computers & Writing

In its relatively short history, computer technology has become a ubiquitous part of human communication. It has transformed the way we write. Dennis Baron describes the way computers have changed the way he drafts:

I found that I had become so used to composting virtual prose at the keyboard I could no longer draft anything coherent directly onto a piece of paper. It wasn't so much that I couldn't think of the words, but the physical effort of handwriting, crossing out, revising, cutting and pasting [...] the writing practices I had been engaged in regularly since the age of four, now seemed to overwhelm and constrict me, and I longed for the flexibility of digitized text. (117)

Not only do computers help order the messy process of writing, but as Jay Bolter explains, computers are, in fact, an interconnected element of writing itself. He says, "The very idea of writing, of semiosis, cannot be separated from the materials and techniques with which we write" (239). Bolter states that computer technology "offers a new surface [a writing space] for recording and presenting text together with new techniques for organizing our writing" (10). He defines the changed writing space further by describing the writer's "reflective and reflexive relationship with the written page" (11). He explains that as with any method of writing, notebook paper or clay tablet, it is problematic to distinguish the writer's mind from the writer's space. He notes that this is particularly true with the writing space of the computer screen because how can one tell "where thinking ends and writing begins, where the mind ends and the writing space

begins” (11)? As writing spaces, computer technologies are importantly interrelated to writers, readers, and the act of writing.

Since writing has been established as a collaborative effort, it is crucial to illustrate computer technology’s relationship with collaboration. Rebecca Burnett and David Clark agree that when computer technology is used for collaborative purposes, it can be “a shaper of human interaction” (186). Like Bolter, they argue that technology can “never be neutral” (183). While they do not find that technology creates a new way of collaborating, it transforms the way people work together: “Adding technology to collaboration may not change the end goal (for example, to create a mutually agreed-on document), but it typically has some potentially positive effects” (Burnett and Clark 184). These scholars also make clear that the effects of computer-mediated collaboration can be negative as well as positive. Either way, clearly, computer technology and writers are connected.

Even so, are student writers aware of their relationship with computer technology? Beth Brunk-Chavez and Shawn Miller found in their pilot study that students viewed technology unlike Bolter, Burnett, and Clark. They write, “Overwhelmingly, students approached technology in a positive, naïve way, only pausing to question tools in terms of their functionality, but never their purpose or intention” (Brunk-Chavez and Miller 17). Students did not demonstrate what Stuart Selber calls “Critical Literacy” but rather “Functional Literacy” (25). Brunk-Chavez and Miller’s students did not consider other purposes for the use of technology like alleviating social hierarchies or encouraging analytical thought during collaboration. Their students used computer technology to accomplish tasks; they used computer technology as tools (17).

In other words, they saw themselves as “users of technology,” not “questioners of technology” (Selber 25). Little research has been done to understand if Brunk-Chavez and Miller’s results are typical in the first-year composition classrooms.

Electronic Peer Review

Computers have become integrated into our lives at work and at home; therefore, it makes sense that computer technology should be used to help first-year composition students practice operating in a technological and collaborative environment through the activity of electronic peer review. Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch labels electronic peer review as “virtual peer review” (10). She defines the practice this way: “the activity of using computer technology to exchange and respond to one another’s writing for the purpose of improving writing” (10). Breuch’s definition is similar to earlier definitions of face-to-face peer review because students are still sharing and responding to each other’s writing. It differs in that computer technology is used to facilitate communication between collaborators. Breuch further describes the use of computer technology within electronic peer review in that computers are used these ways:

“(1) to write documents; (2) to exchange written documents electronically, using Internet attachments, networked computers, and word-processing; and (3) to converse with reviewers about those documents, through electronic comments produced either synchronously (real-time) or asynchronously (delayed time).” (11)

During electronic peer review, students receive drafts electronically, they review electronically, and they comment electronically (11). Within Breuch’s definition, the

entire process is conducted through computer technology, and peer reviewers do not meet face-to-face during the activity.

Not all computer-mediated peer review sessions eliminate face-to-face dialogue. In fact, many instructors create hybrid peer review sessions—a combination of what Breuch calls virtual peer review and the more traditional practice of face-to-face peer review. Moreover, Kara Poe Alexander recommends that peer review sessions include written and verbal feedback. She says that authors tend to receive oral feedback differently than textual feedback because the responses are “cumulative and public” (128). She continues to explain that peer responders can more effectively collaborate by verbalizing their responses because students can come to a consensus about the stronger and weaker aspects of projects (128).

While scholars like Breuch and Alexander have helped define electronic peer review as a valuable online or a hybrid (online and face-to-face) pedagogical tool, the research focuses on teacher perspective. Few accounts have studied the perspective of student writers.

Benefits

Scholarship has demonstrated that there are important advantages to this pedagogical practice. Electronic peer review engages students in more writing, develops technical literacy, allows more time to think critically, reduces social cues, and establishes a sense of authenticity to student writing. If we believe that the goal of the first-year composition course is to “help students develop their writing ability” (Harris 353), then an obvious benefit of electronic peer review is that students are able to practice writing more often (Breuch 28). Students are expected to respond and reflect about one

another's writing through textual dialogue. In addition, Nancy Sullivan and Ellen Pratt found that peer response conducted through computers helped ESL students maintain focus:

[Face-to-face peer] discussions were often filled with personal narratives (students focusing on themselves rather than the task at hand) and short interjections of agreement (uh-huh) or repetition...[whereas, online]...responses followed a pattern that consisted of a positive comment about the essay followed by one or more suggestions for revision. (499)

Similarly, Elaine DiGiovanni and Giriya Nagawami's research with ESL students found that electronic peer review supported student concentration. They compared face-to-face peer review to electronic peer review with ESL students and learned that during electronic peer review sessions their subjects "remained on task and focused" (268). Electronic peer review helps eliminate distractions, and allows students to concentrate on the task at hand: written reflection.

Furthermore, if we believe like James Berlin that the first-year composition course is not just "training in a useful technical skill [...but] a way of experiencing the world, a way of ordering and making sense of it," then computer-mediated peer review provides another obvious reward (20). Electronic peer review helps students learn how to navigate computer-mediated communication. Burnett and Clark have established that the workplace is shaped by collaborative technologies, and they have cited a need for instructors to "develop curricular content, pedagogical strategies, and educational experiences that help prepare students for the challenges of a more technologically

sophisticated workplace” (190). Ann Duin too expresses a need to teach students “how to use computer technology as a means to collaborate and to give and receive feedback” to prepare them for the workplace (131). Breuch explains that electronic peer review is an activity that is “an exercise in critical thinking as well as in technological literacy” (3). This activity helps advance writing and thinking, of course, but it also helps students navigate the world by developing a better understanding of computer-mediated conversation. Therefore, if we return to Bruffee’s idea that writing is a public “conversation,” then computer-mediated peer review helps students practice this dialogue in a real-world technological environment.

Research shows that electronic peer review gives student readers more time to read, prepare, and write their responses. Students are not restricted to course time limits. Breuch found that extra time allowed student reviewers to write well-thought out responses (41). Like DiGiovanni and Nagawami found with ESL students, Joseph Walther notes that computer-mediated interactions help native English speakers focus on individual thoughts too: “[U]sers are released from the pressure to meet and the stress of including both task and social issues in limited time intervals typically allowed by [fact-to-face] interaction. Time is frozen and conversation is disentrained when partners ‘meet’ independent of one another” (qtd. in Breuch 40). Electronic peer review can encourage more thoughtful student responses because students are able to work on their own schedule at their own pace.

In addition, Burnett, Clark, and Janet Eldred have noted that virtual environments can reduce social cues that sometimes hinder effective collaboration. Burnett and Clark explain that factors like “regional accents or social attributes such as age and ethnicity”

are lessened in computer-mediated collaboration and therefore more successful (195). Eldred says that peer review (she calls it “peer editing”) is better with the use of computers because “[o]n-line conversations are usually much more forthright than face-to-face encounters; people of equal status and rank in an organization or classroom tend to do away with the niceties and to offer their opinions more readily (241). Furthermore, electronic peer review can *level the playing field*. Duin explains that computer-supported collaborative writing systems “ignore status hierarchies and authority” (143). Computer technology can help students communicate more comfortably and feel less inhibited.

Additionally, electronic peer review offers student writers and readers an authentic writing space. Since reflections are typed, student writers can digitally save and manage peer commentary. Breuch states that “[a]n author’s writing and a reviewer’s feedback are both ‘durable’ when conducted via technology; asynchronous messages and synchronous chats can be saved and transferred intact” (50). Electronic peer review not only helps order the chaos of multiple viewpoints, but it gives student writing (drafts and responses to the drafts) a sense of legitimacy.

While research has demonstrated that electronic peer review encourages students to improve their writing through more practice writing, the activity also expands technical literacy, builds critical thinking, minimizes societal distractions, and creates a sense of authenticity to student writing. Although much has been said about the benefits of electronic peer review, little has been studied from the perspective of the student to understand if they see these same benefits or recognize any advantages to the practice of electronic peer review.

Problematization

Even though there are many advantages to the use of electronic peer review, there are certain problems that need to be addressed. Bruffee's concerns about collaboration pedagogy are applicable to electronic peer review. Bruffee warned his peers about unstructured collaborative pedagogy:

Organizing collaborative learning effectively requires doing more than throwing students together with their peers with little or no guidance or preparation. To do that is merely to perpetuate, perhaps even aggravate, the many possible negative effects of peer group influence: conformity, anti-intellectualism, intimidation, and leveling-down of quality. To avoid these pitfalls and to marshal the powerful educational resource of peer group influence requires us to create and maintain a demanding academic environment that makes collaboration—social engagement in intellectual pursuits—a genuine part of students' educational development. (652)

There are “pitfalls” with the use of computer-mediated peer review as with any collaborative activity (652). Challenges specific to the practice of computer-mediated peer review include: questions of authorship, frustrations with technology, and issues of miscommunication.

Since peer review comments are typed, there can be a fine line between plagiarism and collaboration. In an ideal electronic peer review scenario, student readers are helping their fellow authors improve their writing, but as Breuch warns, “the textual nature of the activity may raise issues of ownership and authorship” (80). Because peer commentary is typed, it can be easily accepted into an author's document and accepted as

the author's own. While Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede say that the question of authorship is a Western construct that is strangely applied to some documents but not others: "essays, poems, letters [...] but not [...] advertisements, contracts, instructions," it is important to recognize the ease in which technology enables students to share their writing can be problematic (72). Furthermore, electronic peer review enables students to use editing tools like Microsoft Word's "track changes" to edit documents while protecting the author's original text. Students have the option of "accepting" all edits, and this option does not encourage critical thinking on the part of the student writer (Breuch 84).

The "frustration factor," a term coined by Breuch, can also negatively affect the outcomes of electronic peer review. Inevitably, technological difficulties arise in a composition course: "inaccessibility, lack of technical support, difficulty finding and using functions, or incompatibility across platforms (98). Even if students do not suffer from the "frustration factor" currently, they may have negative attitudes from previous experiences which can also impact the success of an electronic peer review session (102). Brunk-Chavez and Miller found in their pilot study, *Decentered, Disconnected, and Digitized*, that students' *frustration factors* not only stem from experiences with technology but experiences with collaboration (12-3). One of the instructors who participated in their study says, "Students generally oppose group work, so working with technology will aggravate their anxiety about having to carry all the weight of the work assigned" (Brunk-Chavez and Miller 12). While the study found that many students feel that they can learn from their peers, they expressed anxiety about the collaborative process. Students dislike "the leader/follower dichotomy arrangement in most groups"

because some want to lead and some do not (Brunk-Chavez and Miller 12). Students responded that it was inefficient to work with others because their work was better when they worked independently. They didn't want to have to depend on other students, and some felt that collaborative work was an "uncomfortable activity" (Brunk-Chavez and Miller 12).

Clark and Burnett also claim that angst with writing or technology can limit the effectiveness of electronic peer review. They declare that fear associated with computer technology or writing "might have the effect of silencing [...] and/or harbor anxieties or insecurities about their written discourse due to inadequacies in education, learning disabilities, and so on" (191). *Frustration factors* or negative encounters with technology, collaboration, and writing can agitate a successful electronic peer review session.

Needless to say, while humans are naturally social creatures sometimes group dynamics and the communication process can be complicated. Even if students are well-versed in the social networking aspect of electronic communication, they may not have experience communicating professionally online. In other words, students may know everything there is to know about using Facebook, but they may have no idea how to converse with a peer about their essay during electronic peer review. Burnett and Clark explain some communication challenges that professionals face when collaborating electronically which may help instructors understand issues that students may encounter during an electronic peer review session. They site four cues that collaborators use to interact with each other. These cues are not always present during a computer-mediated collaboration:

- *Vocal cues* including tone, pace, volume, and inflection
- *Backchanneling cues* that lubricate the conversation such as “Uh-huh,” “I see,” “And then?” or “Mm-mmm”
- *Body cues* ranging from head nods to eye gaze, from foot tapping to hand gestures
- *Proximal cues* including how close a person stands or sits and whether the person leans toward or away from other collaborators (190)

Burnett and Clark maintain that “misunderstandings are more likely to occur” without these unspoken aspects of human communication (191). While improved computer and video technologies enable electronic collaborators to “see” each other—for many electronic peer review groups—there is a possibility of miscommunication due to a lack of physical or vocal social cues.

In their pilot study, Brunk-Chavez and Miller discuss an additional form of miscommunication. They say that students tend to blame failures in an online environment on what they cannot control like “the instructor, the technology, or their group members” (Brunk-Chavez and Miller 8-9). Brunk-Chavez and Miller explain that the “traditional classroom excuses come into play” when the dog used to eat their homework, now Microsoft Word didn’t save their final draft (Brunk-Chavez and Miller 9). The researchers continue to say that “these excuses prevent students from examining their own behaviors in the course. Even more important to us, however, is the feeling of disconnection students may experience because of and through the use of technology” (Brunk-Chavez and Miller 9). Thus, according to this pilot study, students can use

technology as a crutch and become disengaged from their learning goals. It seems that Bruffee's conversation can be hindered as well as enhanced by technology.

Plagiarism, frustrations with technology and group work, and issues of miscommunication can impede student learning during electronic peer review, but more work needs to be done to identify what students find particularly disengaging when it comes to electronic peer review; what's more, if they are aware of these *frustration factors* at all.

Nuances & Practicalities

Scholars have agreed upon some recommendations for facilitating electronic peer review. These suggestions maintain that computer technology used should be chosen appropriately and students should be trained as electronic peer reviewers. The list of available collaborative technologies is "dizzying" (Breuch 93). Burnett and Clark affirm that computer technologies that facilitate collaboration need to be "understood when designing courses and curricula" and instructors "need to consider all the options [...] both as content that students investigate and as strategies they learn to use" (172). They recommend four factors when pairing technologies to groups: *group characteristics*, *group agreements*, *task characteristics*, and *technology environment* (178). Considering demographics, commitments, objectives, and availabilities are imperative when organizing an electronic peer review session. Breuch emphasizes that the "goals for using technology [must] drive our choices" (95). In other words, instructors should consider the unique characteristics of group members and pedagogical goals prior to choosing a feasible and assessable collaborative technology.

It has been well-established that in order for students to be successful in a peer review session, students require training and instructors need to model reader and writer roles, focused praise, and constructive criticism (Hacker 114-8; Harris 370; Mittan 213-4; Lawrence and Sommers 102-6; Simmons 689). While there has not been as much written on specific training for students in electronic peer review, it is also imperative. Patricia Webb explains that electronic peer review requires a two-part training: (1) as peer reviewers and (2) as technology users. Technology composition theorists recommend that students should be introduced to technologies in class because it “demonstrates that the instructor prioritizes it” (133). Moreover, instructors should be prepared for technical difficulties. Webb warns instructors to “[e]xpect delays” (134). Just as one must be flexible when working with others, one must be flexible with computer technology.

Breuch explains that instructors need to use computer technology to evaluate student writing. The purpose of this is threefold: it reinforces the value of electronic peer review, instructors maintain an understanding of the technology’s nuances through firsthand experience, and it enables instructors to explore how technology shapes their response to student writing (135). Instructors are able to model electronic peer review to their students through evaluation. In effect, evaluation not only (hopefully) improves student writing through instructor feedback, but trains students in the art of critical response in the 21st century. Accordingly, an electronic reflection from an instructor exemplifies a contemporary version of Bruffee’s “conversation of mankind.”

Scholarship has been limited concerning the practice of electronic peer review, but studies have confirmed many pedagogical benefits and like any collaborative activity—certain limitations. Research has also made suggestions about successful

methods of facilitating electronic peer review; in effect, students are not born responders (Simmons 684), but need specific training from technologically literate instructors (Breuch 135). The collaborative writing activity of electronic peer review has developed as common practice in the first-year composition classroom because of the established research on traditional peer review practices. It seems that many first-year composition classrooms have done what theorists have warned against: they have incorporated technology into their courses because it is easy and available (Selfe and Selfe 480-504). For this reason, more research needs to be done. In order to fully understand the value and successfully shape electronic peer review, it makes sense to look to students. The rest of this thesis will consider how students perceive the practice of electronic peer review.

CHAPTER TWO: THE STUDY

This purpose of this study was to identify student perception of electronic peer review in the first-year composition classroom. The chapter opens with a description of the study's geographic location, first-semester composition course, and technology situation. Following, comes an introduction of the study's subjects and the structure of electronic peer review. The chapter closes with a discussion of the research questions, research methods, and the data collection and analysis.

Location

This study occurred in the fall semester of 2008 at Northern Michigan University. NMU is located in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in Marquette, Michigan. Situated along the southern coast of Lake Superior, Marquette is home to 20,000 residents. With 180 degree programs, there are approximately 9,400 undergraduate and graduate students at NMU. Along with a number of certificate programs, NMU offers associate degrees (two-year programs) and bachelor degrees (four-year programs) (Northern Michigan University). The majority of students are required to pass, with a C or better, two semesters of English composition (NMU Undergraduate Bulletin 2007-2008). This study took place during the first semester of this English composition requirement. The course is called EN111: College Composition I.

EN111

EN111 is an introduction to college writing. The course is designed to ensure that all NMU students are competent academic writers. The course helps students develop

their written and oral communication skills. As described by the *2007-2008 NMU Undergraduate Bulletin*, EN111 develops “students' abilities to read, discuss and write paragraphs and short essays about significant subjects” (NMU Undergraduate Bulletin 2007-2008). According to a NMU instructor training course for EN111, students are required to complete at least five evaluated writing assignments and expected to write a minimum of 5,000 words. Upon completion of the course, students should exhibit the following qualifications below:

- Write a focused thesis statement
- Write a clearly expressed main idea
- Relate all paragraphs directly to a topic
- Organize ideas in clear narrative and expository structure
- Use common transition techniques
- Show command of basic sentence structure, avoiding fragments and run-ons
- Avoid obvious mistakes in diction such as two/too/to, for example
- Engage in self-expression while conveying information clearly and arguing a point logically
- Write satisfactorily for a known, sympathetic audience

EN111 is designed to help students practice and polish fundamental writing and communication skills.

NMU is a four-year undergraduate university, but it also offers programs that are normally associated with a community college; so, students enter EN111 with a wide variety of expertise. According to the department of Institutional Research, in the fall of 2008, 74% of first-year students were from Michigan. Of those 74%, approximately 40% were from rural areas of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. The majority of the other students came from other states in the Midwest including Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and

Minnesota (“Baccalaureate First-Time”). While much of NMU’s student body is regionally based, there are quite a few students from urban areas like Detroit, Chicago, and Minneapolis. Additionally, since NMU offers an array of programs, students attend NMU to attain a variety of different types of degrees. Per the department of Institutional Research, 74% of students are enrolled in baccalaureate programs. While graduate students make up 5% of the student body, the remaining 21% are enrolled in associates, vocational, certificate, specialist, and non-degree programs (“Final Fall 2008 Student Profile”). Excluding the graduate students, almost all of the other programs require their students to pass EN111. As a result, EN111 is composed of students with a wide range of interests, backgrounds, and experiences. While some enter the course as proficient writers who need to hone their current skill set, many enter EN111 with much more basic needs such as spelling, grammar, and organizational skills.

Technology

In 2000, NMU established the Teaching, Learning, and Communication Laptop Initiative, which is also known as TLC. Undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty and staff are equipped with new laptops every two years. Wireless internet is available throughout the campus, and most classrooms have audio, video, and projection capabilities. It is quite common for students to use their laptops in the classroom, and laptops are used throughout the campus common areas (NMU Academics). According to the TLC Laptop Initiative, technology is an essential part of an academic environment:

Northern Michigan University's vision for education in the 21st century is a learning environment that embraces technology to enhance student access, promote the development of independent learners and encourage

greater student-faculty communication and collaboration. To help achieve this vision, the university has implemented a laptop program that ensures students and faculty have a standard set of tools (hardware and software) that meet a majority of their computing and telecommunications needs, promotes communication and enables quality support. (NMU Academics)

By providing students, faculty, and staff with necessary technological tools and technological support, NMU provides a practical example of the positive and negative roles technology can play in 21st century academia.

Subjects

NMU offers a block program for first-year students. The block program was instituted to improve retention rates by creating a sense of community for first-year students. Students are grouped into “blocks” by a variety of categories including majors, interests, and low grade point averages. Students enrolled in the block program take every course collectively for their first semester at NMU (NMU First Year Programs).

In the fall of 2008, all but three of the subjects were in the Art & Design block. This is an important distinction because all students, faculty, and staff are supplied with IBM ThinkPads except for art and design majors who are supplied with MacBooks. In a class of 24 students, only four members used ThinkPads, including the instructor.

All of the students were in their first-year of school. All but one student came right from high school. A typical day would begin with a group of students shuffling to class toting sketch pads and arguing the feasibility of creating a t-shirt entirely out of masking tape (their next design assignment). They knew each other well, and for the most part, they liked each other. They were enthusiastic about their passions, and they

were passionate about many things: animé, Disney/Pixar, piercings, tattoos, snowboarding, science fiction, politics, and vegetarianism.

Electronic Peer Review

In an electronic peer review session, students submit drafts of their essays to be read and examined by their peers. Since electronic peer reviews are organized countless ways, it's important to describe this study's process. Students were placed into groups of four. These groups were arranged by the instructor with the intent to group students with a range of strengths and weaknesses. In other words, strong writers were placed with weaker ones, and shyer students were placed with livelier ones. Through the NMU's courseware system, WebCT, groups were set-up online so that each group could communicate with its group members via WebCT's discussion board function. After a student wrote a first draft of an essay, they posted their essay on WebCT's discussion board for their group members to view. The students would open each of their group member's essays into Microsoft Word. After first reading a peer's essay, the student reviewer provided feedback for the student writer through the revision function in Microsoft Word. This tool allowed them to insert content and editorial comments, highlight strong passages, and cross out weaker passages. After student reviewers commented on individual sections of the essay, they posted the revised essay on WebCT along with a brief summary comment. Student reviewers were to use this summary comment to reflect on the piece of writing as a whole. The majority of the electronic peer review sessions took place during class so that students could discuss each other's work face-to-face after producing written feedback.

Even though most students followed the above guidelines, there were times when the procedure needed to be tweaked. At times there were technological difficulties, and it was necessary to be flexible in the method in which each group chose to facilitate electronic peer review.

Research Question

As a first-year composition instructor at a laptop university, the instructor wanted to better understand how students conceptualize technology in the classroom. In order to explore student perceptions about technology, two electronic peer review sessions were chosen to be examined. Students were asked to respond to a survey after completing electronic peer review in order to recognize how students perceive electronic peer review. (Human Subjects Research Review Committee approval was received 10/15/08. See Appendices A & B for approval letter and student consent form.)

Research Methods: Survey

The survey contained eleven questions that were designed to determine students' perceptions about the effectiveness of the electronic peer review sessions. Most importantly, students were asked if the session was worthwhile, if the session would help them revise their essay, where they would concentrate their revision efforts, which comments were most helpful, which comments were least helpful, how they used technology, if technology enhanced the experience, and if technology hindered the experience (see Appendix C). Prior to these two sessions, one classroom discussion was spent discussing the definition of technology. For the purposes of electronic peer review, students recognized Microsoft Word, WebCT, the Internet, and their laptops to be forms of technology.

Students peer reviewed four essays throughout the semester. The survey measures student assessment from the last two essays: the argumentative essay and the research paper. As first-year students, many students had not experienced peer review prior to EN111; therefore, the technique was demonstrated by the instructor and monitored during the first two electronic peer review sessions.

It is essential to describe the two essay assignments that make up this study because the timelines and requirements were significantly different. The argumentative essay had a three-week deadline, a peer-reviewed draft, a minimum word count of 1,000 words, and a minimum requirement of two outside sources. The research paper had a six-week deadline, a required instructor-student conference, a peer-reviewed draft, an instructor-reviewed draft, a minimum word count of 1,250 words, and a minimum requirement of five outside sources.

Data Collection/Analysis

In order to understand how students perceive electronic peer review, student responses to the surveys were organized by traits unique to electronic peer review. Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch has identified three characteristics of electronic peer review: time, space, and interaction (50-51). While Breuch's characteristics are specific to an online-only environment, the categories work to identify student usage and perception in a hybrid environment too. With her three categories and sub-categories (see Table 1), student responses were organized to help understand how students perceive the effectiveness of electronic peer review through the utility categories of time, space, and interaction (50-51). In addition to Breuch's categories, two other utility categories were included to gain insight as to how students perceive electronic peer review as a means to

learning: knowledge attained specific to the peer reviewed essay and knowledge attained in general.

Furthermore, student responses were examined by three aspects of satisfaction to help measure student attitude regarding the activity of electronic peer review: social, technological, and overall. Thus, eight categories were used to discern student perception of electronic peer review: (1) utility time, (2) utility space, (3) utility interaction (Breuch 50-51), (4) utility product, (5) utility knowledge, (6) satisfaction social, (7) satisfaction technological, and (8) satisfaction overall.

Table 1:
 Characteristics of Virtual Peer Review (Adapted from Breuch 50-51).

	Definition	Virtual Peer Review
<i>Time</i>		
Synchronicity	Time varies from immediate response to delayed response	Virtual peer reviewers have option of synchronous or asynchronous response
Durability	Written communication remains durable over time	An author's writing and a reviewer's feedback are both "durable" when conducted via technology; asynchronous messages and synchronous chats can be saved and transferred intact
Concurrency	Responses occur more or less at the same time	Virtual peer review encourages continued response
Convenience	Time restrictions are lifted to some degree	Virtual peer review can be conducted on one's own time; extra time can be used for greater reflection if needed; reviewers must be disciplined
<i>Space</i>		
Social Cues	Race, class, and gender are no longer immediately visible	Removal of social cues encourages virtual peer reviewers to focus on the task at hand
Interpersonal presence	Interpersonal connections often take longer to foster online	Virtual peer reviewers may develop interpersonal ties over time when working together in a group
Hyperpersonal presence	Connections that are more intense than in face-to-face situations	Virtual peer review may result in stronger interpersonal connections and presence online between reviewers
<i>Interaction</i>		
Text-based	Online communication encourages increased writing practice	Virtual peer review encourages writing, not only through the creation of documents but through written response to one another, either synchronously or asynchronously
Fixity	Written communication becomes "fixed" online	Virtual peer review comments can be archived and saved to stimulate recall of peer suggestions and revisions
Response structures	Online communication can take form of front, intertextual, and end comments	Virtual peer review can be tailored to provide summary comments, intertextual comments on specific passages, or overall discussion about an author's questions or problem areas
Reach	Preservation of accuracy of message	Comments from virtual peer reviewers are preserved intact and can be transmitted to multiple audiences

(Breuch 50-51)

CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

This pilot study was created to better understand how first-year composition students perceive the activity of electronic peer review. In order to measure student perception, a survey was created. This survey was given during the fall semester of 2008 to an EN111 course at Northern Michigan University. Twenty-three of the twenty-four students from the EN111 section participated in this pilot study. After completing two electronic peer review sessions, students were surveyed about their electronic peer review experience. This chapter will present student perceptions gathered from the two surveys.

Student responses from the surveys were organized by utility and satisfaction of electronic peer review. Utility is categorized by characteristics that Breuch says differentiates electronic peer review from face-to-face peer review. These distinctions include time, space, and interaction. In order to determine how students view the usefulness of electronic peer review, these results were organized by Breuch's unique factors, but the titles have been adapted for this study accordingly: utility time, utility space, and utility interaction. In addition to Breuch's categories, these results were sorted by two more utilities that were created for this pilot study specifically: (1) knowledge gained for the revision of the peer reviewed essay and (2) knowledge gained in general. The results also catalog student satisfaction with electronic peer review. Student satisfaction was measured three ways: (1) satisfaction with the social aspects of the experience, (2) satisfaction with the technological aspects of the experience, and (3) satisfaction with the overall experience.

Utility Results

Utility Time. Breuch further defines time by synchronicity, concurrency, durability, and convenience. She identifies that electronic peer review can be synchronous where communication can vary from real-time to delayed-time. It can be concurrent where multiple peer reviewers can respond at the same time. It can be durable so that peers' responses and writers' documents can be preserved, and electronic peer review can be convenient because time restrictions for peer reviewers can be flexible (50). While some participants from the pilot study discussed synchronicity and durability, it was not widely noted. Most students reflected upon the usefulness of convenience in their electronic peer review sessions.

Synchronicity/Concurrency. While the students worked in class synchronously, this pilot study's electronic peer review sessions were really held asynchronously because student writers read student reviewers' commentary after each student responded. Only one out of twenty-three students responded about this aspect of time. She found this element of electronic peer review less effective as a student reviewer because she was able to see other reviewers' commentary. She wrote, "With other comments you don't have as much to 'seek out' in the essay." For this student, electronic peer review was not an activity that encouraged continued response. Most students gave and received feedback within the one fifty-minute class period and did not continue the discussion with other writers or reviewers after class even though they were encouraged to do so by the instructor.

Durability. Student writers responded that it was helpful to be able to review written remarks outside of class. A few students remarked that the track changes function in

Microsoft Word facilitates this process because it links reviewers to their comments. One student declared, “I always use [track changes]. I think it makes it easier to see who did what.” For this particular student, electronic peer review helped her manage peer review feedback.

Convenience. Overall, students found that electronic peer review was more convenient and “easier.” Students noted that it was more convenient to find information because they could use Microsoft Word tools and the Internet during electronic peer review which made reviewing “quicker.” They commented that it was less bothersome to type responses than to handwrite them. Student writers found that technology saved them time when it came to revising. One student wrote, “It allowed us to make instant organized changes.” Another student commented, “It sped up the process of editing.”

Some students found that technology interfered with the peer review session. One student wrote, “Some people couldn’t upload their’s to WebCT so it delayed our work time and we had to do it outside of class.” Another student felt that his lack of technological literacy delayed the peer review session, “I am not the greatest with computers. I had to ask how to post comments.” Speed and ease seemed to be of utmost importance to students.

Utility Space. Breuch further distinguishes electronic peer review’s space by social cues, interpersonal presence, and hyperpersonal presence. She explains that within the electronic peer review space, social cues like race, class, and gender are less obvious, interpersonal ties may develop gradually, and relationships may be stronger than face-to-face situations (50). These categories were used to help define student perception of electronic peer review’s *space*.

Social Cues. Students did not specifically discuss how electronic peer review minimized racial, class, and gender cues as Breuch defined, but one student response reveals that electronic peer review within this study may have had a similar effect to what Breuch describes. She explains that the “[r]emoval of social cues encourages virtual peer reviewers to focus on the task at hand” (50). One student commented on the effectiveness of electronic peer review because it engaged students and “ke[pt] everyone working on their own thing.” According to this student, electronic peer review helped maintain student focus by keeping students on topic. While she does not specifically note that her peer group was or was not distracted by racial, class, or gender cues, the result seems to be connected.

Interpersonal Presence. Students sat together as they read and commented on each others’ essays. They had the opportunity to discuss face-to-face as they worked, but it seemed that they did not choose to communicate verbally. One student wrote that she liked electronic peer review, “It was nice to work on the computers for the reading/comments/editing and you could talk to one another.” Interestingly enough, it seems that most peer groups chose not to speak about their essays. Another student wrote, “It doesn’t make us communicate with one another. We just work on our computers and don’t talk much.” Another student discussed the difficulty of group negotiations: “We all kind of had different opinions on how to do the workshop (downloading and reposting essays or choosing to use the “reply” option) so that was kind of hard because we weren’t all on the same page.” Other than this discussion of group dynamics, students did not respond whether the electronic peer review session enhanced or hindered their interpersonal rapport.

Hyperpersonal Presence. Students did not specifically comment that they developed strong ties through the use of technology, but many students reflected about the helpfulness of their group members. One student wrote, “I really like and appreciate the amount of help I received from my peers.” Most students would not respond to the survey question that asked, “Which, if any, comments were not helpful? (Please quote them)” (survey question 5; Appendix C). The students that did answer this question said that they find constructive criticism the most useful, but interestingly enough, only one student named the least helpful peer reviewer.

Utility Interaction. Breuch provides four definitions for interaction within electronic peer review: text-based, fixity, response structures, and reach. She explains that electronic peer review is text-based in nature and therefore furthers the practice of writing. This written communication can be stored for later use and is therefore “fixed” (51). Response structures such as segment and summative commentary within electronic peer review can vary and provide flexibility for communication. Lastly, she says that electronic peer review allows written communication to be shared with a number of participants, which she calls reach. Within the utility of interaction, students perceive fixity and response structures to be of most use.

Text-based. Students did not remark that they were able to practice their writing and communication skills through the activity of electronic peer review.

Fixity. A few students noted that electronic peer review facilitated written communication as peer reviewers. One student wrote, “It allows you to say all you want where it’s needed. You’re not trying to cram it in the margin.” Students found this feature beneficial as writers as well. Colors seemed to be helpful: “The colors of track

changes and the user [names enhanced the experience]. Knowing who said what and where the suggestion is directed ...” this same student also wrote, “The comments are nice. You know what is in question...” Some students remarked that they appreciated the fact that electronic peer review helps them manage their comments for revision. Not only do they know what was said, but what each of their peer reviewers said.

Response Structure. Students remarked that the response structures of electronic peer review were valuable. A student wrote from a reviewers’ perspective, “It made correcting a paper appear a lot neater and less messy.” She continued, “I really like critiquing papers online. It’s easier, neater, more professional looking and easy to share with others.” Visual appearance seemed to be important for students as peer reviewers.

Reach. As the student above noted, students did note the importance of using technology to share feedback. As Breuch explains, “Comments from virtual peer reviewers are preserved intact and can be transmitted to multiple audiences” (50). Students seemed to find this aspect useful. One student wrote quite simply, “My comments would be hard to read without computer type.” Students found the usability of reach to be a worthy attribute of electronic peer review.

Knowledge Gained. After using Breuch’s characteristics of electronic peer review to categorize student responses from the surveys, responses were organized by two more utilities created for this pilot study: essay-based knowledge and general knowledge. Even though these questions were not asked specifically, student responses were prevalent within the survey. Students reflected about these two questions differently. When students reflected about the knowledge they acquired from the activity for the

specific essay, they responded as writers. When students wrote about general knowledge they acquired, they responded as readers.

Knowledge Gained for Specific Essay. The first survey question asked students to explain if the workshop was worthwhile. Even though there were five out of thirty responses that noted that the workshop was not worthwhile, these five respondents, in other areas of the survey, found at least one helpful aspect that was applicable to essay revision. While most students said that the electronic peer review helped them work towards a “better paper” and clear up “a few minor grammar mistakes,” when students were asked to check a box to mark where the electronic peer review would help them revise their essay, the most frequent response was not editing but content. Proof-reading/editing was the second most frequently checked box followed closely by organization and focus. Overall, students responded that the electronic peer review helped them focus their revision efforts on higher order and lower order concerns including: content, organization, focus, style, and editing areas.

Students wrote about how the electronic peer review session helped them understand that their essays were lacking specificity or development. One student wrote, “[I] realize[d] that there was quite a bit of content missing from this essay.” Others found that they needed more specific examples to strengthen their arguments: “I need to add more support and facts from sources.” Other students found that they had too many facts and not enough discussion in their essay. One student wrote, “My paper was a lot of jumble facts and information. This way I know to extend my paper from just facts.” She explained that she received feedback from the activity to help her. One of the most

helpful comments was this one: “In a couple areas, however, it gets a bit difficult to follow, maybe because there’s too much information.”

Additionally, students noted that the electronic peer review sessions persuaded them to pay attention to audience. One student wrote, “I need to write my paper as though the reader hasn’t researched my topic because I kind of forgot that sometimes.” Overall, student writers found that the session helped them step away from their essays and reflect on their work as a reader would.

As mentioned, students were asked to mark specific areas for revision after reading the feedback they received from their peers. Students were able to note more than one area for revision. The survey question read:

Where will you concentrate your revision efforts? Did comments from this essay’s workshop help you focus? Check any that apply and please explain.

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Content | <input type="checkbox"/> Writing Style |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Organization | <input type="checkbox"/> Proof-Writing/Editing |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focus | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain) |

(survey question 3; Appendix C)

Results from this survey question demonstrated that students perceived the electronic workshop to be most useful for revision of content. After content, students responded that editing, organization, and focus were additionally helpful. Students found that electronic peer review provided the least amount of assistance for the writing style and other categories. Detailed results are depicted in the charts below.

Table 2: Student Revision Focus After Electronic Peer Review Feedback

Type of Revision	Content	Organization	Focus	Writing Style	Proof-reading/Editing	Other
Number of responses	17	9	8	6	10	3
Student remarks	“I’m considering adding more of my personal experiences and maybe a quote from a famous tennis player.”	“People notice that my papers don’t always flow well, so I am working on transitions.”	“I need to not ramble while writing and stay focused throughout my paper.”	“It pointed out where I had already sounded too dry and just restating the facts. It will help me to smooth my style and tone.”	“I need to work more to fix small mistakes.”	“Revising my own opinion.”

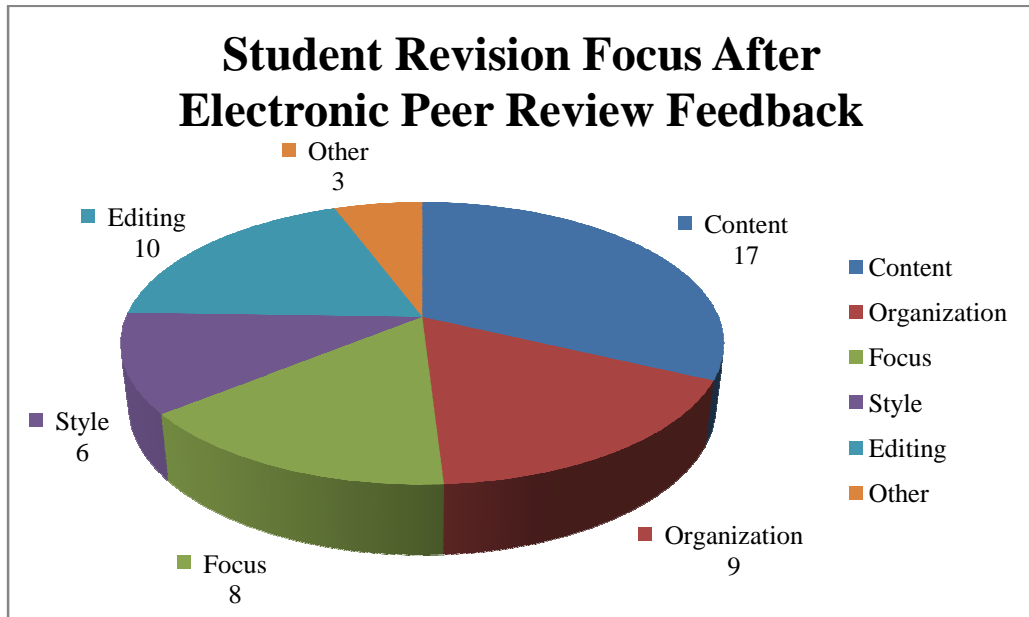


Figure 1: Student Revision Focus After Electronic Peer Review Feedback

Knowledge Gained in General. As mentioned earlier, students tended to respond more as readers than writers when discussing general knowledge gained, but the some students did respond as writers when referring to general knowledge. For example, some wrote that it's important to share work with other people to help "catch all of [the] little mistakes," or to recognize proper citation format. Some students responded defensively about their peers' constructive criticism: "Well, I learned that other people take things completely different from what I intend to write." Additionally, some writers reflected from a personal standpoint; for example, one student wrote about how he felt inadequate about helping other students because of lack of knowledge or experience: "It's hard to help on issues you know little about to help people with their topics." Others wrote about personal writing styles: "I have a less formal way of writing, [and] I should try to be more formal." While the knowledge gained tended to be individualized for most students, most agreed that there was something to be gained.

The students that responded as readers about knowledge gained in general tended to focus on higher order concerns. They wrote in more general, less personal terms. One student wrote about the importance of organization: "It is really hard to understand a paper's point with tons of information. You get lost and it's too much to take in." In addition this student said, "With [...] a longer essay you really need to be careful about your organization and sticking to the main focus." Students also found that writers need a balance of facts and interpretation in research based essays: "It's important to balance facts with emotions. Too much of either one isn't good for an argumentative essay." Another student agreed, "There is a fine line between not enough facts and too many." Others commented on the importance of style, "The facts are not always as important as

the tone, if it is not interesting the reader will not read it to get the information.” All of these student responses did not identify individual essays or writing styles but writing in general.

As peer reviewers, students discovered the importance of a thesis statement from participating in the electronic workshop: “It is helpful if you pick out the thesis statement before you start reading; it helps you understand the writer’s process better.” By reading other student essays, students seemed to respond as having gained more knowledge in general. Many students remarked that they had enjoyed learning about their peers’ subjects and viewpoints. One student commented that a “paper can be interesting and informational.” Another student wrote that he learned about his classmates. Similarly, a student wrote, “I learned where people stand on issues and how much their side means to them by how they wrote.” Another student said, “People know how to argue best what lies closest to their hearts.” Yes, electronic peer review can help to improve a writer’s essay, but as these student responses demonstrate, it can also help to expand a writer’s mind.

Satisfaction Results

Student satisfaction was measured by three perceptions of electronic peer review: social, technological, and overall. Students did not respond that the social experience of electronic peer review was of particular concern, but a few students did mention that electronic peer review either enhanced or hindered collaboration. Almost all of the respondents said that they were satisfied with the technological aspect of electronic peer review, which included Microsoft Word, WebCT, the Internet, and laptops. For the last

satisfaction measure, overall satisfaction, the vast majority of students were satisfied with the experience of peer review as a whole.

Satisfaction Social. Students reflected about the social aspects of electronic peer review the least. Many checked the box that said, technology enhanced the workshop experience by encouraging a professional working environment, but most students did not explain as the survey requested. One of the more studious students wrote, “It keeps everyone working on their own thing and makes it feel more formal.” Another student wrote, “It was nice to work on the computers for the reading/comments/editing and you could talk to one another,” but she did not discuss if she actually took advantage of this possibility. One student explained that at his early drafting phase, it was helpful to discuss in person with his peers: “I wasn’t done with my paper so it wasn’t totally [ready to share], but I talked about it to my peers.” While a few students said that the electronic peer review session was “fun,” students did not really address this aspect of the activity.

Satisfaction Technological. Only one student responded out of twenty-three that he was dissatisfied with the technological aspect of electronic peer review. The rest of the students were generally satisfied with electronic peer review technology as readers and writers. As readers it “sped up the editing process” and made [...] a paper appear a lot neater and less messy.” It increased the space for responding. The one student who responded that technology did not enhance the workshop experience said that he wasn’t able to use WebCT during the peer review session because his computer was giving him trouble. This same student has admitted to being frustrated because he needed help working his computer. On the whole, students were content with technology’s part in electronic peer review.

Satisfaction Overall. Most students were satisfied with electronic peer review. Students said that it helped them create a better finished product. They wrote that “personal feedback from others is always helpful.” Some said that the peer review session was worthwhile because it gave them insight for revision and identified specific areas for revision: “[It] pointed out what I thought needed work,” or “lets me know where I have the most problems.” Others found it beneficial because it confirmed a writers’ purpose: I reached my goal of achieving emotional vindication in my paper. The group said I exceeded in that aspect.” Others found it helpful to read other peoples’ essays to better evaluate their own work: “Seeing other papers helps give me something to compare mine to.” These comments reveal that students perceive that an improved essay can stem from the activity of electronic peer review.

The students that were dissatisfied with the electronic peer review said so because of lack of feedback: “It was nice to have someone else read my paper, but the comments did not help.” Another student wrote that she did not find it worthwhile because of a missing group member. She also commented that she did not receive any constructive criticism: “All I really got was “nice, just organize different.” The students that were dissatisfied were unhappy with the advice or commentary.

Summary of Findings

The chapter was organized by student perceptions of the usefulness and satisfaction of electronic peer review. The majority of students agreed that electronic peer review is a useful and satisfactory activity because it allows a convenient means to a better written product. Most of the results from this pilot study were obtained from the knowledge gained sections. While student responses reflected that an improved essay

was of utmost importance, primarily in the revision categories of content and editing, students were aware of other educational gains: a sharing of general knowledge and an interest in group members as people. An analysis of the results and a discussion of additional findings, and limitations will follow in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

The purpose of this pilot study was to identify student perceptions about electronic peer review to understand if students recognize its unique features and if and how they find the activity useful or worthwhile. The chapter begins with an analysis of results then discusses additional discoveries and limitations.

Analysis of Results

Utility Time. Breuch's four electronic peer review categories for time were used to organize student assessments of the usability of time from the survey. These include synchronicity, response time can be immediate or postponed; concurrency, peer reviewers can respond simultaneously; durability, written responses and documents are not altered; and convenience, time restrictions for response are flexible (50). According to the survey responses, students remarked that convenience was not only the most important aspect of time within electronic peer review, but the fundamental reason for using the activity itself.

Synchronicity/Concurrency. Part of the electronic peer review activity required student reviewers to type their comments in Microsoft Word and resubmit the commented document on the WebCT discussion board with a summary end comment. Within this pilot study, the students were only required to use the delayed aspect of time. Since the students were physically in the classroom during the majority of the electronic peer review session, they had the option to respond to each other verbally and therefore immediately. They also had chatting technology available to them via WebCT to

encourage immediate response or to initiate a real-time dialogue. According to the instructor's observations and per the student survey responses, students did not take advantage of the synchronicity or concurrency aspect of time within the activity of electronic peer review. To really examine this aspect of time, students needed to be required to use a range of response types (instant and delayed). Consequently, while students had the option to use synchronous or asynchronous response, they did not mention this as effective or ineffective; they didn't mention it at all.

Durability. Some students remarked that it was beneficial as writers to have *durable* feedback. One student explained the importance of "knowing who said what and where the suggestion is directed." The text-based nature of electronic peer review enables student writers to manage the peer review comments effectively. Student writers do not have to remember what their peers said in a verbal dialogue because they have not only written it down, but it is linked to the specific comment with specific areas of the document, and it is tied to the name of the peer reviewer. Students did not reflect about this aspect of time from a peer reviewer perspective, but as Breuch explains, peer review comments are also permanent (50). If a student writer were taking notes from a verbal peer review discussion, the chances of manipulating the commentary are great. The textual nature of electronic peer review helps preserve a peer reviewer's feedback, but within this pilot study, students did not discuss this aspect of durability. Perhaps students are not concerned with the work produced as student reviewers. Possibly, their concern is with their work as student writers, but this pilot study cannot come to a conclusive answer because the survey questions were not written to provide answers to the *durable* nature of time within electronic peer review.

Convenience. Student response demonstrated that students were most concerned with the convenience aspect of electronic peer review. They wanted to give and receive feedback in the most efficient and effective manner possible. Students were dissatisfied with the activity of electronic peer review when they could not accomplish the task within the class period because of technological or individual delays, but if there were no outside circumstances (meaning that the Internet was functioning and all group members submitted drafts on time), students found it convenient to be able to finish the process outside of class. Students reflected that the activity was most helpful as writers. Students reflected that electronic peer review aides the revision process by organizing and managing peer comments. For the most part, students agreed that electronic peer review provided an appropriate platform for convenience.

Utility Space. Student responses were organized using Breuch's discussion of group dynamics in the space of electronic peer review. She explains that within electronic peer review, social cues are less apparent, interpersonal relationships take longer to develop, and online relationships may feel more intense than face-to-face connections (50).

Social Cues. Students did not remark that social cues were less obvious during electronic peer review. This could be in part because these peer review sessions were held in a physical classroom. These students were able to ask each other questions and discuss issues if they wanted to, and all of the while, look each other in the eye. This space differs from the virtual space that Breuch describes, but it seems like a reasonable assertion that even in a hybrid situation (virtual and classroom), students might think less of who they are writing to and more of what they want to say. To understand if students

perceive that electronic peer review removes or reduces social cues or not requires further classroom examination.

Interpersonal/Hyperpersonal Presence. For the most part, students did not discuss the relationships they developed with their peer groups through the electronic peer review sessions, but they did take the time to thank their group members for their hard work. Many students remarked that all of the feedback they received from their group members was helpful, and interestingly enough, only one student incriminated a specific group member by name as the least helpful reviewer. Students seemed to protect each other from a group outsider like the instructor. In other words, this pilot study found that students did not necessarily perceive that electronic peer review encourages or discourages interpersonal relationships. It is conceivable that students are not aware of the development of their relationship with group members or do not see these relationships as important, but their responses demonstrated that electronic peer review does foster student writing relationships. Of course, more classroom-based research would need to be done to prove this claim.

Utility Interaction. Breuch's four definitions of interaction were applied to the student responses reflecting interaction within their electronic peer review experiences. She explains that the activity is text-based, which promotes more writing practice for the writer and peer reviewer. The activity is fixed and unaltered, which allows for effective reference for the writer. In addition, the response structures are adjustable in that they can be placed within the document or in the form of summative commentary. Finally, Breuch explains that electronic peer review facilitates collaboration through its reach; messages can be shared with multiple participants (51).

Text-based. Students did not view the activity of providing feedback for their peers as a way to practice their written communication skills. Since this question was not specifically addressed in the survey, it is unclear if students were aware of the additional writing practice electronic peer review affords them, or if extra writing practice was important to these first-year composition students.

Fixity. Students responded that the permanence of the peer review comments was a useful attribute of electronic peer review. They noted that the feedback was valuable as writers because it allowed them to revise their essays. They had the flexibility to review peer comments on their own time, and the commentary was organized in a manner that made revision less daunting.

Response Structure. Peer reviewers were required to provide intertextual and end comments as part of the electronic peer review assignments. Students recognized the value of the intertextual comments. They reflected that they found the comments that were tied with specific sections helpful during the revision process. They appreciated the specificity of who, what, and where. They wanted to know which peer reviewer commented, what their feedback was, and where revision efforts should be focused. While peer reviewers were required to provide a summary comment at the end of document, students did not reflect about the usefulness of summative feedback. Again, the specific question was not asked, so the results from this pilot study are inconclusive. Further research would need to be done to understand if students find this aspect of electronic peer review of value.

Reach. Students found the capability of sharing documents and commentary to be a functional feature of electronic peer review. Students mentioned that the activity saved

them time and money because they did not have to print multiple paper copies of their documents. One student said that the textual nature of electronic peer review made it possible for him to communicate with his peer group because of his poor handwriting. Again, students recounted that electronic peer review was beneficial because it created an enhanced approach to group talk.

Utility Knowledge Gained. In general, students valued electronic peer review because it helped them create a better final product. Students found that electronic peer review helped with a variety of levels of the writing process. Interestingly, from the instructor's viewpoint, weaker student writers tended to focus on lower order concerns (spelling and grammar), while stronger student writers tended to focus on higher order concerns (organization, voice, and content). It seemed that the weaker writers used the electronic peer review session to help them edit; whereas, stronger writers used the electronic peer review session to help them revise.

While the primary concern tended to be the final product, students did discuss realizations about other pedagogical insights. Once more, responses tended to organize by writing abilities: stronger student writers responded about higher order concerns like organization, focus, and style. They discussed realizations about writing in general, while weaker student writers responded about their personal writing. They mentioned that it's difficult to respond to other students if they did not know about the subject matter, that they have been citing their sources incorrectly, or other students just don't understand them. There is a notable distinction between the responses of different levels of student writers.

Satisfaction Results

Social / Technological/ Overall. Students were primarily satisfied with their electronic peer review experience. The few students that were dissatisfied were so because of one of two reasons: (1) technological difficulties or (2) group disputes. This first-semester composition course was primarily composed of art and design students. As part of the art and design program, students receive MacBooks instead of IBM ThinkPads. Most of the Mac students were first-time users and were experiencing some difficulties accessing WebCT. Students found it frustrating that all of their peers did not always have their essays uploaded in time for the peer review session. It made the activity less convenient. In the case of technical difficulties, students were encouraged to develop strategies as a group to bypass the technical issues. Unfortunately, these group negotiations seemed to be the second cause of dissatisfaction. Some group members wanted to swap computers in order to bypass WebCT difficulties, and other members found that method to be too chaotic. It seemed that once a group decision was reached, most dissatisfaction was remedied. All in all, it seemed that as long as students found the process primarily convenient, they were satisfied.

While it is less obvious from the survey responses than convenience, strong group connections are another outcome that students found gratifying about electronic peer review. While the survey did not explicitly ask respondents to consider the effectiveness of electronic peer review to promote group unity, it can be inferred from student responses that the activity did, in some cases, encourage a collaborative team of writers. For example, a section of the survey asked students to define the most useful and least

useful comments from the electronic peer review session. Questions 4 and 5 from the survey are as follows (see Appendix C):

Which, if any, comments were most helpful? (Please quote them.)

Which, if any, comments were not helpful? (Please quote them.)

Students rarely followed the directions and directly quoted their peers. Some students left the questions blank, others responded that all comments were helpful, and others still summarized the commentary. The students that did follow the directions of the survey did not have any difficulty quoting helpful commentary, but they tended to preface the least helpful quote by saying, “It’s good, but...” In effect, these students praised the commentary that they had identified as weak. This behavior may demonstrate that even ineffective comments were appreciated by student writers. Along the same lines, it is also possible that because students developed relationships with their electronic peer review team, they did not want to insult any members of their writing group.

Additionally, students commented that they enjoyed the activity of electronic peer review because they liked reading each others’ work either because of the subject matter or to learn more about each other as individuals. In a few cases, students even used the survey as a means to thank their peers and tell the instructor how helpful they found peer feedback. Thus, while students did not specifically note the value of interpersonal relationships within the activity of electronic peer review, it can be inferred from their responses that it was of importance: the majority refused to identify unhelpful commentary or unhelpful peer reviewers, and many praised their peers for their support. It should be considered that this pilot study was unable to define why students chose not to describe ineffective commentary. Students may have felt uncomfortable describing

useless commentary of their peers, or perhaps they did not find any peer commentary ineffective. Further questioning should be done to really understand the group dynamics of electronic peer review, but it seems that electronic peer review does promote a writing community.

Additional Discoveries

The two sessions provide further insight as to the effectiveness of the electronic peer review at earlier and later phases of the writing process. At the time of the electronic peer review sessions, students tended to have a more substantial draft for their argumentative essay. The students had three weeks to complete a 1,000 word essay that required two outside sources and a peer-reviewed draft. The electronic peer review session was held a week before the essay was submitted to the instructor for evaluation. The 1,250 word research paper had a time frame of six weeks, required five outside sources, a peer-reviewed draft, an instructor-reviewed draft, a student-instructor conference, and a presentation. The electronic peer review session was held three weeks before the essay was submitted to the instructor for evaluation.

From the perspective of the instructor, there were two reasons that students were better prepared for the argumentative essay electronic peer review session: (1) less research was required for the assignment, and (2) they had a shorter amount of time before the essay needed to be submitted for evaluation. The electronic peer review for the research paper occurred a week after the instructor-student conference, and many students were in the early phases of the drafting process.

Interestingly enough, many students responded that they were less satisfied with the research paper electronic peer review session than the argumentative electronic peer

review session. Student readers found it frustrating to comment on incomplete drafts. They responded that it was difficult to give quality feedback since they couldn't follow the essay's direction. As writers, they responded that they did not receive constructive criticism, and that the overall session was not as beneficial. The research from this pilot study finds that first-year students are primarily concerned with the final product (knowledge attained for specific essay), so it would stand to reason that electronic peer review sessions are more beneficial from a student perspective later in the drafting process.

Limitations

As discussed during the *Analysis of Results* section, there were limitations with this pilot study's survey questions. While the survey asked a few open-ended questions that did not incite first-year subjects to reflect about the usefulness of electronic peer review's utility in the categories of time, space, and interaction, the survey questions also failed to inquire about Selber's critical literacy (25). The subjects primarily responded as functional literates, discussing the usefulness of the electronic peer review's technologies (25). They did not examine the process critically, and this may or may not be because of the format of the questions.

Moreover, questions that were broad resulted in vague answers which sometimes conflicted with the answers of more specific survey questions. For example, when students were asked undefined questions in the survey concerning revision of their essay, students tended to say that the activity helped them edit or improve their paper (survey questions 1, 2; see Appendix C). At the same time, when students were asked to check a box with specific areas for revision, content—not editing—was by far the most common

target for revision (survey question 3; see Appendix C). The responses were more informative when the survey questions offered specific responses. Because the survey did not prompt critical feedback, it is difficult to say whether first-year composition students practice critical literacy based on this pilot study's format. This question demands further research.

In addition, one survey question hoped to inspect students' attentiveness to the online activity of electronic peer review, but the question was poorly phrased. The question states, "Did you read your classmates' essays on the laptop screen or just "skim" the essay?" The options for response consist of two check boxes: "yes" or "no" (survey question 10; see Appendix C). Many students left this question blank, but a few students wrote in frustration, scribbling out their first responses. One student writes, "I read it! This is a trick question!" Other students wanted their instructor to know that they had indeed completed the class assignment. Yes, they did as they were supposed to do. The question was not asked to police students but to understand if writing, reading, and responding online are distracters to first-year composition students. Only a few students responded that they did not like to read online because it hurt their eyes or was difficult to concentrate. While most students responded that they were able to focus their attention appropriately, it is difficult to know for sure how honest and accurate the student responses were given the faulty design of this question.

Besides limitations with specific survey questions, the subjects' prior experiences with peer review must be discussed. Many of the first-year students had not been exposed to electronic peer review or traditional paper-based peer review prior to this pilot study. While different practices of peer review were discussed in the class, it stands to

reason that for some of the inexperienced students, the ability to respond to questions that examined the integration of courseware technology may have been less useful for this research because the subjects had no previous experience to compare a WebCT peer review session to a paper-based peer review session. This became obvious with the survey questions that asked:

Did technology enhance [or hinder] the workshop experience? If so, how?

By encouraging [or discouraging] a professional environment (please explain)

Other (please explain)

(survey questions 9 and 10; see Appendix C)

Many students checked the “encouraging a professional working environment” box, but since the “professional working environment” was not defined in the survey, it is difficult to know what they meant by this response. The question was meant to examine the *authenticity* of electronic peer review, but students did not discuss this aspect of electronic peer review. Additionally, students who had previous experience with peer review elaborated when asked to “explain.” One student wrote that it kept students on task, but more students discussed the neatness and systematic organization of electronic peer review. While the question needed to be better defined, the survey also needed to take into account experienced peer reviewers and non-experienced peer reviewers to truly analyze their perspectives.

Summary of Results

This pilot study finds that students believe electronic peer review to be a useful and convenient activity that helps them as writers produce a better final product. From

the instructor's perspective, weaker writers tend to concentrate on editing, while stronger writers tend to concentrate on revision. Additionally, students responded that they were primarily satisfied with electronic peer review. Students reflected that they were dissatisfied with the activity when technology or their group members hindered their collaborative efforts. Additionally, this study finds that since students are product-driven, electronic peer review sessions may be more beneficial from a student perspective later in the drafting process. Lastly, this chapter addressed the limitations of the pilot study including survey questions and subjects. Implications and conclusions will be the focus of the final chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Because the pilot study reaffirmed that students do not critically examine technology, this chapter addresses the need for continued examination of the study of technology, collaboration, and writing within first-year composition courses. In addition, through a discussion of implications, this chapter addresses instructor perception of electronic peer review.

Implications

This pilot study found that students recognize some of the advantages and difficulties of electronic peer review regarding Breuch's definitions of time, space, and interaction (50-51). More research is required to effectively understand how students actually perceive all of these attributes of electronic peer review. This pilot study found that students perceive the body of knowledge attained from electronic peer review to be applicable to improving the assignment and improving an overall body of knowledge. While students remarked that the primary goal of attaining knowledge during electronic peer review was to improve the work-shopped product, revision focus varied by level of writer. Stronger writers seemed to focus on higher order concerns while weaker writers seemed to focus on lower order concerns. Additionally, this pilot study found that students tended to be satisfied with electronic peer review as long as technological delays or group disputes were handled promptly.

While the design of the survey was not ideal to really understand if students think about technology critically, clearly, students need to be encouraged by instructors to

consider technology not simply as a tool but a significant element of the activity of writing like Bolter, Clark, and Burnett say. Instructors can look to Selber to utilize the levels of technological literacy to help them move beyond “users of technology” and towards “questioners of technology” and “producers of technology” (25). After all, the role of academic institutions is to help students evolve from thinkers of fact to thinkers of value. Electronic peer review offers first-year composition instructors and students a platform to push through Bloom’s taxonomy and move intelligently from *comprehending* to *applying* to *evaluating* (“IAR”). Within the first-year composition classroom, in order to complete electronic peer review, students must learn about computer technology and the activity itself, and they must then apply that knowledge to the act. This pilot study recognized that students did not reflect the next level of critical thinking because they were not required to do so by the instructor, but the activity allows students the opportunity to assess the role and value of computer technology during and after the activity of electronic peer review. Thus, electronic peer review can be an effective way to develop critical thinking for first-year composition students, of course, but also for students within other disciplines.

Electronic peer review can help students practice a discourse that is not necessarily ingrained in human behavior: collaboration. While the activity of electronic peer review itself provides students experience for the workplace by becoming familiar with computer technologies like software applications, it also enables them to practice Bruffee’s idea of the *conversation of mankind* for the classroom, the workplace, and the world. This pilot study not only reaffirms that electronic peer review helps students communicate within a collaborative environment, but that students will apply their

electronic peer review conversations outside of the activity itself. As previously discussed, most students did not respond to the survey questions that inquired as to which peer review commentary was least helpful, but those that did tended to cushion their critical response with a statement of praise. *While I appreciated the comment, it was not as helpful as those comments that suggested improvement.* These types of responses demonstrate that students are engaging in Bruffee's *conversation of mankind*: they are critically examining their peers' thoughts and responding in an insightful but respectful way. In other words, electronic peer review allows students to adapt, practice, and explore today's "technologically displaced form of conversation" (Bruffee 641).

In the end, like Brunk-Chavez and Miller's discoveries about online collaboration, this pilot study found that few students critically examine electronic peer review. Most students view the practice as a useful tool to create a better final product—a better essay. The majority of students reflected that convenience was the most beneficial aspect of electronic peer review. Computer technology enabled them to respond quickly and easily as peer reviewers, and it helped them efficiently revise their essays as student writers. Some students did recognize other aspects of the electronic peer review, defined by Breuch, like the flexible nature of time and text, the reduction of social cues, and the ability to share writing, but these reflections were not widespread. Overall, in this pilot study, most students did not view computer technology as shapers of their writing process like Bolter, Clark, and Burnett articulate, but they do find electronic peer review to be useful and are mostly satisfied with the practice.

Instructor Implications

While the purpose of this pilot study was to examine student perception of electronic peer review, the instructor needs to tackle her own post-study perceptions of electronic peer review within first-year composition. On the one hand, since students reflected that electronic peer review was a predominately useful and satisfying activity, the instructor feels contented to have teaching philosophies of process and collaborative pedagogies reinforced. On the other hand, the instructor is discouraged that for most of her students, electronic peer review was simply a convenient means to an end (a better essay). Convenience and revision are valuable functions of the practice but *not* its only values.

The results from this pilot study have persuaded the instructor to develop first-year composition materials that require students to critically examine the purposes, functions, and significance of computer technology. As members of a democratic society, first-year composition students must thoughtfully consider all forms human communication instead of blindly accepting its existence. Specifically, first-year composition instructors need to inspire students to critically examine their own writing, the writing of their peers, and the modes in which they write.

This instructor will continue to challenge herself to promote analytical thinking from her students not just from texts but from other aspects of civilization like computer technology. She will continue to experiment with the practice of electronic peer review because as her students reflected, the activity helps enhance student writing, and as her research has demonstrated it can also further equally important pedagogical goals of collaboration and critical thought. In turn, if done right, electronic peer review can act in

first-year composition courses to move beyond creating superior student writing towards the ultimate goal of creating superior student writers.

Final Thoughts

The results from this pilot study should encourage other composition instructors that students do find value in electronic peer review. However, instructors need to promote deeper consideration of the activity because it can act as a platform for critical thought. Even though this pilot study only measured a small student sample in a tech-savvy environment, the results demonstrate students' abilities to collaborate and embrace writing.

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APPENDIX A



Continuing Education
1401 Presque Isle Avenue
Marquette, MI 49855-3301

October 15, 2008

TO: Samantha Hilton
English

FROM: Cynthia A. Prosen, Ph.D.
Dean of Graduate Studies & Research

RE: Human Subjects Proposal # HS08-215
"Peer Review in the Electronic Space"

CP

The Human Subjects Research Review Committee has reviewed your proposal and has given it final approval. To maintain permission from the Federal government to use human subjects in research, certain reporting processes are required. As the principal investigator, you are required to:

- A. Include the statement "Approved by HSRRC: Project # (listed above) on all research materials you distribute, as well as on any correspondence concerning this project.
- B. Provide the Human Subjects Research Committee letters from the agency(ies) where the research will take place within 14 days of the receipt of this letter. Letters from agencies should be submitted if the research is being done in (a) a hospital, in which case you will need a letter from the hospital administrator; (b) a school district, in which case you will need a letter from the superintendent, as well as the principal of the school where the research will be done; or (c) a facility that has its own Institutional Review Board, in which case you will need a letter from the chair of that board.
- C. Report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee any deviations from the methods and procedures outlined in your original protocol. If you find that modifications of methods or procedures are necessary, please report these to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee before proceeding with data collection.
- D. Submit progress reports on your project every 12 months. You should report how many subjects have participated in the project and verify that you are following the methods and procedures outlined in your approved protocol.
- E. Report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee that your project has been completed. You are required to provide a short progress report to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee in which you provide information about your subjects, procedures to ensure confidentiality/anonymity of subjects, and the final disposition of records obtained as part of the research (see Section II.C.7.c).
- F. Submit renewal of your project to the Human Subjects Research Review Committee if the project extends beyond three years from the date of approval.

It is your responsibility to seek renewal if you wish to continue with a three-year permit. At that time, you will complete (D) or (E), depending on the status of your project.

kjm

Telephone: 906-227-2103 ■ FAX: 906-227-2118
E-mail: coneduc@nmu.edu ■ Web site: www.nmu.edu/ce

APPENDIX B

Informed consent form for EN 111.

Principal researcher/investigator: Samantha Hilton

Purpose of research: to learn how students communicate during electronic-based writing workshops (eWorkshops).

I, _____, understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and is confidential. I understand that I will not be identified by any personal characteristics that might make known my identity, such as sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, etc.

I understand that information collected in this research project will be used as data in a study. I give Samantha Hilton permission to use my written comments in any essay or presentation provided that my identity is not made known.

I understand that I may ask questions and that I am free to withdraw my consent from the project at any time without incurring negative consequences by contacting Samantha Hilton at 227-1837 or Dr. Elizabeth Monske at 227-1631. Participation or nonparticipation in this study will no way affect my course grade. If I have questions regarding my rights as a subject for this research, I may contact Dr. Cindy Prosen, Dean of Graduate Studies and Research, 401 Cohodas Administration Center, Northern Michigan University – 227-2398 or cprosen@nmu.edu.

I also understand that this informed consent document will be kept separate from the data collected in this project to maintain confidentiality.

Risks: No medical risks are anticipated. The only anticipated risk associated with this study is that participants might feel uncomfortable giving or receiving criticism during an eWorkshop. As a class, we have discussed the importance of keeping criticism constructive and impersonal. Please see me if there are any concerns that I can address.

Benefits: This research will help the researcher examine group dynamics in an electronic writing space. This information might help other instructors use technology more effectively in their classrooms. Additionally, this information will help our class customize our eWorkshops so that we can draw as many benefits from this experience as possible.

Subject's Signature

Date

Approved by HSRRC: Project # HS08-215

APPENDIX C

EN111 Workshop Review

Approved by HSRRC: Project #HS08-215

Please answer the following questions as thoroughly as possible:

1. Was this workshop worthwhile? Please explain.

2. Will this workshop help you revise your essay? Please explain.

3. Where will you concentrate your revision efforts? Did comments from this essay's workshop help you focus? Check any that apply and please explain.

<input type="checkbox"/> Content	<input type="checkbox"/> Writing style
<input type="checkbox"/> Organization	<input type="checkbox"/> Proof-reading/Editing
<input type="checkbox"/> Focus	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain)

4. Which, if any, comments were most helpful? (Please quote them).

5. Which, if any, comments were not helpful? (Please quote them).

6. What, if anything, did you learn from this workshop as a reader?

7. What, if anything, did you learn from this workshop as a writer?

8. Did you use any of the following during your eWorkshop?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> The revision functions in Microsoft Word (please explain) | <input type="checkbox"/> Dictionary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spelling/Grammar | <input type="checkbox"/> Track Changes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Highlighting | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please detail) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thesaurus | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Internet (please list specific uses) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please detail) | |

9. Did technology enhance the workshop experience? If so, how?

- By encouraging a professional working environment (please explain)
- Other (please explain)

10. Did you read your classmates' essays on the laptop screen or just "skim" the essay?

- Yes
- No

If yes or no, did technology hinder the workshop experience in any other way? If so, how?

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> The revision functions in Microsoft Word (please explain) | <input type="checkbox"/> Dictionary |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Spelling/Grammar | <input type="checkbox"/> Track Changes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Highlighting | <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please detail) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Thesaurus | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Internet (please list specific uses) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> By discouraging a professional working environment (please explain) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other (please explain) | |

11. Please write below if you have any other comments. Feel free to use the back.

Approved by HSRRC: Project #HS08-215