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Julie M. Barst

*South Dakota State University, Julie.Barst@sdstate.edu*

April Brooks

*South Dakota State University*

Leda Cempellin

*South Dakota State University*

Barb Kleinjan

*South Dakota State University*

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# Peer Review Across Disciplines: Improving Student Performance in the Honors Humanities Classroom

**JULIE M. BARST, APRIL BROOKS, LEDA CEMPELLIN,  
AND BARB KLEINJAN**

**SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY**

The term “peer review” often elicits a negative response from teachers and students alike. The process involves numerous challenges; anyone who has used the technique knows that students often feel awkward giving feedback to their peers and even more uncomfortable accepting the advice of peers in a classroom setting. They hesitate to voice negatives about performance, possibly because they doubt their own reaction to the material presented or fear that, in retaliation, they will be rated poorly as well. In addition, when teachers fail to establish and communicate clearly defined expectations, student authors do not produce high-quality drafts, and student reviewers often believe that even a lackluster analysis should result in a high grade on the assignment. However, once students understand that peer review is a necessary component of the professional environments they will soon join, are trained in the use of peer evaluation, and accept the potential benefits of well-constructed reviews by others at their ability level, their individual performances improve on compositions, speeches, projects, and original research papers. They also become better listeners and editors, are more supportive of others’ endeavors, and become more confident about their own work. These benefits are perhaps most visible in the honors classroom, where smaller class sizes allow for closer, more detailed interactions between student groups and where students can demonstrate and improve on their high-level skills of critical thinking and analysis by learning to evaluate the work of others. With some preparation for the process and some experimentation in its implementation, teachers in every discipline can provide a supportive and positive learning experience using this helpful feedback technique. In this article, teachers of honors courses in the humanities disciplines of English, speech, art history, and history at South Dakota State University hope to show that—in addition to reducing faculty workload (Stowell)—using innovative and carefully crafted peer review procedures creates a win-win situation for every student involved in the process as both author and reviewer.

**JULIE M. BARST,  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH**

Peer review is an integral part of the curriculum in my honors composition classes since it not only produces visible results on projects but helps students improve their skills in teamwork and oral communication. The process is useful for many types of assignments, including short papers such as summaries or reviews, oral presentations, and longer research-based papers. At the beginning of the semester, I ask students to describe their past experiences with any type of peer evaluation, and we discuss their reactions to these activities. This discussion, I have found, helps to establish an honest and supportive environment, which is vital to the success of peer review throughout the semester.

The type of peer review that seems to work most effectively in the traditional composition classroom is what I call “rapid-fire” review, which can be incorporated at any point during a project, including various stages of brainstorming, outlining, and drafting. Students bring two copies of their work to class, one of which is turned in to the instructor as part of the project grade. Multiple peers comment on the other copy throughout the class period: rapid-fire review requires students to switch papers after short blocks of time, analyzing one facet of the project during each session. It is important that instructors clearly articulate the question(s) that should be answered in each session. For instance, instead of simply asking students to “comment on the thesis statement,” which can often lead to vague or unhelpful results, instructors could tell students to “double underline what you believe to be the thesis statement, and then next to it, write down the author’s argument in your own words. Offer suggestions for improved clarity or strength of argument.”

In a fifty-minute class, I generally find that six or seven minutes per session works best, but flexibility is important. If a session has ended but students need more time, I allow them to continue; therefore, the most important prompts should be addressed first. Students bring and use several different colors of ink so that authors can better track the comments they receive. Reviewers also include their name on each draft they analyze so that at the end of class students can discuss their findings with one another. Rapid-fire review could instead be completed anonymously, possibly increasing the likelihood of more honest feedback but also eliminating the opportunity for discussion afterwards.

Many types of peer review sessions can also be held in a computer classroom, the setting I prefer for reviewing drafts of the final course project, a research-based essay of eight to twelve pages. Students bring electronic drafts to class on a flash drive or as an email attachment and exchange them with their peer review partner. They spend the entire class period completing a full review of the draft: reading the draft carefully and answering questions that the instructor provides in a Microsoft Word document. This prompt can include questions about the vitality of the introduction, strength and clarity of the thesis statement, quality and extent of supporting evidence for the argument,

effectiveness of organization and transitions, and persuasiveness of the conclusion; it can easily be tailored to the expectations of each assignment. The prompt should avoid asking “yes or no” questions and instead require students to think carefully and provide detailed answers, a process that provides the highest-quality feedback. The students are also asked to use the “Comment” function in Microsoft Word to highlight and comment on any problems they see in their partner’s draft, including spelling, punctuation, and grammar errors as well as other areas that need improvement. Praise is always encouraged since authors should know when they are crafting clear arguments, supporting their points, or achieving other successes noticed by the reviewer. When both parts of this evaluative process are completed, the reviewer saves the two documents (draft and prompt sheet) and emails them to both the author and the instructor. Instructors can incorporate participation in (and quality of) peer review as either part of the project grade or part of class participation. After each peer review session, I evaluate the students on the overall quality of the feedback they provide and reward improvement as the semester progresses.

Whether peer review is incorporated into the computer-based or traditional composition classroom, several important student learning outcomes result from the process. By analyzing their peers’ drafts, students gain ideas for how to improve their own work, and the instructor’s prompts give them greater insight into the most important expectations of each assignment. In addition, students come to understand and value the revision process as integral to successful writing in any discipline, which is an important goal in the composition classroom. Peer review also builds a sense of community in an honors class as students interact and accept mutual responsibility for one another’s successes. Visible results from the process include early drafts that lack confidence or direction blooming into well-organized, clearly articulated arguments worthy of our honors students.

Many students are uncomfortable with peer review at first because they have no experience with it, but they develop throughout the semester into confident and knowledgeable reviewers, building skills that will serve them well in their careers no matter what field they enter. Because the smaller class sizes in the honors program allow for multiple and detailed peer review sessions for each project, honors students especially benefit from this process. In a course evaluation for spring 2010 Honors Advanced Composition, one student wrote: “Peer review has helped me learn a lot about the writing process and the importance of collaboration.” This statement is simply worded but represents the significant benefits that peer review can offer honors students in the writing classroom and beyond.

## BARB KLEINJAN, COMMUNICATION STUDIES AND THEATRE

In a public speaking classroom, every performance communicates a message that is immediately assessed by audience members, who provide feedback through their verbal and nonverbal reactions. Unlike a written paper or exam, a visible and shared performance is evaluated in some manner by every listener present. The speakers' accomplishments or failures in invention, arrangement, style, and delivery are clearly evident to the viewers. Not surprisingly, the pressure of giving a flawless *performance* as opposed to an effectively communicated *message* unnerves many novice speakers, particularly perfection-driven honors students. Fearing audience judgment and the resulting negative reaction, the speakers' confidence levels diminish rapidly. Appraisal comments and improvement suggestions that could normally be exchanged privately with the professor are now clouded with post-presentation doubts and insecurities. Consequently, making peer review a valuable tool in an introductory-level honors speech course first requires establishing a supportive, skill-focused culture in a non-threatening environment for practice and growth. One honors student concisely phrased this philosophy as "watching for potential, not error." I believe that an attitude of *coaching* rather than *correcting* best produces this atmosphere. Peer review creates a climate of team building and encourages honors speakers to view each presentation as a process rather than a product.

Despite the natural aptitude, intelligence, logic, and organizational proficiencies that most honors students display, many of them fear public speaking as much as the typical collegiate student population does. To alleviate these reservations, I integrate individual and group demonstrations of particular delivery methods within the course curriculum. After modeling the desired movements, gestures, facial expressions, and vocal tones, I select groups of students to repeat the techniques throughout the classroom, eventually incorporating the entire class into these practice sessions. By first observing my expectations, then imitating, adapting, modifying, assessing, and encouraging others, the students become less self-conscious and more comfortable performing before their peers. As they relax and enjoy the experience, the honors students coach and applaud one another while conquering each step of style, delivery, and creativity.

Training the students to use the peer review instruments is the next task. Each speech, and thus each evaluation form, varies as the speaking criteria build in sophistication throughout the semester. We start with four simple queries: analysis of thesis statements, vocabulary development, positive delivery aspects, and one *achievable* suggestion for improvement. Every student in the class reviews at least twelve speakers, so each presenter receives at least twelve positive comments about his or her delivery. As the speeches increase in length, intensity, and difficulty, I insert more group practice situations within the classroom, add descriptors to the peer review forms, raise the expectations,

provide a rating scale, and always include a place to write a paragraph of praise and observed potential. I maintain the consistency of twelve reviews per speech; this supportive base of affirming observations bolsters self-confidence and encourages creativity. Interestingly, the honors students quickly peruse my post-speech evaluation comments and grade markings but then intently and carefully read each peer review.

With the advantage of the smaller number of students in an honors section, both the modeling demonstrations and the specific criteria of the peer review process can be incorporated most efficiently into the curriculum. Enabling each class member to practice closely with the instructor, function as a peer coach, and receive best-practices advice from classmates, honors sections offer the public-speaking student an opportunity to reap powerful benefits.

By addressing the four canons of rhetoric—*invention, arrangement, style, and delivery*—the honors students progress from extemporaneous speeches to debates to oral reading performances, culminating in readers' theater events. As their poise and confidence increase, the orators quickly embrace the differing performance vehicles. With each successive assignment, I demonstrate new presentation techniques, provide a peer review rubric specific to the goals of the project, and allow the students to gain feedback from twelve of their colleagues. Built into the overall grade for the course, I evaluate the peer reviews on the basis of observed accuracy, completed criteria, communicated expectations, crafted creativity, and identified potential. As the class moves from the "me to we" mentality, they build a support system that recognizes the many talents and unique expressions of gifts possible within public communication formats. One student summarized the final experience in these words: "I actually cried before my first speech, but now I can hardly wait to perform again!"

A nurturing culture, skill-based coaching, immediate feedback, criteria-designed peer review, and positive reinforcement, all within the framework of a team-based honors classroom, result in a dramatic acquisition of public-speaking performance expertise, poise, and confidence.

### **LEDA CEMPELLIN, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF ART HISTORY**

The peer review process also leads to impressive results in my lower-division honors course on art appreciation. The term research project in this course is assessed in several stages throughout the semester, with the first two stages involving student peer review and the last stage requiring the instructor's assessment of the final project. In the first two phases, each student is required to review two other papers, anonymously, according to the same assessment rubric used later by the instructor: (1) general information; (2) analysis of the artworks; (3) compare/contrast (artworks, concepts, ideas); (4) introduction and conclusion; (5) cohesion and coherence; (6) fluency (spelling errors, style); (7) personal critical opinion (not instinctual but matured through a progressive deepening the subject); and (8) title, notes, bibliography, use of MLA style. I also

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add a few important questions to the assessment rubric to be answered by the peer reviewer in narrative form. For instance, one question is aimed at checking the student's understanding of the paper's core argumentation, thus increasing the reviewer's reading and comprehension skills and providing the author with an opportunity to receive important feedback about the strengths and flaws of his or her overall focus and vision. Other important questions require the reviewer to comment on the variety of sources, quality of information, and degree of scholarly depth, providing suggestions for improvement in each of these areas.

During the two stages of student peer review, the instructor becomes acquainted with the student's paper and also grades how successfully the reviewer has assessed the paper according to the rubric. For instance, if the student reviewer did not notice some contradictions in the paper's overall argument, the review was probably done superficially and/or too quickly, and the review would earn a poor grade. This process provides an incentive for students to take peer review seriously, helping to ensure that they both give and receive high-quality feedback. In the third and final stage, the instructor assesses the maturation of the student's project and the final results achieved. These three phases are spread throughout the semester to allow the instructor to monitor the projects' progress as well as give students enough time to critically examine the feedback received and refine their projects.

A recent example demonstrates the benefits of this peer review process. The original research paper assignment in Honors Art Appreciation for fall 2009 was to analyze the theme of interconnectedness in art by focusing on one or more artists and their relationship with the land, the community, or both. During a discussion-board session between the second and the third weeks, students had an opportunity to discuss their chosen topic and receive feedback from peers, helping them engage with their own and their peers' research projects from the beginning of the semester. During the fifth and tenth weeks, students were required to review two peer drafts each week. Finally, in the thirteenth week, the final essay of ten to thirteen pages, including ten to fifteen sources, was due for instructor grading. Students arrived at the final length gradually and naturally in large part thanks to the peer review process, which offered them significant feedback and suggestions for improvement.

One student chose to compare the sand art produced by the Navajo with the sand art of contemporary artist Jim Denevan. The title originally chosen by the student for the first draft was "Sand Art: Two Different Perspectives." Because the sources of sand art under consideration were so different, the risk of fragmentation into two topics represented a constant challenge but was effectively addressed by three suggestions from peer reviewers. The first suggestion, in the section on comparison/contrast, was to emphasize a crucial aspect of sand art: destruction, following creation, as part of the same artistic process. The second suggestion, in the last section of the assessment rubric, was to change the title for the paper so that it emphasized the "ephemeral nature of the artworks." The

original title, "Sand Art: Two Different Perspectives," evolved in the second draft into "Sand Art: Temporary Art from Two Perspectives." However, feedback from the peer reviewer during the second stage pointed out the paper's comparisons of two culturally different artists and suggested making the title more captivating. As a result, the title dilemma was finally and brilliantly solved by the student in the third and final version as "Sand Drawings: Only a Moment in Time." This final title, thanks in large part to the suggestions of peer reviewers, avoids direct reference to the artists and instead emphasizes their common characteristics, improving the harmony and strength of the paper's argument. The paper is one of four research projects from this honors class that have been published in Volume 9 (2010) of the *Undergraduate Research Journal for the Human Sciences* and can be found online at <<http://www.kon.org/urc/v9/interconnected-through-art/>>. Within this group, another student's published paper, which discusses a collaboration between artist Andy Goldsworthy and choreographer Régine Chopinot, has been listed as required reading for Professor Jürg Koch's fall 2010 Graduate Dance Composition (DANCE 530) at Washington University <<http://faculty.washington.edu/kochj/uwcourses/Dance%20530/Readingwriting.html>>.

These impressive results within the discipline of art history highlight the potential benefits of implementing a peer review process in the honors classroom and should encourage the adoption and implementation of peer review techniques across the curriculum. The peer review system can be shaped in different ways and easily targeted to the specific needs of any discipline.

## **APRIL BROOKS, PROFESSOR OF HISTORY**

The peer review process has also proven successful when tailored to the needs of students in the history department's research-based capstone course for graduating majors. Honors students who major in history come into the class with as much trepidation as non-honors students because all students know that they must pass the course with a grade of C or better to complete the major. In this capstone course, History 480: Historical Methods and Historiography, students are required to write a research paper of fifteen to thirty pages and incorporate both primary and secondary source material. Our students often assume that this research paper is the same as a term paper but soon discover that research is much more complicated and intense than they realize. Consequently, the capstone course has had fairly high drop and fail rates; in an average semester, fully one third of the students have not passed the class.

About four years ago, dismayed by these abysmal results, I attended a conference designed to teach instructors how to conduct a course that produces first-rate research papers (Brown and Baughman). I returned from that conference convinced that I could improve our student success rate by using two of the many techniques they suggested: a carefully constructed schedule and peer review.

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Each tenured and tenure-track faculty member is expected to take a turn at teaching the capstone class, and this responsibility is rotated. The students' workload includes frequent conferences with the instructor and with peer groups, and the process begins almost immediately. In a brief talk to the class soon after the semester begins, each student must present his or her topic to the entire class and answer questions about it. Listeners respond with questions and comments designed to help the student narrow the topic so that it can be completed within the time frame of a single semester. The students are then divided into small groups, and each early segment of the paper, turned in on a carefully constructed schedule, is peer reviewed before the author turns in a final and complete research paper.

Throughout the term the schedule ensures that students begin work on their topic early and continue at a measured pace no matter what goes on during class time. Thus, discussions about historiography can be interspersed with peer review sessions, problem-solving sessions, or individual conferences with the instructor. The manner in which these elements are arranged is left up to the individual instructors, among whom there is considerable variation. Regardless of who teaches the course, students tend to stay in the class more frequently and turn in better papers at the end because the course includes peer review. Their confidence level is high because they get a lot of support from their peers, and their work profits significantly from the input they receive. Here is a sample schedule for the project's completion:

- Week Three: Thesis statement.
- Week Six: First three pages including introduction and beginning of evidence.
- Week Ten: First seven pages.
- Week Twelve: Class no longer meets with instructor.
- Week Fourteen: Paper due.

In each of these steps, peer review is an integral part of the process. All papers except the final draft are peer reviewed before being turned in. Each writer gets a chance to revise before submitting the draft to the instructor for grading. The paper is reviewed by at least two members of the peer review group, and any issues are forwarded to the instructor for adjudication. When the class no longer meets with the instructor, the groups are urged to meet two or three times a week, and they sometimes meet more frequently. As the class progresses through these steps, the improvement in student writing skills is plainly visible. The students' critiquing skills improve as the groups gain confidence in their opinions and begin to see positive change in their work. Students frequently find that they need to change their thesis statement based on the results of their research, and my response to that is: "Congratulations, you have just become a historian."

This methodology has significantly lowered our drop/fail rate, which now hovers around five percent, and we have further proof that peer review works. Our university has an on-campus writing contest for seniors every spring. The top monetary award in this contest is \$2,500. In 2008, six students from the history capstone class submitted papers to the contest. Five of the students won awards; the total amount of money they garnered was \$7,500. In 2010, nine students submitted their papers, and three were awarded cash prizes totaling \$5,000. In both years, the top monetary award went to a student in our capstone class.

The class is hard work for the instructor, but the results are gratifying. The students report that they recognize the improvement in their writing skills and feel confident in their research ability. On our annual student opinion surveys, those who teach the capstone are scoring “off the charts” in availability and helpfulness.

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These four examples show how beneficial the peer review process has been for honors students in the humanities, and it can be successfully adapted to other disciplines as well. With careful design and implementation, peer review provides a win-win situation for both instructor and student, serving as an important tool in the arsenal of strategies instructors can use to help honors students develop valuable skills and achieve success across the curriculum.

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The authors may be contacted at

[Julie.Barst@sdstate.edu](mailto:Julie.Barst@sdstate.edu).

## APPENDIX

### INFORMATION, INCLUDING ONE VIDEO (TURNER), ABOUT DESIGNING AND IMPLEMENTING PEER REVIEW IN A VARIETY OF DISCIPLINES

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