Module Pédagogue

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***The quality of undergraduate student writing has long been a concern in higher education. This patch addresses this issue by describing an approach, called the Colleague Swap, which can be used in classes over a wide range of academic disciplines to empower students to work together in improving their writing skills.***

*Introduction*

Poor writing skills among students are neither new to the college classroom nor restricted in scope to a single academic discipline. Although undergraduate classes in English composition usually pave the way for improvement of student performance, generalization of acquired writing skills from these to other college classes remains a concern. This problem is exacerbated by the common student misconception that writing well is the exclusive domain of the English major.

In teaching college classes, there are two schools of thought on how to improve the quality of student writing in a given discipline. One approach advocates for the development of a separate course for the sole purpose of teaching effective writing skills tailored to that specific discipline. Consistent with the writing-across-the-curriculum argument, however, a far-less-sweeping solution to the problem entails reinforcing sound writing skills in the existing framework of established courses within a given discipline. This latter stance is the one that I have adopted in my own undergraduate classes in psychology, human services, and education. However, the approach is applicable to a wide range of other disciplines.

In a collaborative research effort while co-instructing an undergraduate educational psychology course early in my teaching career, the *Colleague Swap* (Camplese & Mayo, 1982) was born as a systematic means of improving student writing skills. As an applied pedagogy, I have since adapted this classroom innovation numerous times in the decades that have followed (Mayo, 2006, 2010, 2020).

*How the Colleague Swap Works*

In using the Colleague Swap, students earn grade-applicable credit by exchanging writing assignments with three to five of their classmates. Throughout this process, students evaluate, proofread, and critique one another’s work. At the same time that this strategy encourages writing improvement, it also empowers students to work together as active agents of academic enhancement in their own classes.

General guidelines governing peer critique of term, theme, research, position, and other papers take into account the following questions:

1. Does the introduction properly launch a connecting thread of ideas?
2. Does the summary effectively recap the main points?
3. Do the second, third, and following sentences in each paragraph follow closely from the opening sentence?
4. Are relevant ideas expressed accurately, completely, and coherently?
5. Are all grammatical, spelling, and other mechanical errors eliminated?

In addition to asking peer evaluators to incorporate their suggested revisions directly into the body of the writing assignment, a pre-printed *evaluation ticket*—a 26-item checklist of standard rhetorical, contextual, and bibliographic considerations—is used to help evaluators organize and present summative comments to their student colleagues. As reviewed preliminarily in class with an opportunity for students to ask clarifying questions, the evaluation checklist is organized into comprehensive categories containing various subheadings. Points are assigned to each subheading on the checklist. Space is provided for writing constructive criticism for each item within a given subheading. The contents of the evaluation ticket can be modified to conform to the needs of the course, the writing assignment involved, and/or the instructor’s preferences. As a general rule, I place less emphasis on the content subheading because students cannot be expected to possess expertise in all course-content areas. A sample checklist appears below.

[**Download Word version of ChecklistChecklist**](https://openfacultypatchbook.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Checklist.docx)

After the colleague swaps are completed, the marked papers and attached evaluation tickets are returned to their student authors and class time (face-to-face or virtually) is allotted for each student to meet briefly with corresponding peer evaluators. During the resulting work sessions, students explain their critique evaluations and help one another improve the quality of their papers. As a measure of quality control over the peer-critique process, it is useful for both the instructor and the authors of respective papers to rate the critique evaluations offered by students in a manner that ties to their overall grade determination for the course.

*Cost-Benefit Analysis*

There are curriculum-specific advantages afforded through using the Colleague Swap. Once revised papers are submitted to the instructor for final grading purposes, most technical errors will be eliminated and the content is typically stronger. With mechanical and grammatical mistakes minimized, instructors can now concentrate more freely on the task of judging each paper’s content in the general absence of distracting technical errors.

Allowing students to critique each other’s papers also creates a more cooperative learning environment and increases student involvement in the content and flow of the course. It is only natural that students develop a greater vested interest in a class in which they believe their feedback matters.

For instructors, the primary disadvantage associated with the Colleague Swap is expenditure of time—both in rating critique evaluations and in devoting class time to student work sessions that could be used otherwise. Nonetheless, this difficulty is offset by student’s writing gains and the consequent need for significantly less time by instructors to correct mechanical errors in students’ revised papers.

Another potential pitfall in using the Colleague Swap involves the assignment of students to peer-critique relationships. Due to the high probability of rating inflation, it is wise to avoid allowing students who know each other well to swap papers. As a related instructor consideration (regardless of the nature of the peer-critique relationship), students are generally inhibited about criticizing a classmate’s paper—either out of personal insecurity or fear of reprisal. Before using the Colleague Swap in their classes, instructors should stress to students the need for unbiased feedback as an important means of helping one another become more proficient writers.

As a final caveat in employing the Colleague Swap, students need to know that suggestions for change offered by their classmates are purely advisory in nature. Ultimate responsibility for researching the necessity, accuracy, and validity of these recommended revisions lies squarely on the shoulders of student authors.