

ANALYZING PEER EDITING IN AN AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS CLASS

Analyzing Peer Editing In An Agricultural Communications Class

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Abstract

In-class peer editing exercises were conducted and assessed throughout the course of an agricultural communications class. Students were asked to edit anonymous press releases and then respond to the question “What are your thoughts on in-class editing exercises?” This research found students make multiple types of edits, including Associated Press Style corrections, grammar corrections and content corrections. Only a small percentage of students made incorrect edits to the press release. A large amount of students reported in-class exercises increase their confidence, allow them to catch more mistakes and learn from others in the class. Together, these findings suggest in-class editing exercises are beneficial to agricultural communications students.

Peer Assessment Among AGCM Students

Peer assessment can be defined as an organization in which students consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality or success of the products or outcomes of learning of their peers (Topping, 1998). Peer assessment can be accomplished in a variety of ways: in the classroom (Liu, Carless, 2006), online (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015), anonymous and blind or identified (Topping, 1998).

Peer assessment in journalistic and writing courses helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses, clarify intentions for writing a story and target problems and mistakes students are making in their writing (Min, 2005).

Agricultural communications students learn to write for a diverse audience using a journalistic style, including inverted pyramid format and Associated Press Style. These concepts are taught via multiple methods, including lecture, in-class review games, self-guided writing assignments and peer assessment.

Purpose

This research focused on in-class peer editing exercises in an agricultural communications course intended to instruct students on how to write for a mass audience. The course includes instruction on journalistic writing, source development, and Associated Press Style. The course often includes peer-editing experiences in which the instructor takes a paragraph or two from student papers and provides them, without identifying information, to the class for peer editing. However, in this research, students at the end of the semester were provided entire press release assignments that were submitted at the beginning of the semester. With identifying information redacted, the students were randomly provided a press release to edit. Knowing what types of edits students make and how they approach peer editing experiences

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will allow instructors to better tailor in-class editing experiences.

Objectives

The objectives for this research were:

1. Determine the types of edits agricultural communications students made in a peer assessment exercise; and
2. Determine students' perceptions regarding peer assessment exercises.

Literature Review

Peer Assessment

Peer editing began in the late 1960s (Graner, 1987). Writing classes across the country were restructured into small groups where writers could read, edit, criticize and compliment their colleagues' writing (Graner, 1987). Since then, countless definitions of peer assessment have been developed, and the topic of how peer assessment can be used as a tool in education has become increasingly popular (Jhangiani, 2016).

One definition of peer assessment is the "arrangement in which individuals consider the amount, level, value, worth, quality or success of the products or outcomes of learning of peers of similar status" (Topping, 1998). There are two major purposes of assessment: a summative purpose and a learning purpose (Liu & Carless, 2006). The first is usually dominant, simply because students frequently report to be driven by a desire for high grades (Liu & Carless, 2006).

Peer assessment benefits. Peer editing allows students to strive for better grades and also learn more in the process (Liu & Carless, 2006). Instructors can effectively incorporate and provide feedback and evaluate learning (Jhangiani, 2016). When students work together, they can help one another and provide input for each other on the issue under discussion (Amores, 1997). Peer assessment is intended to help students plan their own learning, identify their

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strengths and weaknesses, target areas for remedial action, and develop meta-cognitive and other personal and professional transferable skills (Topping, 1998).

Beyond that, clarifying writers' intentions, identifying problems, explaining the nature of problems, and making specific suggestions are all characteristics of peer assessment (Min, 2005). Previous research has shown that individual peer assessors benefit by developing a range of behavioral, cognitive and metacognitive skills, including critical and reflexive thinking, evaluation and writing, problem solving and communication and cooperation (Jhangiani, 2016). Peer assessment has also been linked with increases in learning motivation, maturity and confidence, taking responsibility for one's own learning and learning performance (Jhangiani, 2016).

Peer interaction also enhances the standards within a classroom and can lead to improved understanding and learning (Liu & Carless, 2006). Peer editing enables students to "take an active role in the management of their own learning" (Liu & Carless, 2006). Some studies suggest that peer assessment takes power away from an instructor; however, it gives students more power, confidence and control (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015).

Peer assessment limitations. Some student writers lack the skill to make effective evaluations (Graner, 1987). There is a big disadvantage of having inexperienced, unskilled evaluators who may offer inaccurate advice (Graner, 1987). Additionally, students may come to class unprepared or uncommitted (Graner, 1987). Peer assessment also gives students a great deal of power and classroom control, which may be a problem for instructors (Graner, 1987).

Another argument against peer assessment is the fact that not all students reach the same performance level (Rogers & Feller, 2016). Certain studies show students may perceive the performance level of their exemplary peers to be out of reach (Rogers & Feller, 2016). This

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discouragement, at times, undermines motivation and success and causes “de-identification with the relevant domain” (Rogers & Feller, 2016). A fundamental issue in peer assessment is that participants may lack the motivation to assess their peers’ work faithfully and fairly (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015).

With colleges and universities specifically, peer assessment is intended to help students plan their own learning (Topping, 1998). Some of the strongest peer assessments occur when peer marks are made anonymously and students are matched by ability rather than randomly (Topping, 1998). These types of peer assessments provide students with more time to spend reviewing assignments, increased interest and amplified responsibility (Topping, 1998).

There is still a substantial amount of research that can be conducted regarding peer assessment (Diab, 2010). The effect of error correction on students’ language ability in revised drafts is still being questioned (Diab, 2011).

Peer Assessment Studies and Research in Other Courses

Much peer assessment research has been conducted within composition and English as a Second Language courses and foreign language courses (Amores, 1997). One study at West Virginia University focused on systematic descriptions of events and behaviors that occurred throughout the semester in a collegiate Spanish course (Amores, 1997). All students who were involved in the study had either a major or minor in Spanish (Amores, 1997). After pairing with another student and completing peer-editing tasks, the students were interviewed and data was collected from the students’ observations (Amores, 1997). The results of this study showed status and roles become critical components in peer editing (Amores, 1997). The researcher paired students together based on writing ability, allowing students to have similar skill. Power and criticism both create authority and confidence for students (Amores, 1997).

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Another study focused on programming and peer-editing software (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015). The research pointed out a key issue with peer editing – some participants lack the motivation to assess others’ work faithfully and fairly (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015). With that, the researchers created a software module with a “peer code review system” called EduPCR4. This system is able to monitor peer assessment results and trigger the instructor’s arbitration when needed (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015). Many of the arguments in support of software like this suggest that most students do not possess the knowledge and skillset to successfully peer edit (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015). This type of software may also encourage students’ participation in peer assessment experiences and increases fairness (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015).

Methods

During the beginning of the Fall 2016 semester, all students in an agricultural communications writing-oriented course (N = 32) were asked to submit their first press release assignment for a double-blind study. IRB approval was granted for the study, which was originally intended to be a cross-university project in which Oklahoma State University and University of Arkansas students would trade papers and edit each other’s work. However, when plans fell through for the project, students at OSU edited their submitted projects later in the semester. They were asked to submit these edited press releases just as if they had edited the work of the students at the other university. In effect, the students peer edited their beginning-of-semester work at the end of the semester. The peer editing continued to be a blind process, as the press releases were originally anonymously submitted. They were photocopied and handed back to students, who randomly chose and edited one press release. This research includes those press releases and a written response from each participant (n = 15).

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Following this blind peer-editing exercise, students were asked to anonymously answer the question “What are your thoughts on in-class editing exercises?” These responses were then analyzed by the researcher. The responses were placed into an Excel document and then color-coded by the researcher into four main ideas: confidence, helpfulness and explanations, learning from others’ mistakes and perspectives and negative. These four ideas were evident in multiple responses. Additionally, the edited press releases were also analyzed to determine the number of correct Associated Press Style marks, incorrect marks, correct content corrections and grammatical corrections. Associated Press Style is a writing form that journalists use. It was developed in the 1950s and provides guidelines for spelling, punctuation, language and journalistic style. The different types of edits were color-coded and frequencies of each edit were compiled and analyzed in an Excel document.

Findings

Findings Related to Objective 1 - Editing Marks.

Objective one was to determine the type of edits made by agricultural communications students. The number of Associated Press Style corrections, grammatical corrections, content edits and incorrect edits made to each press release were recorded. Fifteen press releases in total were analyzed, including eight different press releases. Of the 15 total press releases edited, there were 21 total Associated Press Style corrections, 40 grammatical corrections, 51 content edits and five incorrect edits made by the students (see Figure 1).

The average of each type of edit were fairly different. Each student averaged 1.4 Associated Press Style corrections, 2.7 grammatical corrections, 3.4 content edits and 0.3 incorrect edits.

Figure 1. Types of Corrections

Student	AP Corrections	Grammatical Corrections	Content Edits	Incorrect Edits
S1	1	3	1	0
S2	0	1	0	1
S3	3	10	8	1
S4	5	16	4	0
S5	3	1	8	0
S6	2	0	3	0
S7	2	1	5	0
S8	1	2	2	0
S9	0	0	2	0
S10	0	0	3	1
S11	0	4	3	1
S12	1	0	0	1
S13	0	1	1	0
S14	3	0	6	0
S15	0	1	5	0
Total:	21	40	51	5
Average:	1.4	2.7	3.4	0.3
Median:	1	1	3	0

Figure 1. Students' edits by type, including total, average and median for each.

Each student made different edits to the press releases. For example, grammatical corrections varied from none to 16 (see Figure 2). Students edited different press releases, and not all releases included the same types or numbers of potential mistakes.

When considered by percentage, the majority of edits made were content edits. Nearly 44 percent of the total edits made were content related (see Figure 3). Beyond that, 4.27 percent of the total edits were incorrect edits.

Findings Related to Objective 2 - Written Response

Objective two was to determine the perspectives of agricultural communications students toward peer assessment exercises. After determining the number of edits made, each of the students' response to the question "What are your thoughts on in-class editing exercises?" were

Figure 2. Edits Made By Individual Students

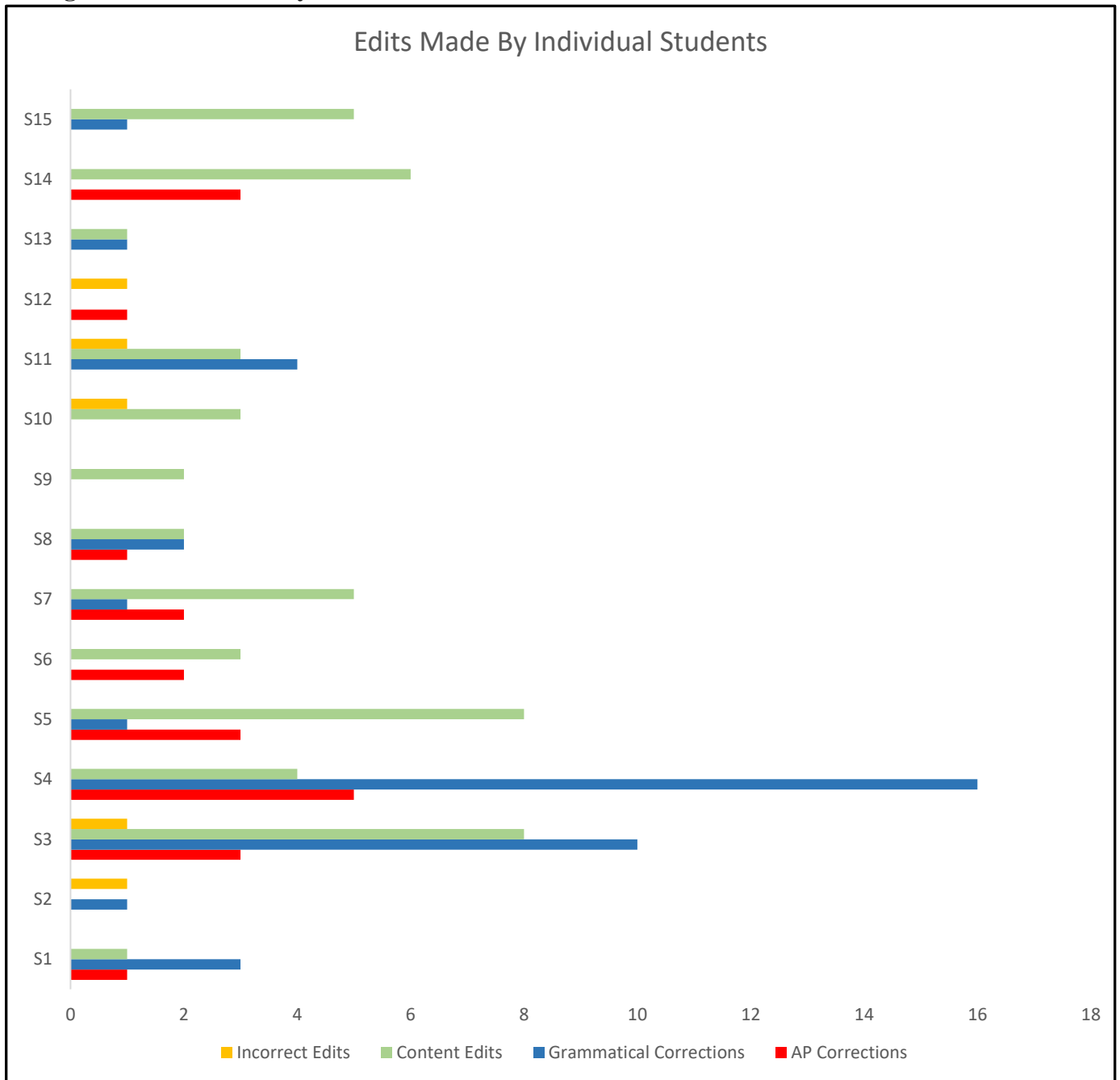


Figure 2. This bar graph shows the students' edits for each type of correction.

read and analyzed. Most of the responses were a few sentences and provided insight into each student's perspective regarding in-class editing exercises. The comments of each student were placed into an Excel document and color-coded by similar themes. The researcher identified four

Figure 3. Edits By Percentage

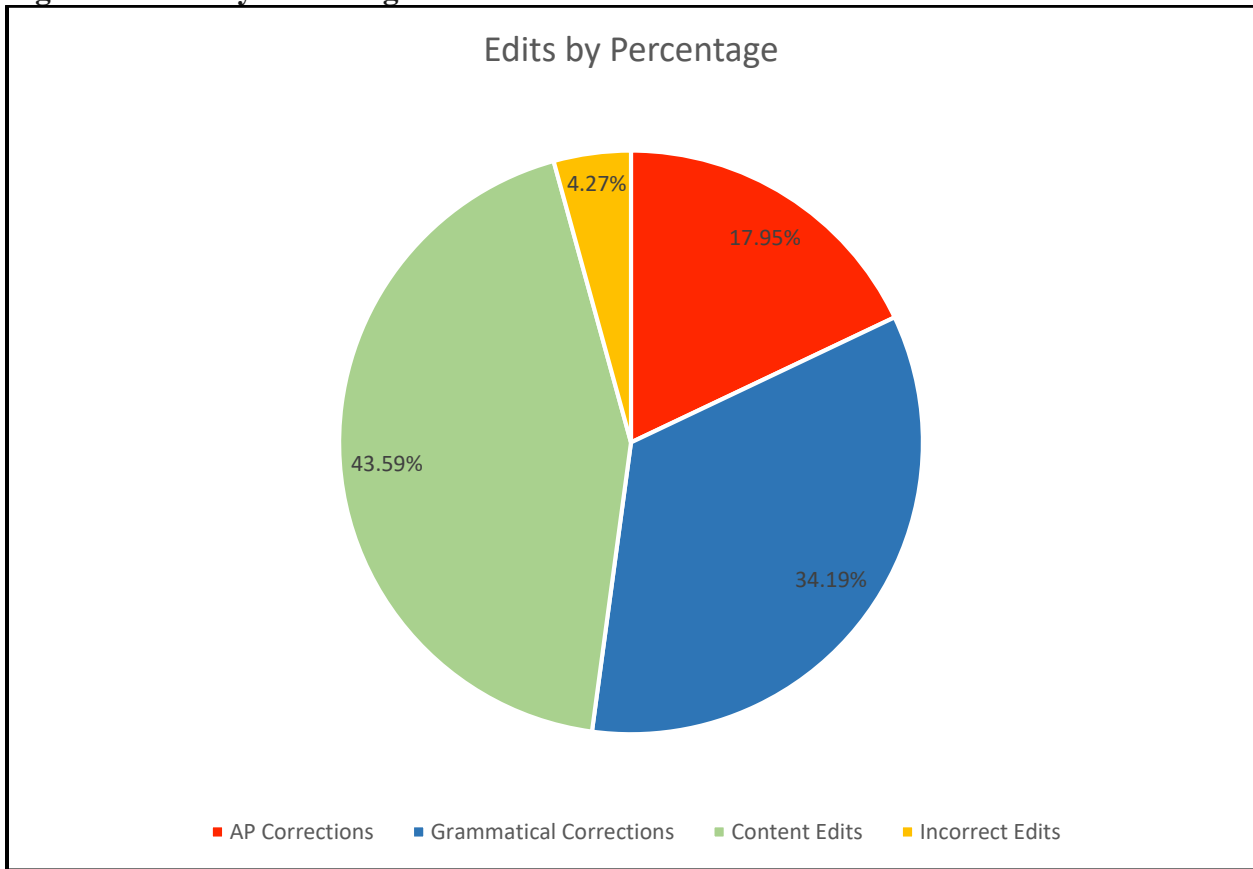


Figure 3. This pie chart shows the percentage of each type of edits compared to the total number of edits made.

themes: confidence, helpfulness, learning from others’ mistakes and perspectives, and negativity.

Confidence. Nearly 45 percent of students said the in-class editing exercises increased their confidence in writing and editing skills. One student said the exercises solidified the information they learned throughout the course and made them confident they had retained the information. Another said that it “strengthened the Associated Press Style foundation.” Others reported they felt more confident when editing personal work away from the classroom. Another student said that the exercises “give me confidence that I am retaining the information taught in class.”

Helpfulness and Explanations. Sixty percent of students found the in-class editing exercises helpful. One student stated that it was “one of my favorite things we have done this

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semester.” Others said the in-class editing was great hands-on learning and a fun and good learning tool for Associated Press Style. One student said that the peer editing exercises are “helpful in that they teach us to look for errors in our own writing.”

Another student said that the editing exercises are a “great way to have hands-on involvement with Associated Press Style.” One student said they have “learned more about editing and how to spot different mistakes in Associated Press Style writing. Being able to learn from our own mistakes is helpful to prevent us from making the same ones over and over again.” Finally, another student said in-class editing “helps me edit my own materials when working at home. It also makes me feel more confident in my editing skills.”

Learning from Others’ Mistakes and Perspectives. A majority of the students found that learning from others’ mistakes and perspectives was enlightening. Eighty percent of students reported seeing others’ work and mistakes allowed them to learn more about their own work and ensured them that they were on the right track with their own writing.

One student said that the exercises “made me feel like my work is not as bad when I see others making mistakes similar to mine.” Another student wrote that the in-class editing exercises “gives me an opportunity to see more mistakes than just my own, and I can learn from other peoples’ mistakes, too.”

Another student wrote that in-class editing was a “fun activity and a good learning tool for Associated Press Style.” This student added that in-class editing “shows me that I am not the only one making mistakes and keeps me from making mistakes in the future.”

Similarly, another student reported the in-class editing assignments were “extremely beneficial.” This student added that the exercises “allow you to pick out mistakes that you might be making as well, but they are easier to pick out since it is not the same writing you have looked

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over several times before.”

A student also reported the exercises are “encouraging because I know I am not the only one making some mistakes, and the explanations of why something is wrong help me remember to not make the mistakes again.”

Negative. Only 3 students, or 20 percent, gave negative feedback regarding the in-class editing exercises. One student suggested incorporating fewer in-class editing exercises in the class, while another stated they do not care for the exercises.

Another student said they felt self-conscious and the need to “defend” their papers during the in-class editing exercises. The student continued by saying that in-class editing made them feel “self-conscious about my papers, as if I need to defend them. However, I always appreciate seeing writing through another perspective and gaining ideas for future articles.” Although the student felt self-conscious, they did report some positive aspects of the in-class peer editing exercises.

Discussion

This research considers blind peer assessment. Topping (1998) wrote that some of the strongest peer assessments occur when peer marks are made anonymously and students are matched by ability rather than randomly. These types of peer assessments provide students with more time to spend reviewing assignments, increased interest and amplified responsibility (Topping, 1998).

The majority of students in this research made multiple types of edits, but several corrected a high amount of content-related edits. Content corrections made up the largest portion of the total edits, followed by grammatical corrections and then Associated Press Style corrections. This may suggest that students are most comfortable with content and grammatical

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corrections, which is probably due to the fact that students learned about grammar and content throughout high school. Some students may not even know what Associated Press Style writing is until attending college and taking news writing courses.

There were also a small number of incorrect edits made. Some arguments against peer editing focus on some student writers lack of skill to make effective evaluations (Graner, 1987). There is a big disadvantage of having inexperienced, unskilled evaluators who may offer inaccurate advice (Graner, 1987). Additionally, students may come to class unprepared or uncommitted (Graner, 1987). The incorrect edits made could have been due to a lack of preparation, motivation or experience.

With that being said, one of the biggest hurdles with agricultural communications classes is teaching students how to write correct Associated Press Style. The findings of this research showed only a small number of Associated Press Style edits made. After reviewing the press releases, the students made correct Associated Press Style edits and caught most Associated Press Style errors. This suggests that the OSU agricultural communications faculty are doing a great job teaching students about correct Associated Press Style writing.

Beyond that, the students gave overall feedback about in-class peer editing exercises. A majority of students found in-class peer editing helped them learn from others' mistakes and others' perspectives. This suggests that this generation of students thrives on knowing others skills and confidence in coursework. Many students suggested that knowing others' mistakes and perspectives allowed them to know that they were on the right track in their coursework. This suggests that feeling one with a group enhances the students' confidence. Peer editing allows students to strive for better grades and also learn more in the process (Liu and Carless, 2006), and that is solidified through the findings of this research.

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Some students said the peer editing exercises boosted their confidence in their writing skills and Associated Press Style skills. Peer assessment has also been linked with increases in learning motivation, maturity and confidence, taking responsibility for one's own learning and learning performance (Jhangiani, 2016). Completing in-class peer editing exercises allows the professor to give feedback and explanations. Some studies suggest that peer assessment takes power away from an instructor; however, it gives students more power, confidence and control (Wang, Ai, Liang & Liu, 2015). Although the instructor may have less power, the experience may allow the instructor to facilitate the class more and give students increased opportunities to learn and explore on their own. In this research, the transfer of power from instructor to student seems to enhance learning for the students and allows them to retain more information and confidence.

A small number of students gave negative feedback regarding in-class peer editing exercises. One student suggested the peer-editing exercises made them feel self-conscious and that they had to defend their work. One argument against peer assessment is the fact that not all students reach the same performance level (Rogers & Feller, 2016). Some studies show students may perceive the performance level of their exemplary peers to be out of reach (Rogers & Feller, 2016). This discouragement, at times, undermines motivation and success and may cause de-identification (Rogers & Feller, 2016). This negative feedback regarding the in-class peer editing may be due to differences in performance levels.

Future research on peer editing could include the effects of grouping students with like abilities in peer editing exercises. Additionally, future research could include the assessment of evaluation throughout the semester, rather than focusing on one experience.

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