

Peer Review Circles: At a Glance

By

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1. What are PRCs?

They are an interactive peer review task (TBLT) that requires students to engage with and present about another's work in an effort to assist the writer. They are an attempt to lift the common practice of **literature circles** used in first language literature classes into TESOL / additional language learning (ALL). Although they are used in writing classes, all **four skills are engaged** – first **writing** of their own work (pre-class) then **reading** and evaluating peers' writing, then **speaking** and **listening** about it in a variety of genres – **Monolog**, **Dialog**, and multi-party **Discussion** – an **MDD cycle**). Finally, the PRC ends with and individually **written** summary-reflection of what was said and learned in the PRC.

2. Why did we come up with this arrangement?

Our students reported disliking peer review as presented to them in their writing text books – essentially “exchange with a partner and write answers to a set of questions on a sheet.” Moreover, their essays rarely reflected the peer's comments. Finally, we, as instructors, had little opportunity for ‘quality control’ over the peer review process as it happened (i.e. the talk-in-interaction).

3. How do we do a PRC?

Before class

Students write a draft of their assignment (e.g. Todd – paragraphs and essays; Shaun – essays and research papers).

They print 2 copies of their assignment and they print 1 copy of the PRC sheet.

TIP1: both discussants will read the writer's paper but only one completes the PRC sheet – that way they must talk and will not just pass the PRC sheet to each other.

Setting up and grouping

- 1) T divides the students into groups of three. Give each person a role – we use A, B, and C for simplicity.

TIP 2: Clearly identify the roles with stickers, ‘name’ cards, chair position, or some other means. Teachers should be able to look at the group and know if the right person is speaking at the correct time to the right person.

- 2) Students read the PRC question sheet and highlight the questions they want their readers to answer.
- 3) Everyone passes one copy of their writing to each of the other members of the group.
- 4) Everyone passes their own PRC sheet, with highlighted questions, to the correct person.

Table 1. Who passes what to whom in a PRC

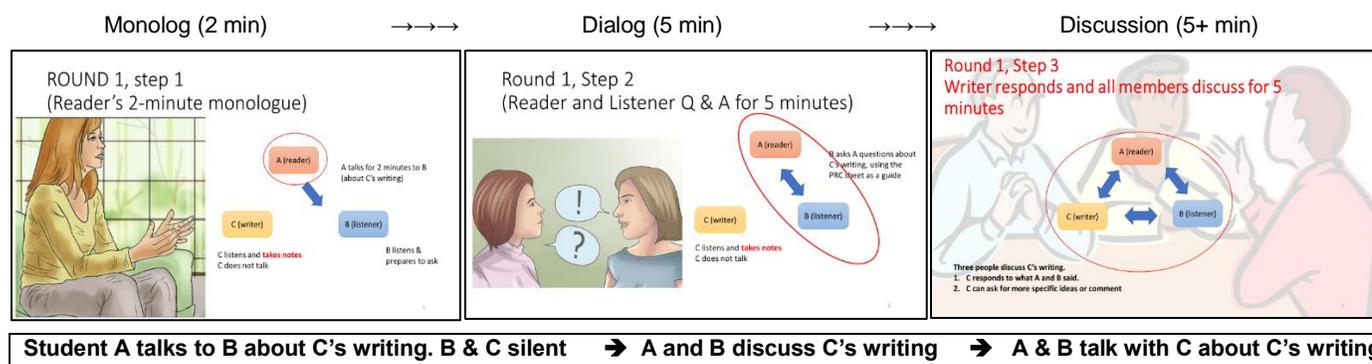
Writer	Passes article and highlighted PRC question sheet to their primary reader	Passes only their essay to their secondary reader
A	B	C
B	C	A
C	A	B

Silent reading and thinking

- 5) Students read BOTH writings
- 6) Students then think of answers to the PRC sheet for ONE of the other writers

Monolog-Dialog-Discussion (MDD) Cycle 1 – analyzing person C's writing

The talk in the PRC cycle moves from a short monolog, to a longer Q & A about someone else's writing. The writer does nothing at this time. Finally, an open discussion happens in which the writer can address comments made by the others, or ask for more help. (See figure below)



TIP 3: Students often want to **talk to the writer** (and not to the designated listener) during steps 1 and 2. To make them talk to each other and not to the writer (person 'C' in MDD Cycle 1), you can tell the writer to put her/his head on the desk.

NOTE: This is why you need a clear way of identifying each speaker (see TIP 1). If A talks to C, C does not experience hearing the way that others read her/his words as fully.

NOTE: The timing that we indicate here is a suggestion that worked in our contexts. You may need more or less per step of the cycle depending on your students' needs.

MDD Cycle 2 – analyzing person A's writing

This follows the same procedure and timing as Cycle 1.

Student B talks to C about A's writing. C & A silent → B and C discuss A's writing → B & C talk with A about A's writing.

TIP 4: Allow B & C to briefly skim back over A's writing before B does his/her monolog – they sometimes forget what they wanted to say

MDD Cycle 3 – analyzing person B's writing

This follows the same procedure and timing as Cycle 1

Student C talks to A about B's writing. A & B silent → C and A discuss B's writing → C & A talk with B about B's writing.

Reflection:

Students write on a separate sheet of paper for 5 min. They summarize the comments others said about their work, what they need to fix and any other ideas they got from reading / listening to the others.

Submit essays and further reflection:

When students submit their final drafts of their writing to the teacher they also answer questions such as the following. Less proficient learners could do this in L1 if T thinks it's appropriate.

1. **Think about your PRC. What helped you the most (this time)?**
2. **Think about your PRC. What was least helpful (this time)?**
3. **What will you do differently the next time you do the PRC? [Did you do the PRC differently this time from the previous PRC?]**
4. **How else did you get feedback on this essay before you submitted it? How was it different from the PRC? Was it more or less helpful than the PRC?**

This step is included to allow for time perspective about their peers' contributions to the final product and to consider ways to make the process better for them. Asking students to write it down also gives the T some ideas about what may need tweaking.

TIP 5: Give a word count minimum for each answer, otherwise you may get one-word answers. (We asked for 100 words per question.)

4. What did students think about the PRCs? (sample responses from surveys, interviews, and reflection writing)

Positive outweighed negative.

- “[The] purpose of writing is communicating. The PRC showed me how well I was communicating, and I could make an adjustment. Plus, I got to learn how to assess a piece of writing.”
- “when peers thought some part was too long - it was too long, when they thought some parts were unnecessary- they were unnecessary.”
- “It [PRC] gave [me] more motivation for writing [my] first draft.”
- “In the first PRC everyone was confused and did not give effective feedback. But as weeks passed, it gave us the chance to thing about the organization and logic of the essay.”

But the negative was consistent along the theme that their partner(s) did not or could not criticize.

- “...the students, especially freshmen, are reluctant to say bad things, but that is the productive thing to do.”
- “...everyone only complimented me. But when I went to the professor, he pointed out so many problems I needed to rewrite almost everything.”

Listening to others' talk to each other was different and good.

- “we spend more time preparing the essay thinking about the PRC partner”
- “Having knowledge about how readers perceive your writing is critical.”
- “Listening to other people talk about my essay was good – it was less stressful to hear them talk to each other than to hear it directly.”

5. What were some issues we experienced, or feel others may have?

Uneven number of students (not a multiple of 3).

Put the two best writers together as a pair and the rest of the class in groups of three. Have them do their monolog to you.

Unprepared students. (Students who don't bring a draft. This **never** happened in Shaun's classes, Todd 😞)

Include “PRC” participation in the grading rubric for the assignment (Shaun gives 10%). Let students know this.

Have something for them to analyze (from another class, teacher-written draft, etc.) and put them in a group.

Uneven proficiency levels.

Weak students cannot read fast enough, or understand well enough – especially if grouped with very high proficiency students. Some solutions include: Give more reading time; allow L1 use for clarification purposes; T involvement in PRC (be sensitive!); have students post their drafts online ahead of class, etc.

6. Conclusions / Final thoughts.

It **WILL** not work perfectly the first time (we guarantee). Do it two or three times so students are familiar with the task and **can direct their attention to giving the kind of feedback they want to get**. The first time, they expect great feedback and rarely get it. The reflection papers suggest that they figured out they have to give good feedback. It takes multiple iterations of a task to develop be able to do it well.