



### The Peer Review Course

While in the process of flipping my English composition classroom from a writing class to a lecture class, I hit upon an activity that altered the way the class would run for the rest of the semester. I had set up this course in a computer lab so that I could briefly lecture or answer questions about an assignment before the students would spend the rest of the period writing. They would receive immediate answers to their questions as well as immediate support and critiques of their writing from me and from their peers. Like most English instructors, my intent was to offer an official peer review day for each essay due.

My plans did not have the results I expected, though. The pattern to the class became a brief Q&A session followed by the students dividing into two groups: those who avoided making eye contact with me so I would not interrupt their drafting, and those who raised their hands repeatedly so I could check their every paragraph. The former set of students did not receive any immediate feedback from me or their peers because they avoided it; the latter set of students was looking for me to “pre-grade” their work. None of them were learning to review essays critically to improve their writing skills.

So, I changed the class requirement. Instead of offering a chance at peer review of their first essay, I informed the students they were required to bring in their drafts—at whatever stage they were written—saved on a jump drive. “The peer review for next week is now mandatory,” I instructed. I decided they would critique each other if I forced the issue.

The students were leery of sharing their work with their classmates, and it took a while to get a volunteer to offer the first essay. We are fortunate to have a Promethean Board at the front of the lab, so when the first student offered, I showed her essay on screen and then marked it in front of the whole class based on her peers’ comments.

To offer balanced information, we determined as a class what worked well within the essay and what needed improvement based upon the specific audience reviewing it. When the students were hesitant to offer more than a “good work” or “I like it,” I pressed them by asking “Why is it good?” or “Why do you like it?” We then discussed what style ideas the students tried and how they worked or did not work for their general audience of classmates. In this period, we were able to examine three students’ drafts, including the introduction, a few body paragraphs, and any research they chose to include.

This was a fantastic amount of feedback for a one-hour-and-fifteen-minute class, but I did not feel like we had done enough. I learned differently when I looked at the faces of every student in the room. They were able to offer constructive criticism as a team of 25. In addition, they were able to take what they heard from their classmates' comments and what they had read in the examples on screen and apply it to their own drafts. By the end of the class period, I was hearing positive comments about the writing skill of the student volunteers and that the students wished we could continue editing papers the following week.

One student summarized his classmates' thoughts: "These were good drafts on the board, and I feel like my paper isn't at that level yet. But, now I know that it should be."

We ended the class discussing what strengths the students realized they had when writing, and what they could learn from the drafts we had examined already. Some students have a way with words but needed to improve their paragraph structure; others were strong researchers but struggled in formatting that research properly. Ultimately, they saw that they all can make improvements and that peer review as a class is a fun, and useful, exercise. I saw that a class which is comfortable as a group will think critically about their own drafts and respond to their peers in a way that keeps everyone engaged and improving.

When the students asked if we could group peer review essays in our lab for the remainder of the term, I readily agreed. I know that I can interrupt with a lesson or two if needed as the term progresses, but if they are willing to draft at home as preparation for a review in class, I see no reason to have them stop working as a team. I do not want to risk losing their engagement or to miss the opportunity for critical thinking practice in this class.

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