

In the Classroom 125

Using Peer Review in Your Classroom for Better Products

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks ever so much for taking time out of your schedule to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, and you're still hanging out with me. I really do appreciate it. I have to apologize for not putting out an episode last week. To be honest, I was not in the game and I don't think I would have delivered a good episode. The reason why is, right in the middle of my weekend, I received a call letting me know that a very respected and favored professor had a tragic accident and passed away.

That just took me out of my game, in more ways than one. His loss, to lose his life has been a huge loss to our community. As I indicated, really enjoyed working with this professor, and it's just an absolute tragedy and tremendously sad. That is why that we did not have an episode. However, we need to move on. This week we're going to take a look at peer review in the classroom, how we can use it. It's a strategy I use with my grad students, and it seems to be viewed favorably.

Now, I also recognize that students are not keen on doing group work. They're not keen on doing peer reviews, but you can make it more palatable by letting them know why that we're doing it. There's a lot of benefits to using peer reviews. As I have advanced in my degrees, I have come to recognize the importance for others to read my work and offer suggestions for improvement. Every time I have somebody else read my work, I end up with a better product.

Right now, I have a book that is out in the hands of a number of beta readers. If any of those beta readers are listening to this, thank you, thank you, thank you. I really appreciate it. Here in about two weeks, I should have that back in my hands and I am confident that they will offer all kinds of ideas where I can improve that book. I'm looking forward to what they have to say. We have to get students to think also in this same mindset about the idea of peer reviews.

As I use peer reviews, I use it for an online graduate-level course. During the course, students are developing what is called a program proposal. Over the course of the term, they submit the proposal in three phases. There's two draft proposals that they submit, and then they have their final proposal. At the end of each phase, ideally, the proposal should improve. We should get a better product after each phase. During the two drafts, that is where I use peer review.

Each of the students in my class, they will have two other proposals that they would look at, review, make comments, add suggestions in order to help the writer create a better proposal. The reviewers have the opportunity to write directly on the proposal,

but they also have to complete a worksheet that I have put together. The worksheet asks the reviewers to analyze the whole program plan in terms of composition, ensuring that all the elements are being addressed properly, that they're providing support, citations, and basically the overall writing.

Each set of peer reviews is worth 10% of the overall grade. By making it worth a letter grade, this helps to ensure that the quality in the review is meeting my expectations. Before I dive in on how I do peer reviews in my class, let's see what others are saying. First of all, we're going to look at some of the benefits of using peer review. One of the things that I have found out and others have commented on is students better understand what they must do in order to be successful with that particular project. They gain this appreciation by seeing what others are doing and how others are handling different parts of the project.

They get to see how others are tackling the problem. They also get inspiration and ideas that they can apply to their particular review. They become also better writers. By helping others with their writing, they have to really dial in on what they're doing in their writing. They in turn become better writers. When doing a peer review, it's important that the students don't get into the weeds.

They're not English professors, their job is not to be grammar Nazis and tweak every piece of grammar that's out there, but really the overall message. How is that communicated? Are they hitting all the important points? Are they providing enough support? Those kinds of things. Is the piece that they're reviewing able to clearly communicate the intent of the assignment? That is one of the benefits out there. Also, writing is not a solo endeavor.

The more that I write, the more I've come to realize that this is not a solo activity and one should become comfortable with others reading what you're writing, and getting suggestions for improvement. At work, for example, I may draft an e-mail that I submit to others to make sure that I got all the elements taken care of, or that I'm using the language that meets the culture that I'm working in. This has been very true at where I'm working right now.

It's a slightly different culture, and so they have ways that they do things. I just want to make sure that I'm in line with this. By practicing this activity in a classroom, this will help students develop also professionally. Where when they go into a workplace, they are able to dive in and offer suggestions, help improve writing, but also be courageous enough to solicit input from others so they can take whatever product they have to the next level.

One other thing, students need feedback in order to improve. Just having the instructor be a solo reviewer, as an instructor you can only provide so much feedback. However, multiple reviewers can identify more areas that can be adjusted thus leading to an improved product. Multiple reviewers, because of their experiences, provide different perspectives that may not be considered by just having one reviewer. Those are some of the benefits. Preparing for a review session, there's things that you need to do before the review, during the review, and after the session.

Naturally, this is going to change based on the modality that you're teaching in. A face-to-face class, using peer review will be slightly different than an online class, but let's talk about some of the things that we need to consider. Before the review session even starts, there's some logistical considerations that you have to take into account. First of all, is it on your syllabus? As you're thinking about assignments for your class, consider if you will be using peer reviews and how they fit in with the rest of your class, making sure that you have time for them, making sure that they're at the right sequence so you can get the maximum benefit.

As I said, you're going to naturally want to get it on your syllabus and get the materials prepared. If you're teaching online, you're also going to want to set up the activities in your learning management system. I'm a huge fan of using technology to support these types of activities. Another thing that you have to consider as you're setting up this activity is how you're going to get the papers or the products in the hands of the students for review. For a face-to-face class, you're going to probably need physical copies.

Who's providing them? Are all the students going to provide multiple copies that they can distribute? Are you going to take their submission, copy them multiple times and redistribute them for an online class? As I said, I use a learning management system, so I can tie a peer review right to that particular submission. When everyone submits their documents, we immediately dive into the peer review. That's the strategy that I use. Nice thing about a learning management system is I can also randomize the assignments, but I also have the capability of overriding that and assigning reviewers as I see fit.

In some cases, you may want the same reviewers for the entire term, that they've started this process, maybe the way that you've structured your review, you're doing it in three phases. Those are decisions that you have to make beforehand. Absolutely imperative to have clear instructions. One of the things that you really want to consider when you're building these instructions is the tone of the language you want students to use. I am a fan of Pixar's method for feedback.

It's very much a yes and, but the idea is that the feedback is going to be constructive and positive. The idea is you want to help to build the writer up rather than tear them down. I guess an emphasis is to encourage the students to use language that they would use if they were speaking to the person eyeball-to-eyeball. There's a lot of things that, for some reason, the way that we write, the way that we provide feedback, when we believe we're anonymous is different than if we would do it face-to-face.

That's important. Have them think about that the person sitting right across the table and they're explaining what they like and what they believe needs to be improved. You also want to get the most out of the review session. You want to specifically instruct the students what you want them to review and how you want them to review it. One of the ways that I do that is, I use a worksheet with a number of questions that I want students to address as they review the program proposals. This keeps them focused on the right things. It's a practice also recommended by many others, as I was preparing for this episode.

The students will then submit this worksheet in order to receive their grade for the peer-review activity. Then, I use those worksheets, I give them back to the writers, so they can see what others have thought about their proposal. As you are also preparing for the peer review, one of the other things they can do is have students include maybe questions or concerns that they have about their paper, and include that in the document that will help guide the reviewers.

This is something new that I'm considering doing for the peer-review sessions that I have set up for this grad course that I'm teaching. Those are some of the things that you consider before you actually launch the peer-review session. However, during the review session, that's pretty straightforward. You're basically going to launch the activity. During this time, you're going to ensure everyone can access the documents they're supposed to review, that they're clear about the instructions.

You're going to set the deadlines, when you want this feedback to be returned but really, you're just going to be available to answer questions. You're going to add clarity. You're going to help make sure that they're going to be successful in this particular part of the activity. When you're done, I suggest that you complete a review of the reviews. Getting some reflective feedback on how successful that activity was. In doing this, first, you're going to collect all the worksheets back, and you're going to package up those worksheets and send them to the authors of the documents that were being reviewed.

You will also take the moment to assess the grade and provide feedback back to the reviewers. For me, this is primarily a participation grade. I have a rubric, but my experience has-- If they put effort into it, I look at the feedback they're providing. Most of the time, it's really good. Occasionally, I've had to give less than full marks to a student, and this is when they simply provide the bare minimum or even less, and it's unfortunate. In most cases, students, in my experience, have done really well, gotten full marks in this part of the activity.

The other thing that I recommend is doing an after-actions review. One way that I do this, is I devote a class discussion, so my discussions go on for a week, but basically, I make it a reflective piece on the overall process. Their experience with writing their actual program proposal and also getting some feedback on the peer-review process, and what students have gained from that part of the exercise. After-action reviews are quite useful. In fact, if you come join me next week, I am going to specifically talk about how to use after-action reviews in your classroom. Basically, it's a discussion about what's going well, what can be improved, and then you weave that back in to continuously improve your course.

There are some nuances, so come join me next week and we're going to talk a little bit about that. Basically, that is the before, during, and after, of the idea of peer review. Peer reviews are not that hard. They're not that complicated, but there's a lot of wonderful benefits. Before we tie this all up, there are some practices out there that you should take into consideration to make your peer-review sessions as successful as possible. I've put a lot of links to different articles in the show notes. I encourage you to go check them out, but here are some of the highlights that I've pulled out of those.

First of all, scaffold your peer-review sessions. It's not necessarily a strategy I am using. I do have multiple peer-review sessions, so every draft, I have a peer-review session. What they're looking at here, is use each session to emphasize a different aspect of the writing process. Such as identifying gaps in the overall message, how the paper is been organized, or the supporting evidence for that, and providing revisions. You can use different sessions just to focus on one piece of this, rather than have them focus on everything that they can do in a review session.

For me, I use the exact same worksheet for the first draft as I do for the second draft, but what I'll do is, I'll switch reviewers so I get a new set of eyes. At the end of the second draft, five different people have looked at that particular product. As they go into the final product, they've got five different perspectives. Another thing that you should consider is making sure that you provide adequate time to conduct reviews. You want, based on whatever the task is, whatever that they're supposed to be reviewing, that you give them adequate time to do that, and do that properly.

Now, naturally, the bigger the paper, the more time you may want to provide. For me, with the program proposals that I have, I give students a week to review two program plans. During that week, I'm reviewing all the program plans, so I think that they can handle that type of workload. Providing feedback doesn't come natural for students, so teach students to provide helpful comments. When providing instructions to the students, explain how to create comments that are going to be useful, with the emphasis on being specific.

Folks have a tendency to not hurt somebody's feelings, and we certainly don't want to hurt feelings but sometimes, when we're trying to protect others, we don't provide them feedback that will help them succeed. You're doing a disservice to someone when you don't provide honest, specific feedback, so help the students through that process. Use technology when at all possible in this process. You should take advantage of technology. For example, in my class, when they submit their program plans, they submit them with Microsoft Word. This means that we can turn on Track Changes, and students can write directly-- add comments directly to the document.

By tracking changes, they can make comments right in the document, so that makes it just a lot easier to collect that particular feedback. When I create the worksheets, I also create those in Microsoft Word, so students can just fill in the worksheet, submit that worksheet to me and then, I redistribute them. I repackage them, distribute them back out to the writers, so that has been useful, helpful for making this successful. I try to use technology as much as possible. As I mentioned, conduct reviews before the final submission. The goal of reviews is to improve a product. Therefore, it makes sense to do the reviews before the final submission.

As I noted in my class, I have students submit two drafts. Each one has a peer review done on them, and then, they submit a final product. Those peer reviews are done during the drafting stage, and that should provide students with enough guidance and help in order to put together a really good product. So far, as I've been doing this, I'm pretty pleased with what I receive in the end. At every level, the products just keep improving. Also, as I noted, one of the things to do when you're getting ready for the peer review is, ask students to submit-- when they submit their

papers, pose a few areas that they want to look for guidance or ideas, and have them identify areas where they're struggling.

I thought this was great counsel that I received as I was prepping for this particular episode, and something that I'm actually going to weave into the program plans and reviews, as I'm getting ready for this upcoming class. The last piece of guidance as far as a practice is make it count. While I'm hoping that students will participate in peer reviews because it's the right thing to do, we have conditioned students to expect a grade for everything that they do, so in my class, peer reviews are worth 10% of the overall grade. I want to make them count.

Overall, peer reviews are something that you should consider. If you're asking students to create a product for your class, I would go for the extra effort and have students do reviews on someone else's products. You will see better products in the end because they're getting in front of more eyes, and everybody wants to help somebody else to definitely get to the next level. I would definitely encourage you to check out more about peer reviews, and let me know how they're working in your class. Before you go, I'm going to make a quick plug for my book.