

Peer review as a valuable tool in online instruction

It can be difficult to get students 'talking' with one another in an online course. Peer review is one technique that gives the students autonomy over their own work, gives them ownership in driving the process with their peer, and helps give another set of feedback to students from a peer, not just the instructor.

In the quick transition during the Spring 2020 Covid outbreak, instructors bore the brunt of extra work moving content and then figuring out how to assess and manage it. Delivering a course online is more work in some ways than a face to face (FtF) class. Peer review is one way to help the instructor share some of the responsibilities, give students the opportunity to interact with others in the course, and can help students learn or understand more when they have to give feedback to a peer.

How can you do this? When assigning peer review, it's important to set some guidelines and provide any form of specific feedback you'd like to see be included. A basic 'stop, start, continue' word document can be modified to suit the peer groups needs as long as it contains constructive feedback. Students can use the form, create their own, or make comments within the document their peer sends them. I do not place restrictions on how feedback is exchanged, only that it is exchanged and documented by uploading into the learning management system (LMS). Placing students in smaller groups (3-5) and giving them the autonomy to determine how to split the peer review helps alleviate some of the management for the instructor. Introduce the student groups over email since not all LMS's show contact information. This provides another cue that it is now their responsibility to communicate with one another. The peers set internal deadlines for themselves as to when one will have their work sent to the other for review, providing another layer of autonomy that you don't have to manage. The peers can sort out other details like work schedules or time zones between each other, teaching them how to manage their time and expectations of themselves and each other.

Be explicit about your expectations. If you want a specific format, provide it so students can model it. If you want certain things submitted, make it clear. Be ready for a few hiccups. I offer leniency on the first round of peer review and if a student has not uploaded the correct documents or had a rough time with their partner, I go back and make adjustments over email, so the communication is direct. Depending on the time in the semester, students may add or drop the course and adjustments can be easily made to peer review groups. Anytime someone adds or drops, I send a note to the group with the new student added or let the group know that a student has dropped from their group. It puts the onus back on the group to adjust and not on you.

Peers can decide if they keep the same partner or switch within groups in subsequent peer review assignments, but it's up to them to make those decisions equitably and communicate with one another. I do not keep track of each pairing, only that the peers each submitted a review of another peer.

To assess peer review, a rubric with a points scale is associated with each peer review assignment in the LMS. I ask students to upload the peer review they sent to their partner and I will comment on it. The rubric allots points for uploading their peer review document (start, stop, continue or other equivalent), submitting their work to their peer to provide ample time for review, and providing positive, meaningful feedback on the content and writing style (grammar, syntax, APA). The rubric is the same for each peer review and the expectations are the same to provide consistency.

I teach at least two online courses each academic year and implement peer review in every course. I receive positive feedback on course evaluations from students and they usually mention that it was useful once they got the hang of it. It's a good way for students to learn about one another without meeting, the success or failure of it is not dependent on expertise or area of focus, and it gives everyone an extra set of feedback from an equal. I would argue that students give and receive more valuable feedback when they're not as familiar with the others work as it forces students to provide more thorough responses and challenges assumptions of what others may or may not know. Both give constructive feedback, and both take constructive feedback into account on their own work. Students will comment that they told their peer to stop a certain thing but admit that they were doing the very thing they encouraged their peer to stop on their own work.

Peer review can be a valuable tool for online instruction. By setting some basic structure but also giving the peers autonomy to make decisions about their groups and review, it gets another set of eyes on student work, helps students interact with one another, and adds a layer of engagement to the online learning environment.

Submitted by:

Tiffany Drape, tdrape@vt.edu
Virginia Tech
Blacksburg, VA