Showing them how to conduct their own interventions in 12 easy steps: how teaching students to be effective peer-reviewers can improve your teaching and their learning

Before you integrate peer review into your course, it’s important to consider the pedagogical reasons for doing so. Research on collaborative learning verifies that working in peer-review groups does work; when students work together, they not only pool their knowledge, but they deepen their understanding of the task you’ve given them, crystallize their written arguments, and, later, remember the advice and interrogatories of others when they are working alone. But such benefits of collaborative learning don’t simply happen overnight.

Peer-review isn’t a substitute for your own comments or wisdom; it’s a way to get students actively engaged in their own learning and to encourage them to be more reflective about the implications of their words and ideas. Students often struggle with peer review because they don’t understand why they are doing it. So, all through the peer-review process, explain your pedagogical rationale for peer review, and articulate your goals for students each time they sit down together to do peer review.

Before you even think about splitting your class into small groups and saying, “Go!” . . .

1. Assign writing that is problem-focused. Students need to appreciate how the urges to write, to invent, and to engage in conversations grows out of the writer’s desire to say something new about a problem.

2. To show that you take peer-review and meaningful revision seriously, build ample time in your syllabus drafts and for peer-review. (And don’t just do peer-review once. . . it’s only fair to say that students are probably going to need practice at becoming good critics.)

3. Early in the semester, model what you consider to be a well-done peer-review session. This can be done in various ways:

   - you and your colleagues can videotape an effective peer-review session and perhaps juxtapose it against a session that wasn’t so effective (though this seems time-consuming, the videos can be recycled throughout the department for years to come);
   - find a colleague willing to come to your class and join you in modeling good peer-review (then return the favor for his/her section);
   - write up a transcript of an effective peer-review session with several student roles, and have your own students dramatize good peer-review in class
   - have a few students peer review one of your drafts in front of the class.
With all these options, it’s important to talk with your students about what was effective and what wasn’t so effective in the mock sessions.

4. Train students to spend their precious peer-review time tackling hard questions about GLOCS—generating & developing ideas, developing an argument, responding to the assignment, and demonstrating a clear understanding of the readings.¹

Logistical Matters

5. Decide how you want to divide up your groups. Honestly, there’s very little consensus about how to do this. The two controversies about dividing up peer groups come with deciding how many students to put in each group and whether instructors should let students self-select their groups or whether instructors should “engineer” the groups. Regarding how many to put in a group, most believe that 3 or 4 is the best number for groups; some worry that a group of 3 leads to a pair and an outsider, and some hypothesize that groups of 4 tend to divide in pairs. I never let students self-select because I’ve noticed that students tend to group up with those with whom they can chit-chat with the most; rather, I tend to divide up the class randomly and make sure there aren’t any all-male or all-female groups. Additionally, if I have non-native speakers, I try to mix them in with native speakers so they get lots of practice speaking English. Some instructors have students fill out a preference form (see “Putting Together Peer Groups” on p. 124).

6. Require written reviews. You can choose several formats for the written review— a letter to the writer, a worksheet that asks open-ended questions pertinent to the assignment, a review that is itself a “mini-argument” about the paper to be discussed. I require that these written reviews are to be submitted to me, and I comment on them and give points for them.

7. Encourage students to be precise critics who point to specific places in the draft for illustration. You can do this by requiring specificity in the written reviews, and you can further encourage it by “eavesdropping” and asking question like, “Where in the draft is Jack being vague?” or “At what point does Sarah’s counter-argument seem insincere?”

8. Be an eavesdropper. Again, this is a point of controversy among instructors who practice peer review, but I believe that it’s important to “drop-in” on peer-review groups so that you signal your dedication to the process, keep tabs on any problems that might be coming up, and offer advice when needed. Some teachers

¹ I have noticed that students don’t give each other particularly helpful advice about sentence-level issues or style. Often, they tell each other bizarre lore like “don’t ever use more than one semi-colon in a paper” or they give vague advice about “the flow” of sentences or paragraphs.
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prefer to listen from their desks in the room instead of playing the wandering eavesdropper.

9. As you prepare students for peer-review, and as you eavesdrop, stress that peer-review groups are arenas for trying on controversial, eccentric, risky ideas—not necessarily forums for building consensus about a draft or solidifying conformity on a particular topic.

The Aftermath

10. During conferences, interrogate students about how their peer-review groups are going. Encourage students to bring copies of the reviews they’ve given and/or received to your conference so you can discuss what’s helpful and what’s not so helpful.

11. If, during your eavesdropping or your one-on-one conferences, you notice that a group is having difficulties, troubleshoot by meeting with them outside of class and work toward a resolution. In general, it’s a good idea to keep groups permanent or semi-permanent throughout the semester, but don’t be afraid to step in and re-shuffle groups if things aren’t improving.

10. Have students write a cover-letter for their final submission explaining the various revisions they’ve made during the process of writing the papers. In the cover letter, ask students to explain how, whether, and why peer-reviewers’ feedback was incorporated into the revision. (Additionally, this sort of “preview” to a paper can really help instructors focus their responses.)