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Helping Students Help Each Other: Making Peer Feedback More Valuable
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As cooperative learning has flourished across academe, instructors across the disciplines have increasingly held their students responsible for not only their own learning but also for that of their peers. Faculty have even relinquished their monopoly on assessment, having students critique and evaluate each other's work in both the formative and summative stages. The questions that students encounter on peer feedback forms often resemble those that scholars ask themselves when they are revising or reviewing a manuscript: How effective is __? How logical is __? How strong is the evidence for __? How clear is __? These questions demand a reasoned, evaluative judgment. Are undergraduates up to the task?

This essay examines the research on the quality of student peer feedback, analyzes its shortfalls, and proposes a way to eliminate them, thereby maximizing its considerable benefits for students

Student Peer Feedback: Pros and Cons
How well do students handle these evaluative questions? The research results are mixed. Many studies show that peer assessments of assignments such as papers and oral presentations are biased and are typically more lenient than the instructor's judgments. In addition, their inter-rater reliability is often low (Orsmond, Merry, & Reitch, 1996; Pond, Ulhaq, & Wade, 1995).

However, other research shows fairly high agreement between students' and instructors' assessments (Oldfield & Macalpine, 1995; Rushton, Ramsey, & Rada, 1993) as well as acceptable levels of validity and reliability (Topping, 1998). Furthermore, peer assessment affords students much more immediate and frequent feedback than one instructor can possibly provide, advantages that compensate for irregular quality (Topping, 1998). Most importantly the research finds that peer learning and assessment help students develop communication skills, the ability to collaborate, critical thinking, and habits of life-long learning (Dochy, Segers, & Sluijsmans, 1999; Topping, 1998). Peer feedback then is well worth improving.

What's Wrong with Student Peer Feedback?

The studies cited above enumerate the common shortfalls of student peer feedback: too lenient or uncritical; focused on whether the evaluator likes or agrees with a work rather than its quality; overly critical and harsh; inaccurate; superficial; focused on trivial problems and mechanical errors; focused too much on content alone; unrelated to the assignment's requirements; and not referenced to specific instances in the work. A brief analysis of this list suggests three main causes for these weaknesses, two of which are supported in the literature.

1. Emotions and loyalties intrude, making most students reluctant to find fault with a fellow student's work and inducing a few to trash the work of someone they don't like (Strachan & Wilcox, 1996; Pond, Ulhaq, & Wade, 1995).

2. Students lack the disciplinary background to know, let alone to apply, professional expectations and standards, so they don't know how to give helpful feedback (Svinicki, 2001). No doubt if they did know how to write a clear thesis statement, a logical argument, a convincing conclusion, etc., they would do so at least to get a good grade.

3. Students fail to put adequate effort and care into analyzing each other's work and giving constructive, detailed feedback – in part because the peer-feedback questions may not require them to. When

a question explicitly asks only for a yes or no answer, students may not know enough to give a justification or to refer to particulars in the work. In addition, since the questions usually ask for an "opinion," students at a certain level of cognitive development may believe that one opinion is as good as another, justified or not. Besides, students reason, the only opinion that matters is the instructor's, so their peers aren't the real audience anyway.

Forms That Improve the Feedback

Consider what the items below ask a student to do:
• What do you think is the thesis of the paper (or speech)? Paraphrase it below.
• List below the main points of the paper.
• What are the writer's justifications (e.g., readings, logic, evidence) for taking the positions that he or she does?
• What do you think is the strongest evidence for the writer's position? Why?
• What do you think is the weakest evidence for the writer's position? Why?
• In each paragraph of this paper, underline the topic sentence.
• Highlight any passages that you had to read more than once to understand what the writer was saying.
• Bracket any sentences that you find particularly strong or effective.
• Put a checkmark in the margin next to any line that has a spelling, grammar, punctuation, or mechanical error. Let the writer identify and correct the error.
• What do you find most compelling about this paper?

These items share several features. First, rather than requiring a judgment or opinion, they ask students either to identify parts or features of the work, as each student sees them, or to give their personal reactions to the work. They are neutral and unemotional. Second, they require attention to the work but not a sophisticated level of judgment. Students only need basic knowledge about essay writing, rhetoric, and mechanics to give a meaningful response. Third, these items require students' keen focus on the work, close attention to its detail, and specific references to it. Picking out aspects of content, organization, and mechanics may call for several readings during which students must actively apply what they are

learning about the subject matter and communication skills. Of course, individual students will miss certain mechanical and spelling errors, but a small group should catch most of them.

This type of feedback influences the writer's or speaker's revisions in a different way from an evaluative critique. For example, if different peer reviewers identify different theses, then the creator knows that she didn't make herself fully understood and will have to make her thesis statement clearer. She might even add a sentence or two stating what she isn't arguing. Similarly, if most of the reviewers miss a main point, a key justification, or an important piece of evidence, she knows that part of her message was overlooked and needs more emphasis. Of course, less attentive students may miss some points that were made quite clearly, just as members of any audience read or listen carelessly and miss important points of a news story, article, or speech. This reality should drive home to students the importance not only of expressing themselves clearly but also of attracting and holding their audience's interest.

The personal reactions of the audience can also provide helpful information. What reviewers find to be the strongest and weakest evidence informs the creator about which content to highlight and which to downplay or edit out. What they bracket as "particularly strong or effective" tells him what he is doing right and should do more often.

In summary, when peer feedback focuses on identification tasks and personal reactions, students realize that the measure of their success as writers and speakers is how well they communicate their message to their peers as well as the instructor. They also realize that their peers' feedback is genuinely meaningful and important. As a result, peer feedback then informs self-assessment, which is a powerful life-long learning tool.

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