

## Designing Peer Feedback Opportunities Into Online Learning Experiences

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### Introduction

Some of the major complaints of online instructors in higher education are that the workload is high, particularly with regard to communicating with students, providing grades and feedback, and making sure students feel like they are “connected” (as opposed to isolated). Peer feedback is one way of addressing these complaints, because students are required to communicate with each other. Additionally, the process—when done effectively—ensures that everyone receives feedback in a timely manner without requiring that the instructor do it all. And it has the added bonus of being pedagogically worthwhile for the students providing the feedback, who are learning to critique or be evaluative within the content domain they are learning.

Instructors who implement peer feedback techniques in their online classes face two major challenges. First, most students enter a class situation valuing both the teacher’s contributions and teacher-student communication more than peer contributions and communication. An instructor who wants students to provide each other with useful feedback must demonstrate to students that such interactions are important and to be taken seriously. Second, many students are not equipped to provide productive peer feedback under face-to-face conditions, and the limitations of online communication modes often serves to complicate that factor. However, there are various techniques and guidelines that online instructors may use in order to make the online peer feedback process a worthwhile one for everyone who is involved. This paper will present some ideas to help online instructors use peer feedback in their classes.

### Peer Feedback Guidelines and Strategies

Can you remember the first time you were asked to write a paper in college? If you were provided with clear guidelines, you probably felt relatively comfortable with the process and expectations. However, if you did not have many guidelines, you probably felt a little helpless. Similarly, students who are asked to engage in an online peer feedback process with few guidelines are likely to feel confused and insecure. Students tend to not only be confused about how to engage in the process, but also the overall purpose. Some of the strategic elements that instructors might use to address these problems include:

- **Clear deadlines:** Instructors set due dates all the time for work that is to be graded summatively, but deadlines also are important when formative feedback is expected. Deadlines should be set for both exchanging draft-level work with a partner and providing feedback to that partner.
- **Assigned partners:** Assigning partners to students helps make sure that no one is forgotten, and the instructor will know who should be held accountable if an individual student does not receive any feedback. Having clear accountability also is useful because students are more likely to provide useful feedback if they feel like they’re in an even trade with a partner. For example, if Crystal and Larry are assigned to be partners, Crystal will want to help Larry improve his assignment because he, in turn, is supposed to help her. However, if Crystal is assigned to critique Larry’s paper, and Larry is assigned to Jenna’s paper, and so on there is less direct accountability. If Larry doesn’t provide useful feedback to Jenna, there should be no impact on the quality of feedback Crystal is willing to provide him.

- ***Models and rubrics:*** Providing a model of what feedback or a critique looks like using a sample assignment helps students approach the feedback process effectively and is more likely to generate similarly focused and structured critiques. Similarly, rubrics for the assignment and the critique help students know what the important elements of the lesson are and how they are valued. As a result, students need not spend any time figuring out HOW their paper was critiqued; instead they can focus on WHAT needs to be revised.
- ***Tool “tips”:*** Online students most likely will be providing each other with feedback in a written format. An e-mail or discussion board message is an easy way of exchanging written comments. However, in some situations it might be desirable to have students comment directly on each other’s papers, inserting comments and suggestions at contextually appropriate points. Obviously, to do so is a bit more complicated than just typing a brief message. However, instructors can specify that students use tools – such as the comments and track changes features in Microsoft Word – to insert feedback into documents that will be exchanged electronically.
- ***Credit for critiques:*** In a perfect world, students would collaborate and provide each other with feedback for the sakes of classroom community and furthering their own learning. Unfortunately, many students tend to focus on the elements of a class that have direct impact on their grade. If students know they are likely to be assessed on the quality of their peer feedback, they’re likely to take the exercise more seriously than if they are just doing as a learning exercise. A few approaches can be used. First, the instructor may choose to review all critiques; this approach can be timely, although if a grading rubric is used it can be less time-intensive. Second, students may be asked to rate the quality of both the feedback they received and the feedback they gave using a rubric or rating scale. Then the instructor can assign
- ***Critiques for diagnostic purposes:*** Instructors can use the critiques themselves to see if students truly understand the concepts being covered. If an instructor suspects a student is falling behind or has limited grasp of a concept, the student’s critique can be reviewed in addition to his own assignment to see if the problem is in understanding the concept and using it in an evaluative sense (the critique) or applying the concept (the assignment). Additionally, if an instructor feels that students are not taking assignments seriously she can check to see if a student has (a) written a first draft for critique that is complete and appears to be a best effort, and then (b) responded in a final draft to the feedback received in the critique.

Most of these strategies assume that peer feedback is being used to help students improve an assignment based on an initial draft. The next section provides various ideas for online course activities that encourage or require students to engage in peer critique that is either formative or summative in nature.

### **Ideas for Using Online Peer Feedback**

Exactly how an instructor chooses to implement peer feedback will depend on the nature of a particular class, the learning goals, the assignments, and the student characteristics and abilities.

#### **Online Portfolios**

One easy way for students to share their work with classmates is through online portfolios. If you have technologically savvy students, they may be able to post their work as web pages. Regardless, it often is a good idea to have each student build a portfolio of work in a discussion thread (one thread per student; assignments may be attached to messages or typed within messages). Classmates can provide feedback directly in the thread, and the instructor can easily monitor it all. Alternatively, portfolio threads can be

used for classmates to help each other select their best work samples from the semester to be submitted for a grade.

### **Research and Writing Buddies (Dyads or Triads)**

In this technique, students are grouped in 2's or 3's and review each other's draft-level work throughout the semester. This can be done via e-mail or in a private online space such as Blackboard's Groups, and can be made visible to the instructor. As mentioned above (see *Assigned partners*), this strategy has the advantages of encouraging students to develop a feedback relationship, in which they become somewhat interdependent.

### **Conference Track Groups**

Another alternative for grouping students to provide each other with feedback is to group projects thematically, following a popular conference convention. On a discussion board, each track might exist in a separate forum, folder or thread (depending on the tool). Students can sign up to provide feedback and contribute content within a particular track. Additionally, after an initial feedback period, students can visit other tracks and provide meta level feedback on the feedback process they see evident in that track's discussion.

### **Class Presentations and Feedback**

In this technique, students create PowerPoint presentations and post them to a discussion thread. Classmates are required to view presentations and both ask questions and provide feedback during a specified time period. One week is usually a good time frame for encouraging interaction. The presenter must answer questions and facilitate the discussion for a set period of time. This technique can be used with papers as well. Students may be put into feedback groups to keep the process organized.

### **Feedback Forms**

Feedback forms are useful for providing both formative and summative feedback to individual students or project groups on their coursework. In this technique the instructor creates a form, to keep student feedback structured. Multiple students may supply feedback – anonymously, if preferred – and the results can be provided in aggregate form if desired. Online survey tools are readily available to support feedback forms, and such capabilities also are built into most commercial courseware. Alternatively, a “lower tech” version can be implemented by creating evaluation forms in a word processor and having people fill out, save, and attach the files.

### **Peer Research/Resource Sharing**

In this formative technique, students share their research paper ideas or thesis statements in a discussion forum. Students are assigned peers to work with and help each other refine project ideas and search for resources. This technique can be particularly helpful to broaden the scope of resources used in a project and to recognize alternative perspectives that the student-author had not originally thought of. Also, peers tend to have a lesser ability to intuit what a student is trying to do, which in turn requires the student-author to more clearly articulate his thoughts.

### **Peer Editing**

Peer editing is a more intense form of peer feedback, requiring that the peer try to improve someone else's work rather than just comment on it. Peers can switch best efforts, edit each others' work, and

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submit both versions to the teacher. If using this approach, I recommend also asking students to write (a) a brief note to their partner explaining their edits and the corresponding rationale and (b) a brief reflection on their peer editing process, comparing the original assignments with the peer edited ones. This process should be focused on conceptual and logical edits, not just grammatical and spelling ones. It generally results in students developing greater critical thinking skills.

### **Cautions and Caveats**

The manner with which students provide each other peer feedback in an online format is critical. If feedback partners are overly agreeable, they may not provide students with useful help. While feelings are not hurt when one is complimented on a job well done, a student will certainly feel let down later on if the instructor points out basic errors that the feedback partner did not note. Alternatively, if a student interprets directions to critique as a foremost call to be critical, the resulting feedback may hurt the recipient's feelings and not achieve the desired result. There is a certain sense of anonymity gained by communicating through text as opposed to face to face. Some students may feel a bit emboldened and more likely to be critical when they don't have to look someone else in the eyes. Communicating online requires that the writer choose words carefully and the reader be prepared to engage in a process of meaning negotiation rather than jumping to conclusions or offense. What does this mean for the instructor implementing peer feedback strategies? Much like using any other form of peer interaction, it is important to set clear ground rules and expectations regarding text-based communication and peer respect. And it never hurts to provide samples or models, since students generally are not accustomed to providing each other with productive, helpful feedback in academic settings.

Another concern is overwhelming students with work. Peer feedback activities, if used in the spirit of deepening the online learning experience and encouraging the development of learning community, take time. These techniques work best in online classes that encourage interactivity throughout the course, not just at points of assessment. Also, it is important to remember that the peer feedback process takes time and effort – students must read each others' work and evaluate it against course requirements and what they've learned so far. Simply added to a current set of course requirements, peer feedback assignments might make the volume of course requirements unreasonable. However, effectively integrated into the online learning experience, peer feedback activities have the potential to push students further than they—or you—previously thought possible.

### **Biographical Sketch**

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