

Strategies for Effective Peer Review Groups

The strategies listed below can help support the formation and management of successful peer review groups in the classroom. The information presented here is a synthesis of my own experience, the results of a twenty-five year study of collaborative groups conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota, and the results of a study of peer review groups at St. Cloud State University. See citations at the end of this document.

Preparing students

For an effective peer groups, students should clearly understand the instructor's expectations for the group process. They should know what the outcomes should be and how they can best achieve them; therefore, some preparation in how to give feedback is necessary. Preparation could include the discussion about following elements:

- The language of critiquing essays (comma splice, fragment, transitions, cohesion, support, detail, thesis, logical progression, word choice, etc.)
- What makes an effective introduction and/or conclusion
- What constitutes academic tone and voice
- What the difference is between higher order issues (sentence level or local items) and lower order issues (larger or global items)
- How to give constructive criticism graciously and, also, how to accept criticism graciously
- How identify and give positive feedback
- Whether they should read aloud or each group member should read the writer's paper silently (research shows that writers find many of their own mistakes by reading aloud)
- How to make critical notations for later feedback

To enhance preparation, modeling the group process in front of the class can be beneficial. Two students or the instructor and a student would fill the roles of writer and peer.

Most effective group sizes

For task-oriented groups, within which students accomplish a concrete task or find a specific answer or answers, groups of 2-3 are most efficient. Examples of such tasks are creating a works cited page, completing worksheets, and short collaborative writings.

For groups where the outcome is open-ended, groups of 3-4 are best. These groups work best on longer projects, peer review, or longer writings.

Designing Groups

According to Johnson, Johnson, and Smith of the University of Minnesota, the best groups are not homogeneous. That is: they shouldn't all be at the same skill level or of the same social group. Groups composed of friends often stay at the same skill level.

To determine composition of groups, the instructor might have students write a short, ungraded diagnostic essay. The essay will reveal a variety of student skills—good writing overall, effective organization, clear thesis, good support, enthusiasm, etc. Then group students so each group represents a mixture of skills.

Using a Peer Review Worksheet

Peer review worksheets are sheets that students fill out to report findings and observations in reviewing their peers' work. While these worksheets can add a measure of accountability to the process, they often interfere with the reviewing process itself. In 2008, Michele Timp-Pilon completed research that examined issues in constructing effective peer review groups. Her findings led her to conclude that even though the peer review worksheet "alleviates fears of losing control for many . . . [instructors], it also impedes what students may accomplish and learn in these sessions" (56).

If an instructor chooses to use a worksheet, I recommend that

- The worksheet should be short, relevant, and easy to complete.
- If the worksheet is longer, the number of writers that one peer must review should be fewer.
- That the worksheet be replaced by a short reflection essay completed outside of class or during another class time.

Other Suggestions

Allow a short time for discussion of the group process at the next class period. Be specific in your prompts. Ask about the most difficult challenge in the group or review process, ask about what students learned in the process, or ask what they feel they need help with so that the next group process is more successful.

Float among the groups to be sure that students' questions are quickly answered and that they are on task.

Contact the writing center to "borrow" a writing consultant who will circulate and help students with their feedback and analysis.

Works Consulted

- Johnson, David W. Roger T. Johnson, and Karl A. Smith. *Active Learning: Cooperation in the College Classroom*. Edina: Interaction, 1991. Print.
- . *Cooperative Learning: Increasing College Faculty Instructional Productivity*. ASHE-ERIC Report No. 4. Washington, D.C.: George Washington U, 1991. Print.
- Timp-Pilon, Michele. *Effective Peer Review Groups: A Writing Center Approach to Creating and Using Peer Review in the Composition Classroom*. MA Thesis. St. Cloud State University, 2008. Print.