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Speed Dating Peer Review Activity

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Introduction

Teaching first-year composition in an online environment poses challenges that though present in face-to-face class meetings are exasperated in an online environment, where students may opt to be invisible by keeping cameras and microphones off. By choosing to be invisible, these students are choosing to observe the class rather than participate in it, and their choices often compromise their successful completion of assignments – and ultimately their success in the course.

Throughout the semester, I focused on re-envisioning tried-and-true in-person activities for online synchronous class meetings. In the process, I was guided by three goals: 1) how to foster student engagement with other students, 2) how to encourage students to be invested in “classroom” assignments, and lastly, how to hold students accountable for their participation in groups. This peer review activity checked the boxes for all three goals.

Preparing for Peer Review

For this peer review activity, I coopted the principles of speed dating: Students moved through a succession of peer reviews, spent a specified brief amount of time with each review, and had a targeted “question” for which they gave feedback. The novelty of speed dating peer review sparked students’ interest.

This activity has two parts: class-generated peer review criteria and peer review feedback. I started class by asking what kind of peer feedback is/isn't helpful. Students had a lot to say, mostly about what isn't helpful. There weren't really any surprises. Vague comments and false praise were not helpful. Students wanted feedback on grammar, which was a wonderful teaching moment as we explored the value of correctness and where correctness is best served in the writing process. (When students think about strong writing, they often think exclusively in terms of correctness and overlook other components of writing such as organization or development. However, when students realize that during revision, writers make substantive changes, they also realize it doesn't make sense to invest time and energy in fixing grammar errors for sentences that are likely to change during revision. Consequently, grammar is “off the table” during peer review.)

With students’ responses in mind, we looked closely at the assignment prompt and created our peer review criteria in a chart that identified what they wanted reviewers to look at in their papers. The chart was posted on Blackboard (LMS) so

that all students had access. Separately, we created guidelines for the kind of feedback they wanted/how they wanted reviewers to respond.

Speed Dating Peer Review

Students posted their completed first drafts in our class wiki. (Blackboard is our LMS, and we use Zoom for synchronous class meetings.) With both Zoom and the class wiki open, we were ready to begin.

Students were directed to review the post just below their own. In the Zoom chat, I posted the "assignment" from the chart and gave the assignment verbally. For example, the first "assignment" was to read only the introduction and evaluate its success based on our class instruction on intros and on the criterion we established in the chart. I set the timer for 5-7 minutes depending on the complexity of the assigned criterion. Students posted their feedback in the wiki comment box. I gave a 30 second warning when it was time to start wrapping up their feedback.

When the timer went off, they moved to the next post (Sometimes, I asked students to skip down 2 or 3 posts just to keep it interesting); and in the chat, I posted the next "assignment" from the chart. I adjusted the timer accordingly, but it was never longer than 10 minutes. During the last "round," students asked the reviewer to look at something specific they wanted feedback on.

While students were leaving each other feedback, I was able to read everyone's posts and feedback in the wiki. When I noticed a reviewer left vague, superficial feedback and/or wasn't using all the allotted time, I sent a private message in our Zoom chat prodding them to review the guidelines for giving feedback and to revise accordingly. This was an effective accountability feature. By the end of class, students had feedback from six reviewers.

Student Responses

During our post-activity debriefing, students responded positively. They liked having feedback from many reviewers and felt they gave (and received) better feedback when they focused on one criterion at a time. Also, students reported the pressure of the timer (beat the clock) kept them on task. Lastly, students learned more about our class theme by reading multiple papers. In the follow up discussion, students asked one another questions and were generous in sharing what they liked about one another's essays. Privately, students shared that they felt they got better feedback because there were more voices. This response was most

typical of strong students who told me their past experiences with peer review felt like a waste of time. One student shared: “I hate it when they say don’t change anything because my essay is great when I know it isn’t.”

Why This Activity Works

This activity met all three of my goals. First, it increased student-student engagement. Each student gave feedback to six other students and in the process, discovered similar interests. During the debriefing, students spoke directly to or referred to specific students, which is a step toward building community. The timed nature of each assignment and the groundwork for guiding students in how to respond and what to look for kept most students invested in the task. Lastly, using Zoom’s chat for real-time follow up with students who were slipping off task helped keep students accountable to the task at hand.

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