Scene One: My Students Don't Want Active Learning!

Overview

Being asked to learn actively is often a new experience for college students. Many enter classrooms expecting to sit quietly and listen while their instructors fill the period by lecturing. Using active learning strategies violates these expectations, making some students uncomfortable, resentful, and resistant. Students may act out by rolling their eyes, complaining, or refusing to participate in the activities altogether.

Student resistance is a concern for instructors interested in using active learning, particularly for those who are new to it. They might see student resistance as a challenge to their authority or an indictment of their teaching ability. Often, it's read as a sign that active learning simply won't work in their discipline or context. Some student resistance to active learning is to be expected, especially at first, and can be overcome relatively easily by attention to the strategies recommended below.

The following scene dramatizes student resistance to active learning.

Scene

Catherine is an assistant professor of geography teaching a survey course that enrolls non majors from across the university. A dedicated instructor, Catherine is very interested in improving her teaching. She attends teaching workshops as often as her busy schedule allows and frequently asks her colleagues for ideas and recommentions. Recently, Catherine attended a workshop on active learning and left the session excited about the possibilities she'd heard discussed. She resolved to try one strategy–an informal small group exercise–in her following class session.

Catherine began the session with a content overview. After spending half the period explaining principles and providing examples of the day's topic, Catherine introduced her active learning strategy. When she asked students to break into groups, however, the results were not what she expected.

Implications of the Scene

The situation dramatized in episode one is all too common: a well-intentioned instructor tries a new and risky teaching strategy for the first time, and it fails miserably. Rather than chalking the situation up to experience and resolving never to try such a thing again–a common and unfortunate response to this kind of occurrence–we might consider the reasons the students in the video clip resisted active learning and what we might do to change their behavior in the future.

First of all, the instructor (Catherine) hadn't used active learning in her class prior to this session, so the concept and format of it was foreign to her students. In fact, an implicit contact had developed between her and her students spelling out the roles and expectations of each party. The students had learned that their role was to sit in class, listen, and take notes, while Catherine's was to present information and ocassionally ask questions. When Catherine violated this contract by asking students to learn actively, they were confused, uncomfortable, and a little insecure in their new learning environment.

Second, active learning is undoubtedly more work for students than attending to the typical lecture. It's much easier to sit in a darkened auditorium, mind wandering comfortably, than it is to actively engage difficult problems in individual or group activities. Active learning pushes many out of their

comfort zone, and their response might be anger, belligerance, or resistance.

Seen from the students' point of view, resistance to active learning is understandable. It falls on the instructor to counter these feelings by clearly explaining why she is using active learning (appealing to their reason, which Catherine does in the second episode), taking charge of the situation, and presenting a confident, positive attitude.

In episode one, however, Catherine fails to do any of these things. She walks around the class asking students to get into groups, but there is a sense that she herself is a bit unsure about the strategy. Rather than taking charge, she seems to hope that the situation will resolve itself. With enough importuning, Catherine's students would eventually get into groups and begin the activity, but their level of engagement with it would probably be very low. The activity would be time consuming, difficult to manage, and yield poor results. Faced with an experience like this, it's no wonder that most instructors would consider the activity a failure and go back to lecturing.

In episode two, Catherine takes charge of the situation in two important ways. When she realizes that students are resisting the idea of group work, she intercedes immediately and explains her rationale, showing students that she is in charge and has thought the strategy through. She then manually puts students into groups to get the activity started and to break down student reluctance.

Recommendations

To overcome student resistance to active learning, consider the following:

- Begin using active learning stratetgies early in the term. Introduce the concept on the first day of class and let students know that they will be expected to participate in such strategies throughout the course.
- Be true to your word and use active learning frequently–at least once a class period initially. After the first several sessions, students will understand that you're serious about active learning and will accept their role as participants readily.
- Give clear instructions. State the goal students should meet, how much time they have for the activity, what procedures they should follow, and with whom they should partner (ie, "turn to the person next to you" or "form groups of four with the people nearest you.") It is often a good idea to put directions for in-class activities on an overhead or a PowerPoint slide so that students have something to refer to as they begin the activity.
- Explain to students why you're using active learning and the benefits they can expect from it.
- Be committed to your choice to use active learning and communicate that confidently to students. Students will be put at ease if they understand that you're in charge and have good reasons for what you're doing.
- Manually break students into groups. This can be an effective way to overcome student reluctance and demonstrate that you're in charge.
- Start small and simple. Use low-impact strategies such as think-pair-share or in-class writing exercises. These strategies are easy to implement, take only a few minutes, and are "low stakes" for students who may be unsure or uncomfortable. As you and your students gain experience, you may decide to graduate to more involved activities.

Scene Two: My Students are Complaining About Active Learning!

verview

In active learning classrooms, students take center stage for at least part of the period. They talk with each other or work together on problems, while the instructor circulates, observes, and intervenes when necessary. Both students' and instructors' roles shift in the active learning classroom, implying a new "student-centered" paradigm for college instruction. This new paradigm challenges students' assumptions about the roles of teachers and learners.

Some students may think that instructors who practice active learning aren't teaching at all, but rather unfairly shifting the instructional burden onto students. They may call into question the instructor's authority in the classroom or knowledge of the subject area. Other students may resent having to work with (and learn from) fellow students when an "expert" is in the room, while many may be uncomfortable taking an active role in the classroom. Active leaning challenges students in these and other ways, occassionally resulting in student complaints.

Knowing how to handle such complaints and turn them into teachable moments can spell the difference between a successful strategy–one that offers an opportunity for students to reflect on how and why they learn–and an unsuccessful one. The following video scene dramatizes typical student complaints and illustrates how instuctors may choose to handle them.

Scene

Jonathan teaches in the education department, preparing future math and science teachers. He uses active learning strategies frequently and to good effect in his classes. His students have come to expect these strategies and comply readily when he asks them to work together to apply what they're learning.

Because all seems to be going well, Jonathan is unaware that several students in the class resent these in-class activities. There are often hushed grumblings and complaints when Jonathan introduces these activities. On one particular day, a student–overhearing two of her classmates–decides to speak to Jonathan about the situation after class. She takes this opportunity to voice her own complaints about active learning.

Implications of the Scene

Student complaints are another form of resistance to active learning, so many of the implications inherent in this scene are similar to those illustrated in the previous one: namely, students' confusion about their role in an active learning classroom and their discomfort with new and challenging teaching approaches.

The conversation between the two disgruntled students at the opening of episode one, however, illustrates a different kind of problem that instructors have to contend with. These students believe that Jonathan isn't really teaching when he uses active learning strategies. It would be much easier, they say, if he just "taught us this stuff" rather than forcing them to engage in active learning.

Because Jonathan violates their expectations of what good teaching should look like, these students

call into question his ability as a teacher and his grasp of the subject matter, speculating that if Jonathan were well preparing and expert, he would teach in the "normal" way. The student who stays after class to voice her concerns holds many of the same assumptions. She hates active learning, she says, because she wants to learn from an expert, not from other students. In a sense, she's challenging Jonathan to teach in a more suitable way.

It's important to deal with these student concerns appropriately because they impact the classroom climate and the relationship between students and teacher. Jonathan's authority is at stake, and if students don't trust him and his expertise, they're not likely to learn from him. In the first episode, Jonathan responds like most of us would: he is taken aback by the students' comments and is unsure how to respond to the criticism of his teaching. Ignoring the situation or disregarding the student's complaint as somehow out of the mainstream is the wrong approach. Also wrong is waiting to address the situation, which simply reinforces the students' beliefs that the instructor is an inadequate teacher.

A better way of confronting the problem is illustrated in the second episode where Jonathan thanks the student for her feedback and explains clearly his reasons for using active learning. He avoids hostility and uses the situation as a "teachable moment," an opportunity to help the student reflect on her own learning process and how his teaching stategies are designed to help her master the course material. Rather than letting the matter drop there, Jonathan resolves to explain his reasons for using active learning to the entire class during the next period.

Explaining clearly and honestly to your classes why you've chosen to use active learning is extremely important. When doing so, you may have to take on the role of salesperson. Make sure to explain what students have to gain from active learning. Tell them that they will understand information better and remember it longer, and that their test scores will improve. If students understand that you're using active learning strategies for well thought out reasons, they will be less likely to resist it.

For some students, this will be a hard sell. High academic achievers, interestingly, may resist active and cooperative learning, fearing that they will be dragged down by less accomplished peers. To these students you might say that teaching something is the best way to learn it thoroughly, so working with other students to understand course material is probably the most efficient way for them to master it.

Recommendations

- Address student complaints about active learning immediately and with confidence. Keep your comments positive.
- Explain to your classes why you're using active learning. Highlight what students have to gain from such activities. Consider making such an announcement early in the term and reprising it later if necessary.
- See student complaints about active learning as "teachable moments" that offer students opportunities to reflect on how they learn and how to improve those learning skills.

Scene Three: I'm Not in Control with Active Learning!

Overview

Active learning strategies are student centered, meaning that students are the primary focus of what happens in the classroom, not the instructor. This runs counter to the arrangement of many college

classrooms, which are largely instructor centered. Imagine a roomful of students sitting in front of a professor who spends the period talking at them and you'll have a sense of the instructor-centered educational paradigm.

Incorporating active learning into your classes is a low impact way to reorient them from instructor to student centered. You need not abandon the lecture entirely, but rather refigure the way you lecture–working in opportunities for students to engage the material actively at regular intervals during the period. For more information on ways to refigure your lectures, see our workshop titled Designing Smart Lectures.

When using active learning the instructor's role shifts from the conveyor of information to mentor, from an expert who gives students answers to one who designs opportunities for students to learn and guides them in making their own discoveries. This shift means putting more of the instructional responsibility in the hands of students. When students are the focus of the classroom, they have more control over what happens in it, and this can sometimes pose challenges for the instructor committed to active learning: namely, the loss of instructor control of the classroom, chaotic classrooms, and students who stray off task.

The following scene dramatizes the loss of instructor control that might occur in the active learning classroom and offers one way of confronting it.

Scene

Claudia is an instructor in the music department teaching a course in music appreciation. She has used active learning strategies occassionally in the past and is always a little nervous about the loss of control that using such strategies requires. Claudia is soft spoken and has had trouble getting and keeping her students' attention during in-class activities, particularly during group work. For this reason, Claudia feels a little uncomfortable and vulnerable giving control of her classroom over to her students, a fear that active learning intensifies. She is committed to the principle of active learning, however, and continues to try.

Claudia begins her session with an explication of the classical sonata form and then moves to a group activity in which students apply the concept to Beethoven's Waldstein Sonata. As she introduces the activity, her fear is realized: she loses control of the classroom and cannot get students' attention back.

Implications of the Scene

The scene above illustrates one of the pitfalls of active learning: the outcome of the activity is often beyond the control of the instructor. In the first episode, Claudia told students to "pair up" before she had finished introducing the activity. When students obliged and began talking, Claudia couldn't make herself heard above the din of student voices. They ignored her and her further instructions, missing details that led to lost time and poor results. The experience was chaotic for Claudia and the outcome of the group work unimpressive–leading her to wonder whether it was worth it to continue experimenting with active learning.

Most instructors who use active learning can sympathize with Claudia. They know what it's like to struggle to regain the attention of the class during and after small group activities. They understand the unsettling feeling of not being in control of the classroom. Fortunately, it is relatively easy to mitigate these problems through careful design and implementation of the activity.

For active learning to be successful, students must know the learning goal of the activity (the purpose), what they're expected to accomplish (the outcomes), how they're expected to achieve those goals and outcomes (the procedure), and the time limit for the activity. Thinking carefully about these during your session planning will ensure that your activities are well integrated into

your class session. You then must present them appropriately to students during class.

Before you tell students to "break into groups," make sure you've explained the activity's goal, outcome, procedure, and time limit carefully. You may assign roles to students to help them achieve the desired outcomes or request that they report to the class after the activity is ended. You might also tell students that you will flash the lights or ring a bell when it's time wrap up the activity. These are quiet, efficient, and effective ways to regain students' attention; they provide a measure of control and perhaps self-assurance by eliminating the need for the instructor to yell above the din of student voices.

In the second episode, Claudia made sure to explain the activity carefully to students before turning them loose on it. She was in control both during the exercise and afterwards when she signaled students' attention by flicking the lights. By following the recommendations below, Claudia's experience of active learning went from stressful and chaotic to productive and rewarding.

Recommendations

- It is not necessary to devote your entire session to active learning. You can still lecture. In fact, a mix of instructional methods–lecturing for ten or fifteen minutes followed by a three or four minute active learning interval–is an extremely effective technique. It's also very easy to implement and doesn't require a great deal of additional preparation.
- When starting out with active learning, keep it short and simple. Use low impact strategies such as think-pair-share or focused writing. They are easy to implement and almost certain to be successful. After you've gained confidence using active learning, progress to longer, more involved activities (such as group cooperative learning) if these meet your instructional needs.
- Just because students are "active" (ie, talking to one another or engaging in some other activity) doesn't necessarily mean they will learn anything. Simply putting students in groups doesn't constitute active learning. Any activity you choose must be well planned and executed.
- When planning and presenting active learning strategies to your students, make sure to consider four elements: the goal of the activity, the outcomes you expect of students, the procedure they should follow, and the time limit for the activity.
- Consider using strategies to keep control of the classroom during active learning activities. These might be ringing a bell or flashing the lights to gain students' attention.

Scene Four: Active Learning Takes Too Much Time!

Overview

Many faculty are concerned about the amount of time they will have to devote to active learning and whether that time would be better spent covering course content via lecture. This is a legitimate concern. Class time is precious, and most instructors do not have enough of it to meet the goals they have set for themselves.

The following video scene dramatizes the reluctance of one faculty member to sacrifice class time to active learning.

Scene

Susan is an instructor in the English department teaching a freshman- and sophmore-level course titled "Introduction to Fiction." She uses active learning strategies frequently and well in her course, and her students respond positively to them.

Susan's students have just finished a think-pair-share strategy that went very well. Students were on task and engaged with the material, and Susan heard many interesting, insightful comments as she circulated among the small groups. As she wraps up the activity and prepares to move on, a student raises a probing question about the short story they are discussing.

It's clear to Susan from the buzz in the classroom that student interest is high. They're clearly primed to grapple further with the issues raised in the story. Susan faces a dilemma. She had planned to cover two stories in today's session and realizes that she doesn't have enough time to discuss these issues with the class and cover the rest of the day's content.

Implications of the Scene

Susan's situation raises at least two important issues:

- How much time can or should be spent on active learning in courses that cover vast amounts of information?
- What is the best way for the instructor to cover course content in such situations?

In the case illustrated by the video, it was clear that Susan's students wanted to continue working with the story at hand. Moving to a new story in order to cover pre-planned content resulted in a missed opportunity for learning. It also caused a definite ebb in classroom enthusiasm.

Moving to new content before adequately addressing current material affects students in different ways. Many feel overwhelmed with the amount of content being presented; some will feel discouraged while others may be upset that the instructor doesn't recognize that they're "not getting it." If instructors fail to address student questions, as was the case with Susan, students may feel ignored by the instructor and rightly be angry. In every case, the result is lower student motivation and lower mastery of the course content.

In the second episode, Susan was right to spend the remainder of the class time unpacking the first story. Her decision shows a sensitivity to the mood of the class and a willingness to attend to her students' learning needs. It's also important to remember that Susan didn't simply ignore the second story slated for the period. Even though she knew they would not have time to cover it, she presented alternatives–either finding time in a subsequent period or having students deal with the material on their own, with appropriate support from the instructor.

This is an important point to remember. It is not always necessary to "cover" (ie, "recite") all important content in class. Some of the material can be read and learned by students outside of class by themselves or in groups. The instructor may wish to create support structures to help students through the information–study guides, electronic discussion lists, or FAQ pages with prompts, practice questions with keys, etc. Depending on the content, most students are capable of learning material on their own, resulting in more class time for the instructor to devote to challenging material or to developing higher order skills.

Recommendations

- Consider your learning objectives carefully. Based on them, what content is most important for students to master?
- Consider what content you must cover in class and what content students can cover outside of class by themselves. It may be necessary to create assignments, activities, or other support

to help students master material on their own.
- Attempt to use one or two brief active learning strategies during your lectures. Space the activities throughout the lecture to break it up and keep students engaged.
- Attempt to use classroom assessment techniques to determine what students are learning and what is confusing them. These can help you decide when (and whether) you need to spend more time working with particular material.
- Avoid racing through material to "finish it all" by the end of the period. This is almost always counterproductive. Students tend to become overwhelmed and discouraged.
- Remember that just because you say it, doesn't mean they learn it. If student learning is your goal, resolve to spend more time on less material.

Content Coverage Issues in Large Enrollment Lecture Courses

Susan teaches literature courses. The pressures she faces to "cover content" are very different from those faced by instructors teaching courses that contain a large body of factual information that students must master. Her course was also relatively small--much smaller indeed than large enrollment courses such as introductory biology or psychology.

Many people believe that it is easier to use active learning strategies in small classes. In some cases, this is clearly true. But is it the case that active learning strategies are incompatible with large enrollment courses in which the primary instructional method is lecture? And in situations where time is tight and content is high, is it better to cover content rather than spend time having students work actively with it?

Although active learning does take class time, we need not see it in opposition to content coverage. Active learning strategies can be a key component in helping students internalize and apply information. Rather than seeing active learning as something that necessitates abandoning content, it helps to rethink the manner in which instructors and students "cover" information.

When most people think of content coverage, they think of an instructor lecturing to students. Research shows, however, that students learn material better during lectures when they have time to work with it actively. Not affording students this opportunity may actually be counterproductive: an instructor may talk through (ie, cover) the day's content, but that's no guarantee that students will understand and remember it.

By choosing active learning strategies wisely, it is possible to maximize students' learning of course content, even though that means a trade off of up to ten minutes of class time per period. The important thing is to find active learning strategies that are suited to your teaching style and the size of your class.

It is important to remember that active learning is not antithetical to the lecture, but a complement to it. There are a great many active learning strategies that work wonderfully in lectures of all sizes —from directed writing, to questioning, to problem solving. While active learning often involves group work, it need not. Many strategies can be completed individually, making them easy to manage in large classes. Active learning need not take a lot of time. Many active learning strategies can be completed in as few as two minutes. (The Active Learning Strategies page has several examples to choose from.)

Finally, Susan's case raises the issue of whether active learning strategies can be used effectively in scientific disciplines. Some strategies clearly lend themselves to the content in literature or philosophy courses, but that doesn't mean that active learning is incompatible with physical or social science courses, even sections with hundreds of students.

For a description of how two instructors managed to incorporate active learning into their

curriculum while covering all required content, see Judy Moore and Eric Mould, "The Evolution of a Biology Course: From Student Passivity to Student Accountability." http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/resources/assess/a2evolbi.htm Our resources page also has links to sites dealing specifically with using active learning in science, engineering, and lecture contexts.

Scene Five: My Students Won't Work Together in Groups!

Overview

Getting students to work together cooperatively in groups can be a challenge. Many are skeptical of group projects or uncomfortable working with others. There are personality clashes, those who see group work as an opportunity to let others carry the load, and those who take control and dominate at the expense of others' participation. Students generally come to college unprepared to work effectively in groups, and unless they're trained to do so, results will often be underwhelming. Nevertheless, there are important reasons to try. Cooperative learning results in higher student achievement, self-esteem, and overall satisfaction with their educational experience. It also provides the social skills students will need when they enter the workforce.

There are important differences between formal and informal group work. The former implies group work that is structured, often of long duration, and results in a graded project, while the latter implies group work that is structured but ungraded and of short duration. Much of the group work that occurs in an active learning classroom is informal: it does not extend beyond the boundaries of the class period and results in a product that is not graded. Even though the stakes for this kind of group learning are lower than those for formal cooperative learning, making sure that groups function appropriately and well is important to the success of the active learning strategy.

Cooperative learning is an important adjunct to active learning since many active learning strategies are also cooperative. For more on cooperative learning, visit The Cooperative Learning Center at the University of Minnesota.

The following scene dramatizes an informal small group activity and a group whose members refuse to work together.

Scene

Kristin teaches in the university math department and often devotes class time for students to solve problems. On this particular day, she decided to try a small group problem-solving activity in which groups of four would work together to apply principles from their text to a real world problem. Kristin created an overhead transparency outlining the problem, successfully broke students into groups, and introduced the activity. When she asked them to begin, most groups acted cooperatively. One group of students refused to work together, however. They began to solve the problem individually, each working quietly alone.

Implications of the Scene

As the first episode illustrates, successful cooperative group work doesn't just happen. When groups become dysfunctional, it is very important that the instructor intervene and guide students toward success, something that Kristin failed to do in the first episode and did quite well in episode two. In the latter, she confronts the dysfunctional group immediately, helping them get on track by

assigning roles and encouraging interaction among members.

It is also crucial that group activities be carefully thought out and well designed. According to Roger and David Johnson, co-directors of the University of Minnesota Cooperative Learning Center and leading experts on the subject, successful cooperative learning situations have five key components:

- Positive interdependence (each group member is accountable to and depends on the others)
- Independent accountability (each group member must learn the material)
- Promotive face-to-face interaction (group members work together)
- Use of group social skills (group members practice leadership and communication)
- Group processing (group members reflect on their functioning as a group, assess how well they are working, and consider changes to make their work more effective)

Instructors should assign roles to each group member to help facilitate their cooperative functioning. Typical roles might be timekeeper, fact checker, recorder, and understanding checker. The latter is particularly important. The role of this person is to guarantee that all group members understand and agree with the solution that the group is formulating, thereby making sure that all individuals are accountable for understanding the solutions the group generates.

In the first episode, Kristin simply broke students into groups and said, "get started." Students didn't have a clear roadmap for how they should function cooperatively, leading to confusion and dysfunction among members. The second episode illustrates how one might present a well designed group activity to students.

Before allowing them to begin, Kristin explains clearly how group members should work together to meet their objective. She notes that every individual will have a role in the group and that all are responsible for working together to meet the goals of the activity. She mentions that she will call on students at random from the groups to share their solution and rationale, thereby encouraging individual accountability among group members. Finally, she makes clear that students will participate in "group processing," assessing how well their group functioned in its task. In this way, Kristin builds training in group skills into the activity.

Recommendations

- Successful cooperative learning doesn't just happen. It takes careful planning, a well designed activity, and an instructor who is willing to intervene to help groups function properly.
- Design group activities to include positive interdependence, independent accountability, face-to-face interaction, use of group social skills, and group processing.
- Assign group roles for students. Explain these clearly at the outset of the activity.

Scene Six: My Students Don't Take Peer Review Seriously

Overview

Writing instruction is a central component of undergraduate education that is no longer restricted to the English department. Through initiatives such as writing across the curriculum, individual departments are taking up the burden of writing instruction in order to teach their graduates the communication skills particular to their fields. Consequently, many professors who have little or no

background in writing instruction are called on to teach writing intensive courses. These courses require the active participation of students and make heavy use of various kinds of active learning strategies, particularly small group peer review activities.

As any practitioner of the craft can attest, writing is an iterative activity. A finished piece evolves from notes and preliminary drafts, through revisions suggested by peers, to finished manuscript. This process is obvious to professors and others who publish professional work, but in most cases it is absolutely foreign to undergraduates. They see writing as a one-time activity in which the writer sits down, composes the requisite piece in the space of a few hours, and is done with it. Convincing students of the important of peer review, then, can be a challenge.

But it is extremely important. By incorporating meaningful and productive peer review sessions into your writing intensive course, you can model for students the importance of revision and the iterative approach to writing. To achieve this requires careful planning and intervention on the part of the instructor. She must confront lack of student buy in to the process of peer review and break down false assumptions. She must counter student complaints that peer review is a waste of time because the instructor will eventually read the paper and convince them of the importance of peer commentary. To be successful, instructors must model a peer review process for students to follow so that the comments they provide are substantive and relevant, not shallow and congratulatory which is too often the case.

The following scene explores some of the problems that instructors may face with small group peer review of written work. It offers recommendations to instructors, particularly those new to writing instruction, for addressing them.

Scene

Bill is a professor in the sociology department. He is teaching a writing intensive seminar and has decided to include an in-class session for students to review one another's preliminary drafts. He has broken students into groups of three or four and instructed each of them to bring enough copies of their drafts to distribute to their peers. He requested that students read the drafts prior to class, making notes and revision comments based on a rubric he distributed to them.

Bill begins the session by explaining the goal of the activity and the procedure students should follow during it. He had set aside ten minutes for the review of each paper, believing that students would need every minute of it to adequately discuss each work. As the class begins, Bill circulates through the room, watching students and listening to their comments. In general, the quality of the comments he hears are low. Students say things such as "good job," "I liked it," or "it seemed to flow well." As he thought about how best to address the superficiality of these kinds of comments, he noticed that one group of three students had finished reviewing their first paper after only a minute or so. Clearly, these students don't understand how to conduct a peer review and don't value the opportunity for it.

Object1

Implications of the Scene

The scene above illustrates two of the most common problems with peer review of writing: students fail to understand the process of peer review and they lack buy in to the concept.

The first issue is easier to address than the second. Clearly, students need some training in how to conduct a peer review before they're asked to do one. Bill provided a rubric–a checklist of elements regarding writing style, argument, organization, etc.–and told his students to use it as a basis for making comments on others' papers. He didn't, however, provide specific guidance for carrying out the review. It was clear in the video that his students needed such guidance. Their peer review broke down quickly, and in the first episode Bill was uncertain how to handle the situation. In the second, he quickly stepped in to provide guidance to his students, leading them through the peer review process as a way of modeling it.

It is very important to intervene as quickly as possible when peer review teams experience problems. Working with teams one-on-one is effective but time consuming and inefficient. You might consider creating an assignment in which you introduce the importance of peer review to your students and teach them the fundamentals of conducting such a review.

One such assignment is to hold a "mock review" in which the entire class focuses on a single paper. The instructor should distribute a paper and ask students to read it before the following session. The paper should illustrate the kinds of concerns the instructor hopes his students will identify in their

own writing; it can be instructor-written or written by a student from a past semester (anonymous, of course). The instructor should also hand out a scoring rubric or a revision checklist for students to refer to when reading the paper. Students should identify two or three concerns in the draft based on elements in the rubric, noting why they are problems and how they may be corrected. Tell students to write directly on the draft since it will be handed back to the writer to aid revision.

The in-class mock review may be held as follows. Sitting in a circle, the instructor plays the role of writer, modeling the kinds of questions that a writer may ask when others are reading his paper ("why do you think that?" "Does this part make sense to you?" "How would you fix that?" etc.). Spend some time addressing various issues (argument, structure, style, tone, and audience) while moving from student to student to model the "round robin" format of a typical peer review session. When students offer comments that are shallow, treat them as teachable moments just as you should when students offer perceptive, concrete recommendations for revision.

The mock review is your opportunity to model both the process of peer review and the kind of feedback that students should give one another. Students are reluctant to give negative commentary to their peers, so you should spend some time talking about what constitutes constructive feedback and how it can be tactfully delivered. It is also important to make clear to students that the words on the page are separate from the writer who created them; saying that a paragraph, sentence, or idea needs work isn't saying that the writer is somehow deficient. This isn't an easy concept to impress on students.

One thing that may help is to bring in some of your own writing, preliminary drafts especially, and show them to students. If you've saved versions of college papers, so much the better. When students see that the instructor also makes false starts, writes run on sentences, and struggles with expressing ideas, they begin to realize that writing is a craft that takes practice, hard work, and many drafts. They understand that no piece of writing is perfect on the first try, a nice way to impress on them the importance of revision and peer review.

The last point gets at the issue of student buy in to the process of revision–to the multi-draft process of composition itself. When students don't buy into the process of writing in stages, peer review becomes a meaningless exercise to be got through as painlessly as possible. Participation is grudging, leading to superficial comments and little time spent on the exercise. Convincing students of the importance of revising their writing is not easy. As suggested above, you may show your own writing and how it progresses through drafts or you may have students read about the composition process of others.

In some cases, though, students will simply not be persuaded to revise their work. The best guarantee for their participation is to grade it. Collect students' revision comments in portfolios and assign a grade to them. Make the grade substantial enough to encourage that they take this work seriously. Some instructors assign 25 or 50 percent of the final activity grade to revision work. Rather than a portfolio, you may assign students a brief "revision" essay in which they reflect on the quality of the comments they offered to peers and how they used their peers' comments to revise their own writing. This essay can then be graded as a record of their participation and counted as part of the final grade for the exercise.

There are many strategies that instructors can use to help students internalize the process of writing. They all take commitment on the part of the instructor and a willingness to shoulder a higher workload.

Recommendations

- Recognize that peer reviews often falter because students fail to understand the process of peer review or they lack buy in to the concept. Develop strategies to address these concerns in your students.

- Teach students how to conduct a peer review. Focus on the reasons for doing them, the process to follow, and how to give (and receive) constructive feedback.
- Create a rubric or checklist for students to use during peer review.
- Grade students' revision and peer review work. Consider portfolio grading or having students submit a revision essay outlining the comments they offered their peers and how they used peer comments to improve their own writing.
- Intervene as quickly as possible when groups struggle with peer review.
- Make it clear to your students that they should not expect to rely solely on the instructor's comments for their reviews. Peer commentary is important.