

Peer Groups and Pairs: Many benefits for the Online Setting!

Introduction

Exchanging papers with a classmate is very common in most college classrooms (Wolfe, 2004). It encourages interaction between students which has been known to improve student learning. The teaching technique which is one of many is used primarily in face-to-face classrooms. In contrast, most present-day instructors are faced with the need to enhance student interaction in online settings especially since the number of online settings has increased. Over the past several years, online enrollments have been growing substantially faster than overall higher education enrollments (The Sloan Consortium, 2013), for instance, almost 3.5 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2006 term; a nearly 10 percent increase over the number reported the previous year. As instructors are being expected to increase and assess student learning outcomes in higher education, it is important for these same instructors to address online students.

To address this need, a teaching technique is being used often in the online setting which is "peer groups or pairs." Wolf (2004) conducted a study that examined how an online peer review system affects the student learning process. He found there were many advantages to online peer reviews and groups such as students' role playing as the "teacher." As a result, students: gained better knowledge for the course's grading process, did not have to wait on the teacher to grade papers, and who knew more about the assignment instructions were able to help their peers who may have been struggling. And, it resulted in less work for the teacher. Wolfe also noticed that students seemed to work harder to impress their peers and accepted the feedback better from them as well. However, he pointed out a few disadvantages were experienced such as, possible harsh comments in some reviews, easily open for cheating, late/missing work, students may do more than what is required, and students may/may not understand the basics of web technology. Similarly, Ertmer, Richardson, Belland, Camin, Connolly, Coulthard, Lei and Mong (2007) reported that student discussions play a huge role during online settings, allowing students to exchange ideas, offer explanations, share perspectives and clarify understandings especially during blogging. If the use of peer feedback can reduce the teacher's workload in an online course yet help maintain a high quality of postings, peer groups and pairs would be an effective strategy for learning in an online course.

Most importantly, instructors are encouraged to use various teaching techniques in the online setting since many students reside in different cities, states, and even countries, still preferring to have a more personal learning experience with their peers; basically, it is a way for them to "connect with one another."

Procedure

To implement the peer learning environment, instructors will need to assess their classes' needs and available resources. Wolfe provides the following steps for implementing a peer group assignment, 1. Provide instructions to students for completing the assignment(s); 2- Instruct student to post assignments to the course website/platform; 3- Remind students to logs in, accesses list of URLs for the other students and review the posted assignment(s); and 4-Inform students they must submit a score and answer questions/leave constructive comments (immediately available for the receiving student). Another technique is discussion boards tailored to course content. For example, students are instructed to respond to a discussion question with a response to a question provided by the instructor and also respond to another students' post. Lastly, Ertmer et al provided an activity were two discussion questions were students post weekly responses and feedback defined as: 1. Assigning a numerical score (0-2) based on Bloom's taxonomy; and 2. Providing descriptive comments supporting the score and the quality of the post.

Assessment

Ultimately, peer groups and pairs improves student learning especially writing skills; for example, in a study conducted by Liang and Tsai (2010) that assessed the use of writing via online peer assessment, found that students gained progressively higher scores; and significantly improved their science writing in terms of both the expert's and peers' evaluations. When students engage in peer

reviews, the practice of peer assessment may help them identify their own writing weaknesses. Or, when reviewing peers' work, students have more opportunities to carefully read examples of superior writing by their peers (Liang & Tsai, 2010). In the end, if the use of peer feedback can reduce the teacher's workload in an online course, yet help maintain a high quality of postings, this would be an effective strategy for learning in an online course (Ertmer et al., 2007), and should be considered.

References

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