

Why Every Student Needs Critical Friends

Amy Reynolds

Students become more engaged when they offer constructive feedback on one another's work.



The final bell rings on the last day of class before the semester break. Students stream out of the room as the teacher stands by the door. Glancing back at her desk, she sighs. It is piled high with posters, compact discs, index cards, and papers, the stack so tall that half of it November 2009 falls to the floor in a heap. This pile represents 10 weeks of student work, reflecting students' creativity and mental effort. Only the teacher will look at these projects now, and only she will provide detailed assessment, which will reach students long after they have stopped caring about these projects. There has to be a better way to give meaningful feedback.

I have found a better way that I use in middle school enrichment and mainstream classes in many content areas—peer critiques. As my students work on major projects—both during the creation process and once they have a finished product—they present those projects to the entire class. Each student receives a formal critique with suggestions for improvement from fellow classmates. Through peer critiques, students learn to appreciate the diversity and richness of one another's work—and to enrich their own work.

Authentic Feedback for Authentic Assessments

Using peer critiques to evaluate and improve student work is a natural outgrowth of the movement toward more authentic assessments in education (Henderson & Karr-Kidwell, 1998). Both formative and summative assessments now commonly go beyond multiple-choice tests to include live performances, digital presentations, simulations, and so on. We have moved from a focus on judging whether students know isolated facts to a focus on assessing whether students can apply newly acquired skills and concepts.

One rationale for authentic assessment was a desire to better mirror "the real world." Educators realized that student performance on tests did not ensure successful transfer of skills to the outside world. Just as our forms of assessment have become more authentic, so our means of providing feedback on students' projects should reflect the kinds of real-world feedback they will face.

Formalized peer critiques simulate the experiences students will have in the workplace. They will need to consult with colleagues and supervisors to get an honest evaluation of their efforts. To succeed in their field, they will need to receive such information graciously and apply it to their work—and offer detailed feedback diplomatically to coworkers. Thus, peer critiques help students prepare one another for life.

What Are the Benefits of Critiques?

Students Get More Out of Feedback

The authentic assessment approach has led students to craft more diverse, complex final products—which deserve a wider audience than the teacher. As learners critique one another's work, they might notice praiseworthy points or pose questions that the instructor has not thought of. A student might ignore feedback from a teacher but suddenly pay attention when a peer voices the same observation. I have found that this effect only increases with student age.

Discussion Becomes Lively

Peer critiques create a more active, engaged classroom environment. In many classrooms that use traditional assessment methods, teachers ask students to present their final projects to the class. The usual result? One student at the front of the room reading PowerPoint slides aloud to a room of dozing fellow students. Peer critiques, in contrast, demand dynamic participation. Listeners must not only attend to each presentation, but also offer concrete suggestions for its improvement while commending aspects of the work that they appreciate.

This is show-and-tell for the 21st century, and students are probably familiar with the concept: On many television shows, the audience can vote singers off the stage and survivors off the island. I find that students are very comfortable with actively evaluating others, although, of course, we should guide their evaluations toward helpfulness rather than the harshness of some reality shows.

Peer critiques can also create a collegial classroom atmosphere. Although I still evaluate students on each project with a rubric, when students exchange feedback, the focus shifts from grades and competition to tangible aspects of a learner's work. Peer critiques make the assessment experience constructive rather than punitive. Students glean from their peers both an understanding of where they have succeeded and concrete ideas for strengthening weak areas. For example, when a student-created Web site featured little color or graphics, several students gave the whole class an impromptu demonstration of how to skillfully use these features in Web design.

An Audience Emerges

This classroom community becomes an authentic audience. Teachers often stress the importance of keeping an audience in mind as students consider what they want to say and how, but without a real audience, the discussion is always abstract (Ede, 1984). Peer critiques make audience more than a theoretical construct; they give that audience a voice.

How to Make Critiques Work

Introducing critiques into classroom culture requires setting up an environment of trust and being patient while students learn to act as confident critics. The following practices help students get the most from peer critiques:

Help Students Critique Sensitively

Peer critiquing runs counter to the everyone-gets-a-trophy philosophy prevalent today. Some students may hear that they are not performing as well as others. But we should not assume that frank peer critiques will hurt young people's self-esteem. Realistically, students have different strengths and weaknesses; they should have the opportunity to view one another's work and learn from mistakes and triumphs. It would be a shame to ignore this diversity when we might use it to promote learning.

Students can learn to express their opinions and offer detailed feedback in a sensitive manner. There is a big difference between saying, "Your work is bad" and saying, "Did you ever think of adding larger text and more color to that slide? People would see it better and like it more."

Give students explicit guidance and practice in providing detailed feedback sensitively. In the beginning, students tend to say things like, "It's boring" or, "That's confusing." I have to prompt them to be more concrete and to expand on their observations with examples from the actual work ("What specifically makes it confusing for you?") or to rephrase comments in a more helpful manner. Gradually, such interjection becomes rare.

During the first few critiques, write simple sentence stems on the board and encourage students to begin their comments with these prompts. In the beginning, keep the focus of prompts general to enable students to individualize their responses; for later critiques, prompts might emphasize a specific skill or aspect of a project. A few of my standard prompts are

- One thing I really like about this is ...

- One way to make this stronger could be ...
- Did you ever think about ...

If the work can be viewed before the critique—such as on a class blog—have students complete these stems and bring them to class. This ensures that everyone, even students who process things more slowly, has something to share. It's best to conduct the critiques during several periods, tackling only a few individual projects each day. Student comments maintain their freshness and potency, and boredom doesn't set in.

Wait for the Transformation

It takes time to create a classroom climate in which students feel comfortable standing in front of their peers, allowing critical eyes to evaluate days or even weeks of effort. Your first few student critiques may be characterized more by reluctant speakers who look to you for direction than by self-assured presenters and critiquers. I know mine were.

I remember the first time I required all students in a class to share a recently completed project with the entire group. After I asked, "Who would like to share first?" a few students tentatively raised a hand. Most were ready to yank their hands down should my eye stray in their direction. I called on one brave soul—I'll call her Susan—to come to the front of the room and open her project file on our Smart Board. For this project, students designed a house using computer-aided drafting software and drew up a budget for furnishing one of the bedrooms. Susan was showing the class a blueprint, a plan for bedroom furnishings, and a spreadsheet outlining her budget.

"Why don't you tell us what's unique or interesting about your work?" I suggested. "Did you face an especially difficult challenge? Is there something you're really proud of?"

Haltingly, Susan began pointing to particular aspects of her project. Often, her eyes drifted downward or she turned her back to the class while manipulating the Smart Board; each time, I redirected her attention to the students in front of her. When Susan had finished, I asked who had compliments or comments on her work.

Again, hands rose cautiously, and I had to direct Susan to call on her peers. Many students came out with ambiguous or unclear phrases such as "Your point didn't really come across." I needed to prompt students to provide concrete examples of what they meant.

Only one semester later, as the same students again began to formally share a recently completed project, the picture was quite different. The minute I asked who wanted to share first, every hand was raised high. Students rose out of their seats, begging to go first. When the presenter had finished, students eagerly offered helpful praise and criticism.

Create a Trusting Community

To go from fear to eagerness, students need an environment of trust and caring (Noddings, 2009). I purposefully try to make all students feel like valued members of the learning community in large and small ways. I remark on new haircuts, ask about vacation plans, and commiserate over upcoming tests. I keep a wall calendar noting student birthdays and carry a pad of sticky notes to write down specific questions students ask that I cannot immediately answer. There is no one best way to create a trusting community; your own methods must reflect your personality and that of your students.

Model Acceptance of Criticism

When students alert me to errors I make in writing, speaking, grading, and so forth, I try to model mature acceptance of critical feedback. I openly thank them and remark that everyone makes mistakes and that we all need our fellow learners' help to improve.

I also solicit feedback. At the end of any unit or project, I ask students for specific comments about

individual activities. I often distribute a form that lists the different activities we did accompanied by the following questions:

- What activity do you wish we could have spent more time on? Why?
- What activity should next year's class skip altogether? Why?
- What activity would you add to this unit? Be as specific as possible.

I use this information (along with my own professional judgment) when deciding which activities to alter, add, or delete from a unit, and I let students know that I use their feedback for this purpose.

Train Students to Take the Lead

The student whose work is being critiqued should stand at the front of the room so that the entire audience can clearly view the project under discussion. This arrangement also makes the critique less personal, with comments and suggestions that classmates offer pertaining to the work itself, not the student as a person.

I usually stand to the side of the room so that all comments travel directly from student to student. Because the goal is to make the teacher simply a fellow member of the discussion, the student presenter should call on his or her peers as they raise a hand to comment. It takes a while for student ownership to become ingrained. At first, students try to address their comments to me and look at me for confirmation. But when the shift finally occurs, and the presenter smiles, ignores my raised hand, and calls first on a peer, it's amazing.

I take brief notes during the critique to give to the student receiving the feedback— or I rotate this role among students. No one can present articulately, field comments and concerns, and look at the audience while also remembering verbal comments.

Experiment with Format

There is no one best method to use for peer critiques. The process should be individualized to fit the kind of work being examined, the time constraints of the class, and students' ages. Experiment with the format until you feel confident that your students are learning from critiques. I recommend using peer critiques during the creation of a project rather than just at the end; I have seen definite improvement in the quality of student work when students get feedback along the way.

Peer critiques work in a wide variety of settings. Students can watch a video of the previous evening's music concert and offer evaluations of their own band or choir performance. Students can share different methods of solving the same math problem, examine blueprints for house designs, or offer feedback on science fair proposals.

Although peer critiques improve students' critical-thinking ability and provide them with a broader spectrum of evaluation, the less obvious benefit is motivational. Students love to offer their opinions. As they share what they think, they take genuine pleasure in seeing—and contributing to—the work their peers have created.

References

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Amy Reynolds coordinates the gifted program at North Salem Middle/High School, North Salem, New York;
aer96_98@yahoo.com.

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