Chapter VI

Culture of Critique: Online Learning Circles and Peer Reviews in Graduate Education

Margaret Riel
Pepperdine University, USA

James Rhoads
Citrus College, USA

Eric Ellis
Treasure Valley Community College, USA

Abstract

In this chapter, we explore a strategy, “online learning circles,” for helping students develop their own authority and trust in evaluating research and a respect for the authority of their peers. Our goal is to examine this online collaborative structure and its ability to foster a culture of constructive critique in graduate-school education. The data we analyze includes peer-review messages and survey responses. Student message data are coded for type and quality of peer review. The survey data is used to understand the students’ perspective about their experience in learning circles and their judgment of the quality of feedback they offered and...
received from their peers. This research addresses two important issues. First, it evaluates a structure, learning circles for group work in graduate online education; and second, it explores the type and form of peer feedback from within this collaborative structure. Learning circles did provide a structure for peer review but there are reservations and issues involved in helping students to develop the trust needed to work together effectively. The second issue revolves around authority in the process of peer review. Under what conditions are students willing to be critical and to accept criticism from their peers as legitimate? To do this involves a process of reacculturation that is difficult to create in courses of limited duration but may be one argument for the advantages of creating a cohort model of education in either on-campus or online programs of study.

Introduction

Much of early schooling requires students to acquire knowledge alone with limited opportunities for inquiry, interpretation, design, and critique. In contrast, graduate education, either online or on-campus, requires students to engage in a creative process of analytic interpretation, question-driven inquiry, and crucial reflection with the eventual goal of creating new knowledge. Group projects or peer feedback on projects engage students in deeper learning because these activities often involve a discussion of alternative interpretations and some accommodation to different strategies for accomplishing a task. This requires a trust in thinking and a willingness to experiment with ideas and approaches, some of which may need to be discarded.

Moving from knowledge acquisition to knowledge construction can be very difficult for students, who often vary in their ability to work collaboratively or offer constructive criticism. Peer review requires students to make evaluative judgments on the progress of their peers. This process requires a shift in many of the cultural assumptions students hold about school in general and graduate education in particular.

One reason a “culture of critique” is difficult to develop stems, in part, from graduate students’ expectations of their relationship to their instructors. Many students come to the university with the expectation that they will learn from the experts, their instructors. These same expectations are greater in online courses where students frequently ask for more feedback from their instructors. While online instructors might appear to be available more frequently, they face the same time constraints of on-campus university teaching, limiting their ability to engage in extensive one-on-one interaction.