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## **Plotting the Course: Online Spaces for Semester-Long Group Work**

A general fear of online coursework is that students will feel disconnected from the subject, as though they are submitting their homework the same way they might pay a bill or order a pizza. It can be a very passive learning environment where students don't really engage enough to significantly expand their writing ability. However, online group work, when managed well, can keep a dynamic conversation going both in the classroom and outside the classroom and give students space to have more of a voice and feel more invested in the subject. To create this kind of online environment, we can structure assignments in such a way that a student has more work to do beyond just posting disconnected assignments on the web every week. For instance, a student can comment on another student's submission. Students can read each other's submissions along with other students' comments on those submissions. And beyond that, the instructor can bring into class a couple of these for the class to discuss. This keeps the process working as a conversation, rather than a series of audience-less writing assignments. If the majority of our conversations about writing are happening *through* writing, it can only make the writing more thoughtfully crafted.

Below are some details about how I set this up. It's by no means the only way. While the same activities could be done through worksheets that students fill out and share in groups in class, I like having this process online so that students can easily go back to find posts they've written and expand on them in their essays.

### **Group Size and Setup**

I begin the semester with online groups of at least 6 students each, which ensures that enough students will participate in any given week. I create these groups on Blackboard, where each group has a variety of tools they can use—including a group blog and a group wiki. I keep students in the same group over the course of the semester. This way, students see each other's strengths and progress and as a result tend to show more investment in one another's work, and subsequently their own work.

### **Weekly Activities**

On Thursday of each week, my students respond to a writing prompt from me and post this on their group blog. The submissions are usually around 200 words. I tell my students that these are "mini-drafts" for their essays, so they should do the best they can, but to think of this as a space where they are free to experiment and test out their ideas on their peers.

By Tuesday of each week, students comment on at least two of their group members' posts from the previous week (at least 100 words each). I provide them with discussion questions they can choose from. They range from questions about craft to questions about their responses to their peers' ideas. This works best when the questions in the prompt allow students to analyze the text from a direction they are most interested in. My goal here is to give them the tools to have a rich conversation among themselves about their writing so that they feel invested in what they are doing.

## Signaling to Students That They Have an Audience

I'm very careful to keep these groups active through periodic prompts, at the same time as making it feel like their space—not mine. Through consensus, a group of six students can be quite good at evaluating what is successful and unsuccessful in a piece of writing, and I give them the space to do so. I do keep regularly involved, posting once a week in each group blog, but not so much that the group's conversation becomes stilted. As I might do in the classroom, I synthesize groups' discussions, comment on a group project's progress, or simply offer up a prodding discussion question or praise where it's due.

I also use class time to show samples of students' most successful posts to the larger class, and we discuss our reactions to them. This helps to raise the quality of students' work by giving them a sense that what they write is being heard and starting conversations. This also gives me a chance to comment on their craft and give them examples of what makes their writing successful.

Periodically, I'll give the class an assignment that makes use of what students have written previously, asking them to go back and identify and expand on their best posts.

## Online Peer Review

As we move from brainstorming and drafting to revising their essays, we transition from the risk-free space of the group blogs to Turnitin.com, where they are each randomly assigned to peer review the essay of any student from the class. Although I want students to be aware that I'm grading them on the quality of their work in their final drafts, I still want this to feel like a continuation of a conversation.

I ask students to submit their rough drafts through Turnitin (available through Blackboard) and complete peer reviews (called a "Peer Mark" Assignment in Turnitin) there. At this point, we have spent enough class time workshopping various parts of the essay that they should have some understanding of how to respond to the peer review questions.

Somehow, the peer review process seems less exhausting online, for both the peer reviewer and the person reading the peer review. All of the methods below could be used for an in-class peer review, but I like the idea that the student writer and I can access all of the peer reviews in one place without squinting to read another student's handwriting or shuffling through a pile of papers:

1. 1. I begin peer review with one "scaled response" question. For example, "On a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the best), how persuaded were you by this author's argument as a whole?" Most students tend to be stingy with 5's, and a rate of anything less than a 5 requires the reviewer to justify this with revision suggestions when answering the rest of the questions.
2. 2. I limit the number of questions by allowing students to choose from a set of questions in three or four categories. This gives them a little freedom to decide what is most important to praise and to revise in the essay.
3. 3. In my comments on rough drafts, I synthesize students' responses, adding whatever ideas are necessary for helping the student strengthen the essay. Making sense of seeming contradictions in what their peers have said, I can reinforce what their reviewers have praised as a strength in the essay and

suggest a method for improving the areas reviewers said needed improvement.

Synthesizing my comments with students' comments makes commenting on rough drafts take longer than it would otherwise, but when I do this, I feel that students are receiving helpful feedback from three people, not just one. Especially on the rough draft of the first essay of the semester, this kind of feedback really gives students an idea of how to improve over the rest of the semester.

### **Possible Uses for the Wiki Tool**

The wiki tool in Blackboard seems like underexplored territory for teaching revision, since it allows students to revise one another's work remotely and see the changes. Although there are many other possible uses, I've had groups of students create a wiki page on a particular craft skill we've discussed in class. Ensuring that each group understood at least one craft technique in depth improved both the peer reviews and the class's writing as a whole. One further advantage of the wiki tool is that the instructor can see how much each student has contributed, making it easier to give each student a grade based on how much he or she actually contributed to the project.