Using Blackboard (Bb) to Organize and Conduct Effective Peer Review Sessions

There are a few approaches and techniques that may be used to organize and conduct peer review sessions in **Bb**. Users of Bb will know that peer review sessions can be set up and carried out either using the Group function or via the Discussion Board function. Each function has its advantages and disadvantages, and teachers should choose them depending on their teaching philosophies and goals in the classroom.

Using the Group function of Bb to conduct peer review sessions allows for a tight class and small group management. It allows students within each group to have a "private" review space that cannot be used or seen by others in the classroom. Students can also use their small group's discussion forum and chat room, if enabled by the teacher. Obviously, these features are beneficial if teachers want each workshop group to have more privacy online.

On the other hand, using the Discussion forum of Bb allows the class to create a public space where everyone sees everyone else's work. The teacher may enable the attachment function that would allow students to upload files with their papers. In that case, everyone enrolled in the class can leave comments to every paper in the discussion forum, thus creating a truly public space online and allowing all the students in the class to learn from each other rather than limiting the interaction to each small group.

Some Practical Advice from the Authors

In Bb, many instructors prefer like to use the group areas to set up the peer review sessions. I've experimented in the past with groups of three or four students. However, when teaching online, I've discovered that participation in peer review can slack off during the semester, compared to participation in face-to-face classes. To prevent one member of a small group from ruining the peer-review experience for the rest of the group, through a lack of participation, I've begun to make my groups larger—five or six members, instead of three or four. I limit the number of reviews each session to three, although I encourage students to read all group members' papers, to get a good sense of how other writers are responding to the assignment.

1. I set up peer review using the small-group Discussion Board area, which I can enable for each group. I set up each peer review session clearly in separate Discussion Boards in each group. Sessions are appropriately scheduled on my course outline and clearly visible in Bb. Written instructions are supplied in Course Documents for each peer review session. Students know when and where to conduct peer review, because I reinforce the assignment by posting permanent announcements to the announcement page as the date for each peer review approaches.

2. In the class Discussion Board—the one that all member of the class can access together—I leave permanent instructions for students to go to their small-group's Discussion Board area to conduct peer review. I reserve the class-wide Discussion Board for large-group discussions.

3. In each peer review session, I have each group member create a thread to which he or she attaches his or her paper.

4. During peer review, group members go into their group Discussion Board area, open a thread, and retrieve a paper. They are instructed to read three papers that have not already been reviewed three times. In the Discussion Board environment, it is easy to see which papers have already been reviewed three times. My students experience confusion and frustration during peer review when I've used the file-exchange area to download papers and responses for peer review. To avoid this reaction from my students, I like using the small-group Discussion Boards, ones created for each peer-review session. They help the students stay organized, because the work is neatly arranged there for ease of viewing.

5. Students can comment on a paper, save it as a new file, and then attach it to a reply thread. Reply threads responding to each author's main thread organize the responses using an outline format for easy viewing. It is clear which responses go with which paper, because Bb indents replies to a thread and places them directly beneath it.

6. After reading a paper, a student can also make his or her responses in the reply thread itself. I like how this approach keeps students from writing directly on a peer's paper. It keeps them from merely editing a paper and focuses them, instead, on responding to it.

7. I generally give students 48 hours to conduct peer review. They have one deadline for posting their papers and another deadline for posting reviews.

I have found that the following steps must be taken in order to ensure a smooth and useful peer review session in Bb. I typically use the Groups function of Bb to conduct peer reviews sessions.

1. Before even splitting the class into small workshop groups, spend time with students discussing the fundamentals of peer responding. For this purpose, I use Richard Straub's excellent article "Responding, Really

Responding to Other Students' Writing," which provides novice writers with a set of accessible steps towards becoming a better responder. Please note that this applies both to face-to-face and online writing classes.

2. After the students have had a chance to read the article and discuss the fundamentals of effective peer review, both orally and in writing, on Bb's discussion forum or through other means, it is time to assign them to peer review groups. If you choose to use the Group function on Bb, now is also the time to create those groups. I typically enable all the functions in the small groups, except for the chat room. I have found that students prefer asynchronous communication with each other to synchronous.

3. I then make sure that each student knows which group he or she has been assigned. In face-to-face classes where I use the Group function for peer review, I typically conduct the first review session in class. During that session, students get a chance to get comfortable working with each other. In an online class, before assigning a full-scale review session, I invite the students to do a few ice-breaking activities on the group's discussion board, such as an introduction, telling their histories as readers and writers, and so on.

4. I then post detailed instructions for the review session on the web site, typically in the Announcements section, and go through the instructions with the whole class, taking questions and addressing any concerns that students may have. I believe that it is important to keep the instructions on the "common" space of Bb rather than posting them separately to each review group's space because that gives students a continuing sense of community in the class. An example of such instructions from a class that I am currently teaching can be seen on this slide. This is a face-to-face first year writing class, in which I use the group function of Bb for online peer review.

5. The students then upload their files to the group space and the workshop begins. I usually allow 36-48 hours for a group of 4 students to finish their work. This means downloading all other group members' files, reading them, and leaving specific written comments on the margins, typically using MSWord's comment function. After that, the students upload their papers back to the group site.

6. A note on the use of the group discussion forums. I find them to be useful spaces where students can discuss their work and simply chat, but they function well only if the teacher takes time to create favorable conditions for such exchanges. Simply telling students to post things on the discussion board will usually not be enough. On the other hand, giving students too many instructions may create the impression that the teacher is taking the group space over. Therefore, I prefer to invite students to participate in the discussion forums, but usually do not insist that they use them all the time. After all, my main purpose is to get them to comment on each other's papers, and group discussion forums are useful add-ons.

7. After the review work is complete, it is useful to ask each student in the review group to post an executive summary of his or her responses to others, whether on the small group discussion board or on the class discussion board. This not only provides the teachers with the means to monitor the activity of various students, but also to help students vocalize and conceptualize their work as responders to other writers.

A Word on the Role of the Teacher During and After the Workshop

As I mentioned earlier, it is important to set clear instructions and to let students know that you will be watching what goes on in their review group. At the same time, it is crucial not to take over the review space and the review process.
Student writers, especially, novice writers, need to know at all times that they have a low-threat, low-stakes writing space to revise and to experiment. At the same time, they need to know that help is always available when they require it. Process-based composition pedagogy sees the creation of each written work as a process of re-writing, re-thinking, and re-imagining, where only the last draft in a series of drafts should be formally evaluated and graded. I have found that the small group discussion forum provides me as a teacher with an excellent space to raise concerns or ask questions of the students if I need to, without overtaking their workshop and review space.

Final Thoughts on Conducting Successful Peer Review

When organizing and facilitating online peer review sessions using Bb, writing teachers should use the same fundamental principles of peer response that they use in other, offline classroom situations. These principles include:

1. Discussing, at length, with students the goals, objectives, and methods of peer response;
2. Giving detailed and precise instructions to students without overtaking their review spaces and review processes;
3. Being "present" during the workshop, giving the students confidence that the teacher is there to help.
4. At the end of the peer review session, raising any outstanding concerns and questions with the students, praising them for their successes and outlining directions for improvement.
5. Holding students and themselves to standards, policies, and procedures announced before the workshop.

Conclusion: Achieving Overall Goals with Peer Review in Bb

By organizing and facilitating online peer review in courses across the disciplines, instructors will be amazed at the improvements they will see in their students' writing. Students, who become acclimated to the discourse of a particular discipline, will feel much more comfortable engaging in activities that require reading, writing, and discussion in the classroom. Peer review directly and critically engages students in the use of a discipline's discourse. Instead of receiving the awkward, unreadable prose insecure students produce at the end of the semester, instructors will find papers that actually make them want to read on I often hear teachers in other disciplines say that they don't teach writing—they aren't the experts. They say they don't "count off" for the English mistakes, but only the mistakes in the content of the paper, instead. This kind of comment is confusing, because I don't see how we can separate the way a paper is written from its content. To be a member of a discourse community, students need to understand and master to a large extent the way people in a field engage with each other, both through their language and language use.

Anyone who assigns writing—and I hope everyone does—is a writing instructor. We each teach the discourse of our disciplines, not just their contents. We cannot escape doing so. What we can do to make the task more effective and enjoyable is to invite our students into the discourse community and help them practice using its language, first in the low-stakes writing and speaking assignments that involve peer review, among other things, and later in the more demanding assignments that carry higher-stakes, at the conclusion of the semester. Waiting until the end of the semester to assign writing activities is too late. We invite you to employ writing and peer review activities early in the semester to help your students achieve the comfort level necessary for using the discourse of your discipline to improve both their writing and their learning.

Cited from: Virtual Peer Review: Using Blackboard to Create the Writing Workshop Environment. By Shelley Aley and Pavel Zemliansky: James Madison University