Peer Assessment in Online Courses

Peer assessment—sometimes also called peer grading, peer evaluation, or peer review—is widely used in teaching both online and in person. Thoughtful integration of peer assessments into coursework can enhance students’ learning in a number of ways: it helps build trust and intellectual community; it leads to more thoughtful and reflective discussions; and it can help students cultivate a greater capacity for critical and evaluative judgment.

Peer assessments can be used in any discipline
Although often associated with courses in the arts and humanities, peer assessments can be added to classes in almost any discipline. Whether students are writing mathematical proofs, composing essays, or analyzing scientific data, there is likely room for some form of peer evaluation.

Peer assessments can be used in classes of all sizes
Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) often use peer-assessed activities as an efficient way to evaluate student work on a large scale. However, peer assessments can easily be tailored to small courses, where they are arguably even more valuable in promoting collaborative learning.

Peer assessments involve more than just assigning grades
You can use peer assessments to assign scores or grades, but this is by no means a requirement. In fact, grading need not be involved at all: you can design peer assessments to elicit only qualitative comments and suggestions for improvement or further development.

Peer assessments promote learning
The act of evaluating another person’s work with a critical eye—but also with care and respect—involves a number of higher-level cognitive skills. Students are better able to evaluate their own work, and also to discover what they don’t yet know, when they can observe and reflect on the range of approaches made visible to them during peer review.

Tips for developing peer assessments
• Design assignments and evaluation criteria in concert with one another, so they are tightly integrated; make sure criteria are appropriate to the knowledge and experience students are likely to have.
• Provide an encouraging and supportive environment to reduce students’ natural anxieties about peer evaluation; emphasize your rationale for using it and explain its benefits.
• Distribute examples of what you consider to be thoughtful, respectful, and constructive feedback.
• Develop clear evaluation criteria or rubrics and distribute them before students are required to submit an assignment, so students know how they will be evaluated.
• Discuss evaluation criteria with students before a peer assessment activity occurs; consider revising the criteria in response to student feedback.
• Consider dividing large or complex assignments into several smaller parts that can be evaluated independently and then revised based on comments from peers; this also helps reinforce the value of peer review as part of a larger developmental process.
• Assignments in some disciplines can benefit from multiple forms of evaluation, only one part of which may be peer assessment.
• Consider allowing students to evaluate one another anonymously.