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Peer Review Strategies that Keep the Focus on Better Teaching

THE PEER REVIEW processes for promotion and tenure and for continuing appointment provide committees with what's needed to make overall judgments about the quality of instruction. For teachers, however, peer reviews usually don't contain the diagnostic, descriptive feedback they need to continue their growth and development in the classroom. The assessments are broad and in the interest of preserving collegial relationships, any negative comments lurk between the lines or in vague statements that can be interpreted variously.

Teaching Professor Blog It's too bad that we don't do better with peer review because faculty consistently list colleagues as the best source for new ideas on teaching and frequently wish that instructional collaboration with peers was more substantive. Perhaps a list of peer activities with greater potential to improve instruction might lead us in more productive directions. But first a gentle reminder: collaboration works best when peers can communicate comfortably with each other and can get beyond only saying nice things about each other's teaching. Furthermore, unless you have questions about what content you should be teaching or how to explain or assess it, I recommend collaborating across disciplines. When you don't know each other's content, the discussion stays focused on teaching and learning.

Syllabus Review – Exchange syllabi. Read your colleague's syllabus carefully, noting what you'd conclude about the course and the instructor if this was the first introduction to both. Then exchange reactions. "If I was taking this course, here's the questions I'd have." "After looking at this, here's what I'd think about the instructor and how he/she will be conducting the course."

Classroom Observation – Dispense with all thoughts of what's done for the promotion and tenure review. Instead, truly observe and experience what it's like to be in one another's classroom, and then have follow-up conversations after each. Here are three approaches to try. For the first two, you observe each other. The third one has you observing someone else.

Be in class as a student. If there's assigned reading, do it (ditto for any homework assignment). Take

good notes. The goal here is providing quality feedback, not replicating student behaviors. Follow-up by sharing your notes and thoughts. "Here's a spot where I was totally confused." "The example you gave here really helped." "I wished you'd asked for questions at this point. If you had, here's what I would have asked."
Focus your observation on an aspect of instruction, say participation. How long before the first teacher/student question? Record the questions. Wait time: how long is the teacher waiting after asking a question before doing something? How's the teacher handling wrong or not very good answers? Who's answering the questions? Share your observations and talk about whether what you saw achieved the teacher's overall goals for classroom interaction.
Observe someone else teach—someone who's a good teacher, someone who uses a particular approach (team-based learning, a flipped course). Talk to each other about what you saw and how well it promoted learning.
Course Evaluation Exchange – Review a set of your most recent student ratings and write down the three general conclusions you've drawn from them and a couple of questions raised by them. Then share the ratings with your colleague but don't reveal your conclusions or questions. Review each other's results and write down three general conclusions and some follow-up questions. Do you think the conclusions you've drawn will be the same ones your colleague arrived at after looking at your results?

Facilitate a Focus Group – Identify five to seven students in one of your courses and ask them to meet with your colleague for 30 minutes. Give your colleague three questions you'd like the group to discuss. When facilitating the focus group discussion, encourage students to offer the feedback constructively. Providing each other with a written summary of what you heard is helpful. When the two of you talk, consider how representative these opinions are and what (if anything) should be done about what students said.

Jointly Implement Something New – It doesn't have to be a highly innovative approach or something that requires lots of extra preparation. For example, the two of you may decide you'd like to try a different approach to quizzing. Start with some goals: a quiz structure that promotes thinking, one that better prepares students for the exam, or one that changes how students study. You may experiment with just one quiz or several. Maybe you each try a different approach—but you both do something new. Pay attention to what happened and then get together to talk about the results and their implications.

Maryellen Wiimer, PhD; Peer Review Strategies that Keep the Focus on Better Teaching; Faculty Focus; May 24, 2017; [https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/peer-review-strategies-better-teaching/] May 31, 2017.

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Six Classroom Elements Learned from Zombie Films

COLLEGE COURSES, like movies, can inspire, entertain, shock, or repulse. Instructors produce, direct, and star in a series of semester-long scenes, complete with audiences, critics, and awards. If your course could be equated to a movie genre, what would we be watching? Would we see a romantic comedy, focused on relationship-building and a predictable, subtle narrative? Perhaps it would be an action film – colorfully energetic, thrilling for some, and uncomfortable for others. Current research on learning suggests you may want to consider plot elements in zombie films as you design your courses. Here's why.

1. Hook. All zombie films begin with a dramatic attention-getter—an event that draws you in and demands you stay in your seat and watch every detail play out. Similarly, one study found that students who had an impactful, positive experience on the first day of class were more likely to have higher motivation throughout the semester and subsequently earn better grades in the course (Wilson & Wilson, 2007). For information about creating a great first day for your class, see The First Day of Class: A Once-a-Semester Opportunity.
2. Collaboration. Simply put, characters in zombie films do better and are more likely do survive, when in groups. They are able to share workloads (like taking turns being the lookout and scavenging for resources), congregate skills and knowledge, and negotiate solutions in critical ways. Like the zombie movie characters, some research suggests that student motivation may be generated and facilitated by classroom collaboration (Järvelä, Volet, & Järvenoja, 2010). For more information on structuring collaboration in face-to-face courses, see How to Improve Group Work: Perspectives from Students. For online courses, see Building Community and Creating Relevance in the Online Classroom.
3. Problem Solving. Problem solving is the critical plot line in zombie films; characters must collaboratively deal with ill-defined, complex problems (e.g., protecting borders from zombie intrusions) and implement their solutions in order to endure. Research into Problem-Based Learning (PBL), one problem solving pedagogy, offers supportive evidence for practice; in fact, students may learn more through collaborative problem solving than through traditional lectures (Yadav et al., 2011). For more information on PBL, see Problem-Based Learning: Six Steps to Design, Implement, and Assess.
4. Risk-Taking. Since problems in zombie films are ill-defined and do not have obvious best solutions, risk-taking is a necessity. Most zombie films have a character who

holds out in taking a risk and wants to stay put, where it is "safe." It almost never ends well for him or her. In academic contexts, risk-taking students are those who have the self-confidence to pursue creative endeavors and constructively deal with failure (Gibson, 2010). In doing so, instructors should encourage mastery goals (i.e., learning and improving without students taking big 'hits' to their grades when they try something new) rather than performance goals (e.g., grades and peer comparison). For more information on facilitating risk-taking, see Teaching Risk-Taking in the College Classroom.

5. Humor. Traditional zombie films, like many horror films, do not simply scare the viewer – they entertain. They are a humorous, often satirical look at modern life. The humor keeps viewers invested in the humanity of the characters. Humor, when implemented appropriately in the classroom, may make instructors seem more likeable and approachable, and even contribute to greater content learning (Banas, Dunbar, & Liu, 2011). See Humor in the Classroom.
6. Hope. Even with the previous five elements in place, successful characters in zombie films must maintain hope to be successful. Hope is a powerful contributor to learning and mental health; among new college students who may be at risk for psychological distress, hope contributes to their self-efficacy and academic success (Cranford, Eisenberg, & Serras, 2009). We can start developing students' hope and self-efficacy by establishing a positive classroom community, providing appropriate learning feedback, and guiding students to understand the progress they have made. For help on instilling confidence and hope, see Finding Signs of Progress When Learning is Slow and Promoting Students' Self-Efficacy in the Online Classroom.

Zombie films offer a framework for us to understand important elements of the learning process. Without each of these six elements, zombie film characters' failure is inevitable. As we develop our courses, let's use what we know from zombie film plots to write a script where our students have all the tools they need to successfully make it through the semester.

Resources

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