

Branch out with peer critique

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Learning the value of drafting and review can help students to produce their best work

Students usually want to complete tasks as quickly as possible and move on to something else. This is often down to a natural competitive streak, or to a misguided belief that speed equates to intelligence. Another factor is the impact of the internet and computer games, which offer instant gratification and may even be shortening attention spans.

As part of a pilot project in which my school is involved - trialling project-based learning - it was my job to try to work against this desire to finish and move on, and instead to use peer critique in a process of drafting and redrafting to make work the best it could be. The impact has been significant, with students now recognising that the best work comes from multiple drafts that have been carefully critiqued.

To make sure that all members of the class understood the value of peer critique, I introduced the concept with a YouTube video about "Austin's butterfly". Here, Ron Berger, chief programme officer at Expeditionary Learning in the US, shows American elementary school students progressive drafts of a butterfly drawing by a first-grade student called Austin. For each draft, Austin's classmates had given him constructive criticism.

My class were left amazed, not only at the quality of Austin's final draft but also at the fact that he got there through simple feedback. The video demonstrates the value of resilience and the progress that can be made by every child. It also successfully models to students the non-negotiable nature of peer critique: the need to be kind, specific and helpful in their feedback.

Over the next few weeks, we explored the idea of peer critique for our own work. First, we discussed the importance of the key principles noted above and how we could ensure they were kept to.

Next, I asked the students to apply the method of peer critique at three points during a project of their choosing, to ensure that each student's final piece was the result of multiple drafts. To facilitate this, we stuck students' work up around the classroom and did a "gallery walk". I gave each student a pad of Post-it notes and instructed them to write and stick feedback on their peers' work according to the key principles that we had discussed.

The change in students' work was evident but the change in their mindset was even clearer. All the children in the class, regardless of ability, were proud of what they had achieved. A culture of critique is now the norm in our classroom and students frequently check to make sure they are going to have an opportunity to redraft.

Katie Alden teaches at Stanley Park High School in Sutton, England, which is taking part in a pilot trial of the Learning Through REAL Projects initiative in UK schools. Stanley Park will be a coach in the second stage of the trial later this year.