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Practicing Healthy Relationships in Academic Spaces through Informed Revision

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Abstract

I try to create classroom environments where students of diverse backgrounds can develop their intellectual curiosity and can engage others with vulnerability and respect by centering relationality and community-building as key practices of knowledge and learning. I implemented Informed Revision through a “research feedback day” as an instructional strategy to help me further engage students in these processes through writing and research. I was interested in understanding: To what extent does informed revision increase students’ engagement with the course assignments and with each other? I found that this intervention: increased student confidence in their knowledge and work; provided space for them to model positive and constructive feedback; helped students connect in a healthy and collegial way; and helped produce strong research papers from students.

Introduction

Thinking about my own experiences in higher education as a first-generation queer woman of color, particularly in graduate school, at times the most difficult aspect of being a student was navigating intellectual discussions in academic spaces. I struggled under the hegemonic politics of domination where uneven power dynamics gatekept information and knowledge and shaped conversations. Graduate seminars and conference presentations, for example, often devolved to destructive critique rather than constructive knowledge-building. Now, I try to create environments where students of diverse backgrounds can develop their intellectual curiosity and can engage others with vulnerability and respect.

For the past several years I’ve found that approaching the classroom as risky, joyful places (hooks 1994) and guided by ethics of love (hooks 2001), care (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2019), and relational accountability (Wilson 2008; Ruiz 1997) helps in strengthening my relationships with students. I center relationality and community-building as key practices of knowledge and learning. I attended the summer 2022
Writing Instructional Support Retreat (WISR) to find out strategies to help me further engage students in these processes through writing and research. Among the approaches discussed, I chose to implement Informed Revision (IR) because it can be used to build a caring and loving intellectual community when guided by principles of relational accountability that center love, care, and reflexivity. Moreover, these skills can apply beyond the classroom to workplace, family, and other relationships.

Building Relational Accountability in Research Spaces

I implemented IR as an instructional strategy in my two Fall 2022 courses: PLSC 397N Decolonizing Political Scientists and WGSS 450 Immigrant Health, the latter being a senior seminar with a Writing Proficiency requirement. I was interested in understanding: To what extent does informed revision increase students' engagement with the course assignments and with each other? My aim is to encourage and model what relational accountability can look like in academic and intellectual relationships as a means to: increase student engagement and build healthier academic relationships and spaces. Specifically, I wanted students to:

- Feel confident in what they know – experiential and cultural knowledge matters too, not just academic knowledge
- Practice providing feedback in positive and constructive ways
- Connect to their peers through knowledge sharing
- Develop collegial relationships
- Submit strong assignments

I utilized their midterm assignment which was a research paper on a topic related to the course content to incorporate IR in two ways: research feedback day and revisions. This write-up reports on the observations I made during the research feedback day and student responses from a post-midterm feedback form (N=8). The feedback form was optional and anonymous, I did not collect emails or identifying information except the class the student respondent was in.

Research Feedback Day

Students were required to draft a research proposal with basic information about their midterm project including: research question, motivations for studying this topic, guiding theories/frameworks, and methods. Instead of providing direct written feedback on their proposal, I built in a “research feedback day” in the syllabus where
each student had the opportunity to share their research proposal with the class. My goal with this day was to: model giving positive and constructive feedback, help students build confidence in their ability to create a strong research paper, and provide space for building healthy relationships.

I found these class sessions to be very engaging and interesting. Students connected through their projects often expressing interest in each other’s topics and giving each other encouragement. They also got to showcase their own knowledge of the topics through sharing of articles and materials from other courses, and discussing research projects they have participated in with other WWU professors and/or in other classes. They also pointed each other to resources on campus such as the library databases.

My observations were echoed by students in the feedback form. When asked if they found the research feedback day enjoyable and what about it made it enjoyable, students commented: “I liked hearing other people's ideas and also talking through mine, which was easier than writing and reading feedback for me.” And,

“Yes! First of all, it was super interesting to hear what everyone else was planning to research and discuss our ideas together as a class. Second of all, it was super helpful to get feedback on my research proposal from Dr. Juarez as well as my classmates, and I used their feedback to edit my proposal. It helped me to gain clarity on the intentions of my project as well as how to see them through.”

Moreover, five out of the eight respondents said the research feedback day was helpful for completing their midterm. Only one student thought the research feedback day was not helpful for completing their midterm and two indicated it was somewhat helpful.

In addition to this student engagement, I found that the research feedback day also allowed me to showcase my own breadth of knowledge. Providing feedback on such wide range of projects required I dig deep into my knowledge of multiple cannons, research methods, and project management skills. And discussing their research proposals allowed me to see their strengths and areas of improvement. For example: What theories/concepts were they hazy on? What is their knowledge of methods and research practices? How much writing experience do they have?

Conclusion
Overall, I believe this assignment helped me achieve my goals of increasing student confidence in their knowledge and work. And providing the space for them to model positive and constructive feedback helped students connect in a healthy and collegial way. Moreover, although students have not yet submitted their midterm revisions at the moment of writing this paper, having graded their midterms – I can say that the research feedback day did help produce strong research papers. Given these positive results, moving forward, I plan to incorporate a research feedback day into all my courses that require a research paper.

Bibliography


