Peer review as a form of active learning

As student numbers grow, educators frequently find it difficult to give adequate personal attention to their students’ individual needs, especially given the increasing diversity of prior learning among students.

Using a pedagogic method such as peer review has several beneficial steps:

- Students work individually to draft a piece of work according to a defined set of instructions, with clear guidelines and criteria for scoring it.
- They are then asked to review other students’ drafts (two is probably the optimum number), assess them in terms of the criteria, and provide constructive comments.
- This provides them with an opportunity to compare other ways of doing the task, think again about the criteria and what counts as a good piece of work, and so reconsider their own work.
- They look at the two reviews of their own work, which provides them with some support for improving their work.
- They score each one for how helpful it was.
- Finally they re-draft their own work for submission to the tutor, which following the peer review process should be of higher quality than without it.

This design orchestrates a series of activities that do not involve the tutor. It engages the students in thinking in several different ways about the task as an individual, as a reviewer, as a recipient of comment, and in responding to feedback. In that sense, it gives each student a series of effective active learning experiences, freeing the tutor to provide more individual support where needed.

It’s important to encourage students to be constructive in their comments, and willing to share. This is not summative assessment, so there should be no concerns about being graded by someone who is inexpert. In formative assessment, peer review is valuable because it gives students an opportunity to think again.