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Peers Coaching Teaching: Colleagues Supporting Professional Growth Across the Disciplines

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Peer coaching is a highly effective way to encourage professors to talk about teaching in a purposeful manner and to venture from traditional academic practices. However, peer coaching is more complex than it appears at first glance. This article provides background on the coaching process, a description of two basic peer coaching models, and guidelines for selecting and training coaches.

In a culturally pluralistic society such as the United States, it seems reasonable to expect educators across the curriculum to actively seek knowledge and instructional practices relevant to working effectively with *all* students. Today's university faculty members are charged with the rather formidable responsibility of serving a student population that differs strikingly from that of 20 years ago, when many faculty were beginning their teaching careers or in the midst of their own undergraduate education. Discipline-specific graduate coursework and teaching fellowships have failed to prepare faculty for the multifaceted challenges of understanding and responding to the richer and more complex array of learners who comprise today's classes. Across the nation, the professoriate has yet to grasp the implications of the student population's diversity of gender, age, cultural and

linguistic heritage, learning styles, job and family responsibilities, and secondary school preparation.

Most college faculty members teach the way they were taught. Others fashion their instruction after a particularly inspirational professor-mentor, one who promoted both curricular excitement and scholastic achievement for the mentee because the two shared compatible learning and teaching style preferences. Faculty members who lack formal training in methodology and teach pretty much based on how *they* learn best, frequently are unaware of alternative classroom practices which may be better suited to the instructional needs and strengths of the more diverse student body. Yet, the creation of a truly democratic teaching/learning environment in the modern multicultural classroom depends on the willingness of instructors in every field, first to understand their own teaching and learning preferences, and then to face the likelihood that the majority of their students may prefer to acquire knowledge and skills in other ways. This realization ultimately warrants a sincere willingness to develop a more flexible and responsive repertoire of pedagogical practices.

Professional Development for the Modern Multicultural Classroom

The extensive findings about the development, socialization, and schooling of linguistically and culturally heterogeneous student populations suggest many practical and promising instructional alternatives. Some of the innovative alternatives heralded by advocates of inclusive pedagogy are cooperative learning activities, classroom assessment techniques, "learning-to-learn" development across the curriculum, and multimodal presentations of information which enhance curricular access for students with varied perceptual strengths. Not surprisingly, however, successful implementation of innovative instructional approaches typically requires more than a simple fine tuning of a college instructor's existing attitudes, knowledge and skills. It necessitates initial reflection and critical examination of underlying issues of present-day educational access and equity, classroom roles and relationships, ownership of knowledge, and power and privilege in the academy.

Professional enhancement of this nature and magnitude requires that faculty have access to applicable resources and training while involving them in the creation and validation of their own knowledge. Additionally, dedicated educators must be provided with the time and support necessary to fit new learning theories and instructional practices to their unique philosophical premises, disciplines, and classroom conditions.

Clearly, the achievement of a truly pluralistic instructional environment involves large-scale, complex, sustained organizational transformation. Current professional development opportunities addressing diversity and inclusion within higher education are largely inadequate, though well-intended, efforts to affect significant, long-lasting changes. This should give both instructors and administrators cause for genuine concern. Occasional departmental workshops or campuswide addresses by noted scholars, despite the credibility or charisma of the featured speaker, do little to promote the complex insights or sustained commitment and effort which translate into reflective and responsive instructional transformation. Annual conferences in specific subject matter fall equally short of addressing the professor's needs for relevant and ongoing learning about discipline-specific, learner-centered pedagogy.

Instructional Experimentation and Collegial Support

Few faculty members can implement an instructional innovation with noteworthy success simply on the basis of an inspirational journal article or a stimulating teaching conference presentation. In most cases, instructors need considerable exposure to the major tenets of a new approach and illustrative modeling, along with substantive time for classroom application. An equally vital aspect of this process of mutual adaptation, trial and experimentation is the opportunity for classroom practitioners to do detailed and continuing analyses of their teaching in a context that is supportive, non-evaluative, and intellectually stimulating. Instructors working in heterogeneous classrooms need to become comfortable with trying the unfamiliar, sharing successes, and openly seeking suggestions in times of disappointment.

This willingness and ability to take risks to teach more effectively, and to consistently monitor and adjust goals and strategies, can only be fostered within a trusting, collaborative environment.

Active teacher-scholars need access to a variety of opportunities for peer support in their efforts to question and explore new ideas and practices. However, collegiality among faculty members entails a great deal more than congeniality or similarity in discipline focus; it includes mutual respect, validation, assistance, and connection on a professional level. Unfortunately, few universities have strong structures to support the collegiality and experimentation so vital to professional growth and renewal. Frequently, the sociology of a university or a particular department discourages colleagues from soliciting help or offering assistance to fellow instructors. The prevailing milieu of many institutions actually fosters isolation not interaction, and independence not team-orientation. Professors too often work alone in their classrooms and offices, and struggle independently with instructional decisions and dilemmas. Novice and veteran professors alike may feel that to actively seek advice on curriculum, instruction or classroom management is admitting a lack of competence and a potential threat to their professional reputation and status within their department. Centra (1993) points out the discrepancy between the willingness of faculty to avail themselves of peer feedback on a draft of a research article or grant proposal and hesitancy about asking for a classroom visit to offer feedback on course curriculum and instruction. He attributes this in part to the widespread belief among faculty members that teaching is highly personal and subjective, while standards of quality research and scholarship are well established and objective. Consequently, professorial autonomy in the classroom is sustained and prized, while collegial assistance is resisted. Another unfortunate result is that critical decisions about teaching and learning are likely to stem exclusively from the professor's solitary reflection rather than from mutually enriching dialogue with informed, trusted, and respected classroom practitioners.

It is ironic that in an era in which such great emphasis is being placed on *learner-centered* participatory methodology, grounded in the premise that dialogue and collaborative construction of knowledge fosters both intellectual and personal growth, that relatively little

importance has been attributed to structured opportunities for *educators* to converse, collaborate, and contribute to the instructional knowledge base of their fields. This is particularly alarming because most faculty have had little or no exposure to the extensive body of scholarship about adult teaching and learning. Considering the complexities of effectively teaching the range of diverse college learners, it is imperative for universities to create structures for continuous pedagogical improvement, collegiality, experimentation, and support.

Peer Coaching

Peer coaching is a highly effective way to encourage professors to talk about teaching in a purposeful manner and to venture away from traditionally sanctioned academic practices. Peer coaching is a structured, formative process by which trained faculty voluntarily assist each other in enhancing their teaching repertoires within an atmosphere of collegial trust and candor through: a) development of individual instructional improvement goals and clear observation criteria; b) reciprocal, focused, non-evaluative classroom observations; and c) prompt, constructive feedback on those observations.

But like many other educational innovations, successful peer coaching is more complex than it appears at first glance. Peer coaching is an instructor-to-instructor interaction aimed at facilitating reflective, responsive classroom practices while mitigating the psychological isolation that can so often characterize the university workplace. In order to achieve these goals, faculty need assistance in order to communicate and work effectively with colleagues of different genders, ages, disciplines, cultures, and philosophical orientations (just as they need to understand how to reach varied students). Instructors who have rarely opened their classroom doors to observers are apt to approach the coaching process with understandable trepidation.

It is imperative, therefore, that trust and program integrity be established from the onset if peer coaching of teaching is to be widely accepted. Careful consideration should be given to several factors: a) the cultivation of both faculty and administrative support; b) the nature and extent of the training provided in classroom observation procedures and consultation skills; b) the provision of additional training

opportunities in new instructional practices; and d) any logistical or financial constraints.

Formative Coaching versus Summative Evaluation

An initial goal in enlisting voluntary faculty participation in a peer coaching program is clarification between *summative* evaluation conducted for administrative decisions and *formative* evaluation designed to improve instruction. A national leader in coaching program design and implementation, Showers (1985) reminds faculty and administrators that the goals of coaching and evaluation practice are antithetical and should be kept separate. Other proponents of peer coaching (Cogan, 1973; Garmston, 1987; Joyce & Showers, 1982; Skoog, 1980) maintain that successful programs can be established only in an atmosphere of mutual trust, confidentiality and support, where colleagues feel it is safe to experiment, fail, reflect, solicit help, revise, and return to the classroom to try again. Nothing could be farther from this atmosphere than is the practice of traditional classroom observation and instructor evaluation. Formal, required faculty evaluation for promotion and tenure purposes typically implies summative judgment by an administrator or senior faculty member about an individual's total professional performance. Given the power imbalance and the anxiety-provoking judgmental aspect inherent to this relationship, it is predictable that faculty would feel vulnerable opening their classroom doors for scrutiny of their instructional practices and reticent to solicit follow-up advice. Further, untenured faculty members are placed in an awkward position if teaching suggestions are, in fact, offered by senior observer. Even suggestions provided by mentors do not necessarily promote optimal self-reflective practice or relevant instructional modification. Coaching, on the other hand, implies formative assistance by a peer in a professional development process, and provides an alternative means for instructional support and goal setting among colleagues.

The Coaching Process

Although various coaching models exist, partners or teams typically work together through a nonjudgmental process which includes the following stages: a) pre-observation planning conference with establishment of observation criteria; b) classroom observation and collection of data; c) post-observation reflecting conference with data analysis, and formation of instructional goals with subsequent observation criteria. Individual coaching program partners are directly involved in determining when and how often the observations will take place, under what conditions the observations will be conducted, and what specific instructional data the visiting coach will record.

During the *pre-observation conference*, coaching relationships are shaped, educational philosophies and approaches are shared, ground rules are established, and observation goals are set. Instructors make explicit for their peer observers: a) relevant background information about the course; b) the intended purpose of the lesson; c) expected student outcomes and behaviors; d) planned teaching behaviors and strategies; e) any special concerns about the lesson; f) logistical arrangements and ground rules for the observation; and g) the desired focus for the observation. It is useful for each coaching partner to complete a pre-observation form during this conference to record all pertinent information for the mutual upcoming classroom visits (See Table 1). Individual instructors have specific preferences regarding observation date and length, observers' seating arrangements, participation in classroom activities and interaction with students, and use of recording equipment.

Decidedly the most challenging aspect at this stage for most partners is establishing clear and limited observation priorities and productive data gathering procedures. Because many college teachers are not aware of how they teach and what effect their instructional practices have on students, it is not surprising that coaching novices initially find it difficult to decide what is most important in their professional development and to try to operationalize those goals. The collegial duo must put their heads together to determine what objective and descriptive data can be recorded to address the observed partner's concerns. It is not at all fair or helpful for a prospective observer to

have a coaching partner evade this individual goal articulation and simply state: "Just come to my class and give me your general impressions of whatever you see." The end result is predictably counter-productive. The observed instructor may easily end up either with an overwhelming litany of arbitrary feedback, or very general, impractical comments.

Some instructors find their observations and conferences to be more focused and beneficial if they share common criteria than if they examine completely different aspects of teaching. Many novice coaches find it particularly useful at this stage to have a summary sheet of observable behaviors for specific instructional approaches. An observation form (see, for example, Table 2) that focuses on major tenets of the selected teaching goal is extremely useful. Another strong suggestion is that partners select no more than five observation criteria per session. Otherwise, the observations will lack focus and the follow-up conference lack substantive data.

During the actual *classroom observation*, the peer observer records descriptive data, but does not interpret or evaluate the classroom action. Unlike a summative evaluator, the coach focuses exclusively on the instructional elements previously identified by the instructional partner. Multiple data gathering procedures exist, including record keeping on an observation instrument, audiotaping, and videotaping. Educational researchers have generated a variety of observation instruments which can facilitate data collection during classroom observations, depending on the nature of the instructional behaviors and goals specified by the teacher partner (e.g., Good & Brophy, 1984; Braskamp & Ory, 1994; Centra, 1993; Seldin, 1984).

The most logical and manageable observation instrument for teaching improvement would be one which outlines the target changes. A focused observation form can be distributed and discussed during a departmental or institutional training session and would serve as a summary of the major tenets of the new instructional approach. Taking descriptive notes on the observation instrument improves the quality and extent of data a partner can share after a visit. However, to relieve any residual apprehension about peer observations being used for performance reviews, any and all data gathered during the

course of the coaching sessions must become exclusively the property of the observed instructor.

As soon as possible after the classroom visit, the coaching pair needs to find an uninterrupted and adequate time to meet for a *post-conference*. During this follow-up session the two colleagues reconstruct the details of the observed session, discussing what actually happened during the lesson as opposed to what may have been planned. Particularly during this initial summary of impressions and recall of data, it is crucial that the coach refrain from making any value judgments about the effectiveness of the teaching strategies observed. Rather than offering advice, the observer facilitates the partner's recollection of instructional decisions and student reactions through specific coaching consultation skills, particularly paraphrasing and asking non-threatening questions. Questions such as "Is that what you expected to happen?" or "How would you do that differently?" prompt the teacher to reflect on the lesson, recalling actual teacher and student behaviors. When offering this feedback, the observer focuses on elements of the instructional delivery established in the pre-observation conference, and grounds this feedback in concrete data recorded during the class session. An enabling coach provides additional feedback on the lesson only if the colleague openly solicits this information. Peer coaches provide specific, solicited, limited, constructive feedback on what they see rather than what they feel.

After analyzing the data and identifying any critical incidents or patterns, the partners summarize their mutual learnings. The observations and follow-up reflection sessions are grounded on the notion that the observers are as likely to glean valuable insights about their own teaching practices when visiting a colleague's class as when they open their classroom doors to caring coaches. To close this post-observation session, the coach might ask "What do you plan to do differently or similarly in our next class observation session?" The observed teacher ultimately decides upon the focus for the subsequent classroom visit, directly stating the aspects of curriculum or instructional delivery which should serve as follow-up observation priorities. Again, the coach can greatly facilitate this final step by making sure that the items of focus are limited, clearly articulated, and actually observable.

Peer Coaching Models

The two most prevalent coaching models are *technical coaching* and *challenge coaching*. The *technical coaching* model stems from the work of Joyce and Showers (1982) and has been widely used in elementary and high schools to provide a structure for the follow up that is essential for mastering complex teaching methods and curricular reforms. This model pairs teachers with each other, or with consultants, and provides training in using an assessment form designed to capture the key components of a new teaching method. The coaching partners use this form during classroom observations to record the presence or absence of specific behaviors and to later provide focused, nonevaluative feedback. Garmston (1987) highlights the multiple benefits of technical coaching when offered as a complement to quality training in new instructional practices: enhanced collegiality, increased professional dialogue, creation of a shared pedagogical vocabulary, and maximum transfer of training. Sparks (1986? or 83?) adds that peer coaching in conjunction with instructional development provides critical rehearsal of learning, often yielding more demonstrable results than expert consultant observation.

Collegial coaching, most often conducted by pairs of instructors, concentrates on individual areas the observed teacher wishes to improve. This coaching approach, exemplified by Costa and Garmston (1994), leads colleagues to reflect together on personally relevant issues of teaching and learning. It encourages instructors to develop the habit of self-initiated reflection about their professional practices. The observed instructor's priority, rather than an instructional approach introduced in a professional development session determines the coaching focus. The major goals of collegial coaching are to establish collegial trust and open communication, increase pedagogical dialogue, and facilitate reflective practice, rather than to facilitate implementation of specific instructional strategies.

Since a variety of coaching models exist, it is crucial that any faculty group seeking to establish an effective program first determine exactly what it hopes to accomplish through the observation-feedback cycle. No single coaching program model can meet the needs and goals of every faculty group in an institution. Nonetheless, to promote

maximum instructional improvement, while creating a collegial work environment and promoting professional reflection and dialogue, it would seem beneficial to implement an eclectic initial coaching program borrowing from both the *technical* and *collegial* coaching models. Ideally, a group of voluntary participants in a coaching program should be given the opportunity to identify some mutual objectives for instructional improvement. They would then receive comprehensive training in the goals and process of coaching, accompanied by concrete strategies to promote their objectives. They then would select a coaching partner to mutually observe class sessions and collect objective data on these specific new teaching behaviors, utilizing a manageable data collection and feedback form.

Training Coaches

Training in coaching is an essential condition for a program to flourish and be clearly disassociated from traditional evaluation. Effective training takes place before observers first visit a classroom and includes follow-up training while the program is under way. The critical need for adequate and appropriate training of peers as classroom observers and instructional consultants has been indicated by a large number of researchers (e.g., Joyce & Showers, 1982; Sweeney & Grasha, 1979; Weimer, 1990). Although on the surface it appears that observing another instructor conduct a class is a relatively simple, straightforward process, faculty members who participate in coaching programs are generally astonished by how difficult it is to be objective and faithful to a partner's requested observation criteria when recording data and conferencing. Faculty who have received little more than judgmental comments on their own teaching find it challenging at first to provide supportive reactions rather than quick-fix critiques or descriptions of how they conduct their own classes. Although faculty always will experience a certain degree of discomfort when being observed, it is important for them to be solidly assured that the procedures used for data collection and reporting are fair, accurate and confidential.

Instructors in a coaching program need to view other participants as sensitive and competent colleagues with whom they can openly

share their insecurities and frustrations. Training in coaching must, therefore, empower faculty members by helping them identify practices that impede movement toward collegiality and by equipping them with an extended repertoire of consultation skills. Among these skills, training in descriptive classroom data gathering is fundamental. Delivering and receiving prompt, detailed, nonevaluative feedback is equally vital. A peer coach must have collected adequate relevant data on the colleague's pre-established target strategies and behaviors during the classroom observation. The coaching partner must then be ready to praise the observed colleague's efforts step-by-step, while giving specific, nonthreatening feedback which is grounded in the observation data. A supportive coach must also know how to ask nonjudgmental questions that help the partner to analyze and evaluate instructional decisions, and that prompt reflection and improvement in teaching performance.

Cohen and McKeachie (1980) emphasize that colleagues should provide feedback only on those teaching effectiveness criteria that they are in the best position to observe and credibly assess. Unless a coaching partner possesses some knowledge and skill in the area, the quality of the feedback is likely to be vague and of questionable validity. Again, coaching program administrators can facilitate the process of establishing reasonable observation criteria by ensuring that faculty use a feedback form which synthesizes target behaviors. Instructors need to have a common vocabulary for discussing teaching and learning processes, as well as a framework for selecting instructional goals that are personally significant. During the coaching training session, instructors greatly benefit from practice using consultation skills and giving focused constructive feedback. The coaching group can work together to establish clear observation criteria before viewing videotaped lesson segments, then facilitate roleplays in which participants provide facilitative feedback to the observed instructor. This crucial observation practice helps minimize any residual reticence about being evaluated, rather than assisted, by a peer coach.

Selecting Coaching Partners

On a practical basis, most coaching should be performed by pairs of active classroom instructors working together to broaden their teaching repertoires. In their daily practice they are logistically and psychically closer to each other than to administrators or faculty development specialists, and, if provided with effective, incremental training in new instructional practices and coaching techniques, they are in an ideal position to carry out all coaching functions. Further, by placing the major responsibility for coaching with professional peers, status and power differentials are minimized, thereby creating a more trusting, responsible, and collaborative atmosphere.

To help reduce anxiety, instructors definitely should be allowed to select their coaching partners, or to form teams of four colleagues who rotate observing each other. Instructor partnerships may be formed by similarity in teaching context or may vary considerably in experience, content area and level. The main ingredients for successful coaching relationships are mutual trust and respect. Nonetheless, there is at least one decided advantage to cross-disciplinary pairings. As members of instructional support teams structured across departments, courses or grade levels, colleagues become more aware of their common resources and challenges. Also, they tend to focus their observations and ensuing discussions on new instructional practices and broader educational issues, rather than primarily on course content or departmental dilemmas.

Summary and Conclusions

The necessity for increasing reflective practice and instructional improvement to respond to the changing context of college teaching and learning is more often met by the resourcefulness and responsibility of individual educators, than a commitment of a university or department. Unless individuals and institutions strive to create more supportive contexts in which faculty can learn about and from their teaching, only lip service can be paid to efforts to promote diversity in our classrooms. Peer coaching is a formative evaluation procedure which continues to demonstrate its potential for faculty growth, reju-

vention and empowerment conducive to the creation of more democratic and humane academic environments.

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Table 1
Sample Pre-Observation Conference Form

Instructor _____ **Peer Coach** _____

1.Observation Logistics:

- a.class observation date _____
- b.classroom location _____
- c.beginning time _____ ending time _____
- d.relationship of observer to students: detached ____ involved ____
- e.seating arrangement for observer: anywhere ____ assigned ____

2.Class Background:

- a.subject area _____
- b.level (lower or upper division, graduate) _____
- c. type (lecture, seminar, lab, lecture/discussion, activity) _____
- d.number of students _____
- e.description of student population _____

3.Lesson Description:

- a.learning objectives of the lesson:
- b.planned teaching behaviors and strategies:
- c.any concerns about the lesson:

4.Specific Areas for Observation Focus:

- a.
- b.
- c.
- d.

5.Post-Observation Conference:

- a. place _____ b. date _____ c. time _____

Table 2
Sample Peer Coaching Form (For Group Work)
Group Work Design and Implementation

Instructor _____ Peer Coach _____
Class _____ Location _____ Date _____

Directions: Collect descriptive data on the specific aspects of effective classroom group work design and implementation which your coaching partner has asked you to focus on during this observation. Write concrete examples, comments, or questions which you would like to be sure to discuss in your post-observation conference.

1. Selected an activity which clearly lent itself to task-based, active collaboration.
2. Related the activity to previous lessons and previous related activities.
3. Made explicit the purpose, procedures, and expected outcome of the group activity.
4. Broke a more complicated task into manageable, clearly-delineated steps.
5. Gave clear oral instructions for the activity, accompanied by a visual aid; wrote the goals, time frame, and procedures on a handout, an overhead transparency, or the chalkboard.
6. Modeled the task or a part of the task, and checked to see if all students understood the instructions before placing them in groups.
7. Established a clear and adequate time frame for students to successfully complete all parts of the task.

8. Explained the various group member roles and specific responsibilities associated with each role for completion of the particular assignment.
9. Appeared to have a clear rationale for small-group formations.
10. Encouraged cooperation, mutual support, and development of group accomplishment.
11. Took an active, facilitative role while the small groups were in progress by providing feedback and guidance, and getting students back on track.
12. Saved adequate time to process the completed small-group activity as a unified class, clarifying what was learned and validating what was accomplished.
13. Incorporated listening and responding tasks for students to complete during individual group reports to facilitate task processing and ensure active listening and accountability.
14. Provided feedback to students on their prosocial skills and academic accomplishments during and/or after completion of the small-group activity.
15. Asked students to evaluate their individual and/or small-group's performance by means of a form, quickwrite, or journal entry.
16. Made sure that students saw the connection between what was generated, practiced, or accomplished during the small-group activity and any follow-up individual assignment.

Instructional Goals for Future Observations:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.