

Development of Composition Instruction Through Peer Coaching

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The need for some kind of collaborative coaching, especially of novice teaching assistants, is widely evident. The inexperienced teaching assistant in a large program all too often is handicapped by uncertainty or resembles Klein, a graduate teaching assistant in Joyce Carol Oates' story "Archways": "He was a graduate student in a state university that serviced thirty thousand students, having come to his life's work . . . after having been frightened out of other, lesser tasks. . . . He yawned at the thought of his students, they at the thought of him . . . He accepted their justified indifference, and the probable indifference of his professors . . ." (147, 150). An effective system of collaborative coaching, with teachers working together, discussing their mutual successes and frustrations, reduces the sense of isolation in the classroom too often felt by teaching assistants, and promotes positive relationships, communication, and moral support.

A recent survey conducted by the authors of this paper of forty geographically representative state and private universities with sizeable composition programs documents both the need for and interest in peer coaching. The average number of composition sections offered yearly at the surveyed institutions is 183, ranging from 30 at Carnegie-Mellon and 35 at Wisconsin-Madison (where only seven to fifteen percent of incoming freshmen take composition) to 400 at Tennessee and 488 at Purdue. The average number of composition instructors is 72, ranging from 14 at Hawaii to 200 at Purdue. Of all schools queried, 21% of the schools have some form of orientation for new graduate teaching assistants before the semester begins, and 34% require participation in a weekly practicum, colloquium, or workshop throughout the year, and 25% require a three-hour course or seminar in rhetoric and the teaching of composition. In 56% percent of the programs, composition teachers are observed by tenured faculty, and 68% have a mentor system, whereby new teachers work with tenured faculty and/or experienced graduate assistants; 36% have no form of peer coaching; 21% say they are interested in instituting peer coaching or have considered it. Of the 40 universities surveyed, only 8 currently have an authentic form of peer coaching (not to be confused with a mentor

system that uses tenured faculty and/or experienced graduate assistants): Carnegie-Mellon, Illinois, LSU, Maryland, Nevada-Reno, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and the University of Washington.

The seminal work of Joyce and Showers has influenced several programs of peer coaching in elementary and secondary schools. Concerned that, in most teacher development programs, teachers fail to transfer to the classroom skills learned in workshops, Joyce and Showers have recommended "an observation and feedback cycle" whereby teachers "coach" each other as they practice (17). Joyce and Showers assert that "like athletes, teachers will put newly learned skills to use—if they are coached" (5).

Elementary and secondary school peer-coaching programs (Anastos and Ancowitz; Leggett and Hoyle; Munro and Elliott; Sparks and Bruder) that have reported success with the Joyce and Showers model share several components:

- a pre-observation training session in which a specific teaching technique is demonstrated;
- observation visits to team members' classrooms where teachers practice the specific technique;
- a follow-up session at which non-judgmental feedback is given to team members;
- a period of self-reflection when teachers assess their own performance of the teaching technique.

In addition, peer coaches need to be trained in observation skills, note-taking (script-taping), and giving specific non-evaluative feedback (Leggett 17).

While most of what Joyce and Showers have recommended as important features of peer coaching can be transferred and used in a university setting, certain suggestions would seem impossible given the present status of most university composition programs. For example, elementary and secondary teachers usually receive compensation or released time for training workshops and for observing their peers. Additional compensation and substitute teachers are luxuries most universities cannot afford. In addition, Joyce and Showers recommend that "at least fifteen to twenty demonstrations" of a teaching technique should be observed, and that "each teacher needs to try the model—with peers and small groups of students from ten to fifteen times before a high level of skill becomes

evident" (6). Experience has shown, however, that significant improvement can occur with fewer demonstrations and attempts.

A form of peer coaching was instituted at Arizona State University in the fall of 1989 for the purpose of helping graduate teaching assistants develop necessary skills to teach composition effectively and to reduce the sense of isolation in the classroom. As the fifth largest state university in the US, ASU serves approximately 6,000 students in over 200 sections of composition, with 105 graduate teaching assistants and adjunct instructors. While some of the instructors have had teaching experience elsewhere, many are novices.

Like 21% of the universities surveyed, ASU has an initial week of orientation in the fall, a training seminar for first-year teaching assistants, and a weekly, hour-long meeting during the spring semester. TA classes are also observed at least once each semester by tenured faculty members, and grading of and comments upon a set of papers are evaluated. In addition, teaching assistants are evaluated by their students each semester. An informal system of peer mentoring is also in place, whereby experienced teaching assistants/associates volunteer to be paired as advisors to new teachers. These methods seemed inadequate to the Director of the program, however, and, like 28% of composition directors in the survey who feel only moderately satisfied with the nature and extent of their supervision and the 26% who expressed dissatisfaction with the supervision, the Director and colleagues at ASU felt the need for another method of helping instructors become more effective and self-assured.

In the fall of 1989, new teaching assistants in teams of three began sharing ideas to improve their lesson planning, classroom performance, and grading proficiency. Team members made a series of visits to observe and describe each other's classroom activities. In follow-up sessions, team members objectively discussed the events they observed.

The peer-coaching program has had at least five significant benefits. First, it has served to reduce the feelings of isolation new teaching assistants often have in the classroom. Knowing that others have similar problems and similar fears gives teachers self-confidence in their own abilities. Second, getting feedback from peers "in the trenches" who are teaching the same material and facing the same challenges provides support through shared experience. Having a "second pair of eyes" in the classroom enables teachers to "see" more of the classroom dynamics. Getting feedback on their own performance and on the subtle reactions of

their students helps teachers provide better, more effective instruction. Third, getting positive reinforcement in a nonthreatening system engenders trust, confidence, camaraderie, *esprit de corps*. It is healthy simply to get teachers talking with each other about their teaching. Fourth, teachers are exposed to various teaching styles and strategies. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, teachers begin a process of self-reflection and self-evaluation which will help them improve their classroom attitudes and behaviors as they continue to teach.

After their first round of visits to each other's classrooms, new teachers made comments such as the following: "Having a chance to see other classes calmed my anxiety about my class"; "I was able to notice things about class dynamics that I hadn't been able to notice in my own classes"; "I realized that I'm not such a bad teacher after all."

Setting Up the Program

As its name suggests, the peer-coaching program at ASU, though instituted and overseen by a tenured faculty member and a senior teaching associate (a PhD candidate completing her dissertation), is carried on by and for the teaching assistants themselves. Because it is a non-evaluative program aimed primarily at improving teaching rather than judging, it is a non-threatening way for teachers to learn to be more effective in the classroom.

During a week-long orientation preceding the fall semester, the program was introduced to the teaching assistants by the senior teaching associate who administers the program throughout the year and by a faculty member not associated with TA evaluation. Setting up the program consisted of introducing the teaching assistants to the concept of collaborative learning, emphasizing the non-evaluative, self-reflective nature of peer coaching, and scheduling the first observations.

In the introduction to collaborative learning, reference was made to Kenneth A. Bruffee's article on "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" Of special interest is Bruffee's discussion of Michael Oakeshott's suggestion that "we are the inheritors . . . of a conversation" that goes on "both in *public* and *within* each of ourselves." The intent was to ensure that teaching assistants would see that their participation in peer

groups is similar to the sharing of knowledge that writing students do as they learn to edit papers collaboratively; that is, the objective was for teachers to learn the "normal discourse" (a la Rorty) of a teaching community as students will learn the normal discourse of writers. It was hoped that by watching others teach, listening to comments about teaching, and reflecting on these experiences, the composition teachers would improve their teaching and their self-esteem as teachers.

One of the most important features of peer coaching is its non-evaluative nature combined with its emphasis on self-reflection for teacher development. In order to reassure the teachers that peer coaching would not be used in evaluation, two steps were taken. First, teaching assistants were assured that no composition administrator or faculty member would see any of the peer observation forms. Second, the teachers were taught to use non-evaluative terms in their observation reports and to make them purely descriptive. They were encouraged to use the third person and the impersonal rather than the second person in their reports, to describe what the teacher and students *did* and *said* rather than guessing what they felt, and to use direct quotations when appropriate. Peer observers were encouraged to avoid trying to solve the teacher's problems and instead to describe, in the first person, how the lesson affected them with such statements as "I felt confused about . . ." or "I'm not sure what the teacher meant by . . ." Other ways of writing non-judgmental reports include avoiding use of evaluative adverbs, such as "abruptly," "clearly," and "fortunately." Observers were also warned to be sensitive to fragile egos and to diversity of effective teaching styles.

It was necessary throughout the year to re-emphasize the non-evaluative nature of the observation reports and to encourage self-reflection and self-evaluation. In post-observation follow-up sessions, for example, teachers were asked to freewrite and to answer questionnaires concerning their feelings about their own classroom performance and their attitudes about teaching.

Because most of the new instructors are graduate students who come from all over the country and usually do not know each other, the senior teaching associate set up the fall semester peer coaching teams, keeping in mind both graduate students' teaching schedules and graduate courses. In the spring semester, the teaching assistants chose their own partners. In scheduling peer coaching classroom visits, it was necessary to allow for

teachers who were ahead (or behind) the common syllabus. Pre- and post-observation discussion sessions held during the training seminar were scheduled three weeks apart to allow teachers time to complete their visits.

How the Program Worked

During each semester, teachers were visited twice by their teams. Since teams consisted of three members, each observer had the opportunity to visit two classrooms during each round of peer coaching. Before each visit, teams met during the seminar to be trained in a specific teaching strategy to be practiced during the observation. At these pre-observation meetings, they also collaborated on lesson planning and scheduled the classroom visits.

For the peer-coaching observations, specific teaching strategies were selected to help new teachers move effectively through the syllabus. For the first observation, for example, teachers were asked to practice introducing students to a new rhetorical mode, such as comparison-contrast. During the second visit, teachers practiced directing group work in the classroom and demonstrating methods of beginning lessons and effectively ending a class. In the second semester at ASU, freshman students are taught library skills and methods of research for writing papers from sources. Since students must read effectively to report and synthesize their research, during the first spring-semester observation, instructors observed their peers teaching pre-reading techniques, such as SQ3R (Readance 167-68) and ReQuest (Manzo 123-26). During the second visit, teachers practiced directing a discussion on an assignment from the reader.

After collaborating on lesson plans and before each observation, instructors provided their peer observers an outline of their lesson. This outline specified the *goals* for student behavior and the teaching *strategies* that would be used to accomplish those goals. In addition, instructors noted on the form which teacher and which student behaviors they especially wanted peer observers to describe in their report.

During the classroom visit, peer observers wrote a descriptive narrative of the classroom activities, noting special activities requested by the teacher. After each of the visits, teams met with the peer director during the seminar to exchange observation forms and to discuss the activities

they had observed. During each of these follow-up sessions, teachers were asked to reflect on their own teaching performance. Further, teachers were encouraged to write their feelings about teaching and peer coaching. Often they were asked to complete the sentence, "When I think about peer coaching, I'm concerned about . . ."

Teacher Reactions

Before the first peer-coaching visits, most teachers expressed concern about one issue more than any other: that a visitor to the classroom would affect their students' behaviors or their own. In most cases, this concern is another way of expressing the fear that, as one teacher put it, others might "find out that I'm an ineffective teacher."

After the first round of observations, one teacher wrote, "When I was visited I was nervous before the class. I felt nauseated. Once I began talking and engaging my class, I forgot that my two peers were present. Maybe I was more conscious of time spent and goals set. Afterward they approached me and congratulated me. I felt *very* supported, rewarded, and appreciative."

Another wrote: "I found peer coaching to be quite valuable. Before I was observed, I was quite nervous and concerned about my performance. I discovered, however, that once my class got started I forgot my observers were even there. As it turned out, the class my observers sat in on was my best to date."

Some instructors felt that having peers in their classes helped prepare them for the more formal, evaluative visit by a faculty member which would occur later in the semester. At any rate, the fear of having someone visit in the classroom seemed to disappear as the visits continued. Instructors expressed surprise not only that the visits were non-threatening but also that having "a friend in the classroom could be very supportive." One teacher wrote, "I feel my class went reasonably well, and I felt nothing but encouragement and sincere concern from my peers."

Another teacher wrote, "I felt my class was awful, and I actually felt supported by having peers there. I wasn't aware of their presence at the time[,] but *after* class I was glad they captured what seems to be eluding me. I also really appreciated visiting their classes to see other TAs in action[,]

as well as to observe other student populations. I felt I was no longer going through these 'antics' or teaching in a void."

Visiting other classes gave new teachers self-confidence. One teacher expressed her feelings this way: "When I visited the two other classes, it was the day after a discipline problem in one of my own. Students were talking, and I felt I lost some of my control. I was upset because this had never happened before. Having the chance to observe other classes calmed my anxiety about my class. The classes I observed had much more talking going on when they were in control than mine had when it was not. I realized that I had overreacted."

Still another instructor said, "I appreciated being able to observe my peers—to assure me that I was not really as poor an instructor as I thought. I'm not implying that my peers are poor teachers, but rather that observing them and seeing student reactions made it clear that I'm not doing so badly after all."

A teacher with more experience, one concerned more with learning than with discipline wrote, "In the classes I visited, I felt almost invisible, I was able to notice things about class dynamics that I hadn't been able to notice in my own class: how to phrase questions so students can understand them clearly and respond and other class techniques. I learned a lot about my own teaching from the observation." Another wrote: "Observing classes myself was also very instructive for me. I observed specific problems, such as talking in class, lack of response, and boredom. Watching *how* each instructor dealt with these problems gave me some insight into how I should and shouldn't deal with them in my class."

Teachers more confident about their roles wrote about different concerns. "I wasn't very nervous being observed, I guess because I've taught and been observed so many years. I wish there was more emphasis on developing and sharing lessons between and within peer groups. I feel this is of greater importance to me and my effectiveness in the classroom."

As the semester progressed, most teachers' concerns changed. More teachers expressed the hope that they could "utilize the suggestions made at the last peer coaching session" or "show some improvement in my teaching." Teachers became less concerned about themselves and more concerned about their peers. One wrote, "I am concerned about being able to give helpful feedback." "I'm concerned," another wrote, "about making someone else nervous, screwing up because I'm watching." One instructor

revealed a self-reflective attitude toward his role in a group when he wrote, "I am concerned about not dominating a group and not steamrolling others' ideas or opinions." Another expressed anticipation for the next visit: "I want to see the rapport that M and B have with their groups of students."

After the second observation, teams expressed gratification that they had "learned teaching techniques," "got ideas from each other," "gained insight into teacher-student relationships," and had "better, more trusting relationships with peers."

It was especially gratifying to the program's coordinators to see how some teachers applied the principle of self-reflection and changed their own behavior. Early in the semester, one of the new teaching assistants expressed to the TA peer-coaching director feelings that his easy-going manner in the class might be a problem to administrators. After the first peer visit, he voluntarily identified himself in an otherwise anonymous assignment to write about concerns with the program: "I'm still concerned about the department's tolerance for my own unique teaching style. I have no idea of where my teaching crosses the line into unprofessional behavior as far as the degree of informality in my classroom is concerned." Later, this same instructor confided in the peer-coaching director that he had done a considerable amount of reflecting on his own classroom dynamics. After visiting other classes, receiving the descriptive feedback from his peers, and reviewing several sets of his students' papers, he decided to make some changes in class discipline. No one needed to "evaluate" him; a process of self-evaluation, which had begun with his first day of teaching and which was reinforced by the objective narratives of his class by peers, helped him change his own techniques and become a more effective teacher.

Collaboration in teaching enabled a number of instructors to help students see the importance of collaboration in learning. One instructor put it this way: "I discussed with my students that we [teachers] are also working cooperatively, and they were into that, into seeing peer editing and peer coaching as vital to the process of learning. They see the 'process' in which the class is engaged, in more ways than one."

The survey of forty composition programs asked directors what possible weaknesses they saw in peer coaching: 46% listed none or stated that they saw none. Six major concerns were expressed, the most common being the extra time involved and lack of compensation to instructors for

the time invested. As one director said, "Teaching assistants are so burdened with so many tasks that they have enough simply completing what they have to do now." Another expressed concern over possible exploitation of instructors unless they are adequately compensated. To be sure, any teacher development program involves time beyond the regular workload. While participating in peer coaching, the teaching assistants at ASU expressed their concern for balancing time spent in class observations with their own teaching schedules and graduate classes. At present the program involves only new teaching assistants, who receive university credit for attending a training seminar. Their planning and post-observation feedback sessions are held during that class time. They are encouraged to think of class visits as "homework" for the seminar, but the director is sensitive to their concerns. Although original plans called for peer groups of five members each and for three visits to each member's class, it soon became obvious that reducing the groups to three members each and visits to two was more realistic.

A second potential weakness of peer coaching—"overkill," as one respondent put it—can be a problem. Because the director at ASU hopes to have volunteers coach each other after the first year in the program, partners rather than teams are recommended to senior teaching assistants. In addition, it is hoped that experienced instructors, not able to continue the benefit of learning new teaching strategies in the seminar, will participate in what Robert J. Garmston calls "collegial coaching" (20). Unlike "technical coaching," whereby teachers practice skills taught them by a coordinator, collegial coaching "concentrates on areas the observed teacher wishes to learn more about." Accordingly, the teacher specifies techniques or skills of special interest to him/her and asks team members to describe classroom activities with particular reference to those techniques.

Another potential weakness mentioned was lack of experience and knowledge or, as one respondent wrote simply and somewhat cynically, "the blind leading the blind." Composition teachers and administrators who do not see the value of collaborative learning—for example, in various forms of peer editing—feel that teachers participating in collaborative teaching are indeed "the blind leading the blind." Ample evidence has shown, however, that teachers, as well as students, who are taught a new skill and who desire to improve can do so as they reflect on their own behaviors after being observed and coached toward improvement in a non-threatening environment.

Respondents who mentioned a fourth possible weakness—potential for soft-pedaling criticism, a hesitancy to be honest, reluctance to give constructive criticism, fear of hurting another or even mutual stroking—apparently did not take into consideration the fact that observation reports are *descriptive* rather than *evaluative* and *judgmental* in order to encourage self-reflection. The same point applies to the respondent who expressed concern over the possibility of "some occasional resentment."

Other concerns expressed seem to relate to the need for positive presentation and sensitive supervision of the peer-coaching program. One respondent wrote, "It can be idiosyncratic, not applicable to all circumstances"; still another commented, "The passing on of 'lore' about teaching composition as if it were fact could be a problem." Each of these potential problems, legitimate though it may be, is minimized by sensitive peer-coaching administration.

One respondent, who commented that peer coaching "provides a cheap supervision and excuses non-composition faculty from becoming involved," seems to assume that peer coaching is the only form of supervision. On the contrary, the program at ASU, and apparently those at the other eight universities which have some form of peer coaching, supplements other forms of supervision: tutelage and direction by the Director of First Year composition, pre-term orientation, a seminar and/or practicum during the year, a mentor system involving experienced senior teaching assistants and/or tenured faculty, and evaluation by tenured faculty who visit classes, examine graded essays, and write assessment reports.

Peer coaching has proven to be an effective program at ASU, serving, among other things, to reduce the detrimental sense of isolation of composition teachers in the classroom. As one teaching assistant put it, "I feel I am no longer teaching in a void." The program has helped instructors recognize that they face common problems in the classroom and that they can help each other find the best solutions. If, as George P. Elliott noted in an essay on "Teaching Writing," the criterion for judging "a good class" is "the way it pulls together late in the term into a kind of community" (82), a major criterion for judging a "good" group of composition teachers is the way they pull together early in the term into a kind of sharing community—visiting each other's classes, writing descriptive reports, meeting together to discuss objectives and strategies, and, most importantly, engaging in self-reflection about their own teaching. Elliott points out that "it is in our nature to make such communities, though of course we can be

prevented from doing so both by our own negative wills and by too constricting a system." "The extraordinary ingredient in making communities," according to Elliott, is "wanting them enough to risk failure" (85). The alternative to composition instructors "squatting sequestered" in debilitating isolation is to establish collaborative communities through peer-coaching.

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