Peer Coaching:
Implication for Teaching and Program Improvement

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1.   Abstract:

Although peer coaching has been used as a means of professional development in K-12 schools and administration, it is rarely utilized in higher education. This article uses a case example to describe a peer coaching project implemented between two university faculty members. Multiple means of peer interaction, as a means to cultivate a collegial relationship between faculty and encourage critical discourse and reflection, is incorporated into the project. Discussion of the use of peer coaching, as a means for program improvement, finalizes the article.

Key words

peer coaching, program improvement, improving college teaching, peer collaboration, peer review of teaching

The scholarship of teaching was introduced to higher education as reconceptualization of faculty roles (Boyer, 1990). Since then it has been given special emphasis and has led to increased reflection and innovation (Hutchings & Shulman, 1999). Much of the innovation has been demonstrated by individuals working towards the scholarship of teaching. University faculty have continued attempts to evaluate and improve their teaching and its impact on student learning. This article describes a peer coaching model, implemented, by two faculty members at a university within the United States.

2.   Peer Coaching Defined

Peer coaching is a partnership between teachers in a nonjudgmental environment built around a collaborative and reflective dialogue. It is a confidential process through which instructors share their expertise and provide one another with feedback, support, and assistance for the purpose of enhancing learning by refining present skills, learning new skills, and/or solving classroom-related problems (Dalton & Moir, 1991). Additionally, the process builds trust and develops strong professional relationships between trusted colleagues. Peer coaching is often used as a professional development method in K-12 teaching and administration situations. It has been shown to increase collegiality and improve teaching (Joyce & Showers, 1995). Many coached instructors report positive changes in their behaviors, when provided with an appropriate program that insures accountability, support, companionship, and specific feedback over an extended period of time (Licklider, 1995; Tschantz, & Vail, 2000). Findings from a study done with preservice teachers, in 2007, indicated that peer coaching fostered the exchange of teaching methods and materials, cultivated the development of teaching skills, and encouraged participants to reflect upon their own teaching methods and styles (Vacilotto & Cummings, 2007).

3. Peer Coaching in Higher Education

Although peer coaching has been shown to be successful in many teaching environments, it has rarely been utilized in higher education. However, peer review of teaching in higher education isn't a new concept. Peer review of teaching has some crossover to peer coaching, because peer review also entails faculty working together to evaluate each other in order to improve teaching. While there are benefits to cross-disciplinary peer reviews, scholars within a discipline can provide a connection to the content, research, and pedagogy that others lack (Quinlan, 1995). Coaching, on the other hand, implies an ongoing collaborative relationship where one person works with or trains another person over an extended period of time. In peer coaching, the relationship is reciprocal.

In 1991, the American Association of Higher Education in cooperation with Lee Shulman and Charles Ducommun designed a project to train faculty from several institutes of higher education on techniques designed to develop faculty's ability to develop new ways that professional colleagues could assist each other in the area of teaching (Hutchings, 1995). Although the project generated interest and publication, it did not translate into the use of more extensive peer evaluation. In 1993, Susan Kahn reported that only 25 percent of colleges and universities make routine use of classroom visits by colleagues as a technique for evaluating teaching. Add to that the fact that classroom observation is just one facet of peer coaching, and it's easy to assume that far fewer colleges and universities are using peer coaching. One might speculate the reasons being: 1) it is very time consuming, 2) it requires a long term commitment by the instructors to be effective, 3) it is not commonly tied to decisions of tenure and promotion, and 4) college professors tend to function very autonomously. However, the benefits seen in K-12 teaching have led professors, searching for excellence in teaching, to implement peer coaching.

Often, the peer coaching plan is established by a contract between faculty agreeing to a long term commitment to systematically gather and share information related to student learning. The plan has an emphasis on the scholarship of teaching and program improvement.

4. Peer Coaching Case Example

As a college professor who came from the educational discipline, I spent nearly a decade as a special education teacher and became engrained in the use of peer coaching to help refine my own teaching and improve student outcomes. When working on higher education, I was stuck with the difference in teaching evaluation. Typically the institutions of higher education that I worked for put a heavy emphasis on student course evaluation as a way to evaluate teaching. Although I typically received good course evaluations, the students provided little actionable information. They might comment on "tests being difficult" or "projects being too long", but they rarely provided me with specific information that could be used to make improvement in the course that would lead to better student learning outcomes. Yes, the tests may be difficult, but did they adequately measure student learning? The projects were comprehensive, but did they allow students to demonstrate and apply knowledge and skills? These questions, and others about student learning, were the impetus behind the implementation of a

peer coaching project based on my experience as an elementary special education teacher.

5.   Participants

To begin the process of establishing a peer coaching relationship, I approached another tenured faculty member in the Psychology Department. His background in psychology and my background in education would complement each other. We were both looking towards promotion to full professor status within the next five years and wanted to implement an innovative project that might provide us with the important information that would allow us to refine and perfect our teaching and boost student outcomes, which would then be demonstrable in promotion documents. My psychology colleague agreed to participate, and we developed a plan to implement peer coaching at the university level.

6.   Implementation Procedures

After reviewing the benefits of peer coaching described in the literature for school age and higher education programs, a Peer Coaching Plan was developed and implemented. The plan called for the two colleagues to actively participate in activities where they would both serve as "teacher" and "coach" to continuously refine and improve teaching over a period of two years. The participants agreed to perform the following activities each semester, 1) a course observation focusing on teaching behaviors, 2) a Group Instructional Feed Back Technique (GIFT) including a pre-GIFT conference, GIFT, and post-GIFT conference and reflection, 3) review of graded work samples, and 4) regularly scheduled meetings to engage in reflection and critical discourse related to teaching effectiveness. The participants drew up a contract to formalize their agreement and immediately set meeting dates.

Class observation. The classroom observation model used for this project emphasized a three-step consultation process which included a pre-observation conference, classroom observation, and a post-observation conference described by Neil Fleming (2004). In the pre-observation session, the coach obtained information from the teacher concerning his/her class goals, students, and particular teaching techniques utilized for this class. Questions to be addressed during the pre-observation conference often included:

1. What content will the class cover and what activities are planned?

2. What is the makeup of the class? (number, seating arrangement, etc.)

3. What can I expect the teacher and class to be doing?

4. Is there anything in particular that you would like me to focus on?

The actual observation consisted of a two column observation, where the coach noted the teacher behaviors and student behaviors that were related to the teacher. During the observation, the colleague, who was playing the role of coach, would watch for specific teaching behaviors and student behavior. The coach would note on-task and off-task behaviors exhibited by the students. Also noted by the coach, would be the student's reactions to the teacher's behaviors. For example, if several students were off-

task and the instructor asked the students to write down the answer to a question and then share that answer with students sitting near them, the students who were off task might respond by writing and engaging in an on-task small group discussion. This observation could provide powerful information about the effectiveness of teaching strategies. Figure one is an example from an observation done in an introductory psychology class. This particular observation occurred in an upper level undergraduate class containing twenty-seven students. The students were engaged in note taking during a PowerPoint lecture.

Figure 1: Peer Coaching Observation

Teacher Behavior	Student Behavior
Welcomed students to class. Asked students if they had questions related to the paper topics.	Two students asked questions about the paper.
Paused for more questions.	None had additional questions.
Let's begin.	
Reviews information from previous class.	Students listen and check notes from previous session's lecture.
"Are you with me?"/ "thoughts".	Nod heads. No comments by students.
	Student asks question "Who decides what self-esteem is normal?"
Acknowledges question as a good question and begins to explain issues related to self-esteem.	Three students in the back of the room are off-task and talking/laughing quietly.
Makes joke about self-esteem.	Students laugh. The off task students also laugh and stop talking. They focus their attention on the teacher.

During the observation, the coach noted specific student behaviors such as: listening, writing, reading, talking, or participating in various ways. As a trusted

colleague, the coach avoided making subjective judgments about whether learning was occurring. The coach was there to "hold up a mirror" during teaching by describing the interaction between the teacher and the students.

After the observation, the coach made a copy of the observation notes and allowed the teacher time to read them. Then the pair would schedule the post-observation conference. At the conference, the teacher began the discussion by reflecting on his/her perceptions of the class session. At this point, is it appropriate for the teacher to make value judgments about the observation. The teacher might determine that his/her humor facilitated engagement in the lecture, or that his/her inability to get the DVD player to work detracted from the effectiveness of the teaching.

GIFT. This project also made use of The Group Instructional Feedback Technique (GIFT) described in Classroom Assessment Techniques by Angelo and Cross (1993) as a way to assess student's perceptions and make adjustments in the course during the semester.

The GIFT has played a prominent role in many university classroom assessment strategies. Although there are different names and different variations, the constant feature requires faculty to get student responses to questions centered on improving classroom instruction. Typically, a colleague will pose questions to students, while the instructor is not present. The questions generally ask the students to identify things that the instructor is doing to facilitate their learning and things the instructor could do better to facilitate their learning. The colleague then quickly summarizes the comments without identifying students and presents the feedback to the instructor privately within a short period of time. This allows the instructor to make modifications and adjustments in the class in mid-semester, as opposed to getting course evaluation feedback at the end of the semester and making changes for the next semester.

For this project, each participant did a GIFT for one class each semester. We tried to do the observation and GIFT in different classes to get feedback from more than one course during the semester. Before the actual interview occurred, the coaches would sit down and discuss factors that might influence the GIFT. They discussed the make-up of the class, information that might be important for the colleague to know, and agreed on the questions to be asked. After each GIFT, the coaches met to discuss the information from the GIFT. We tried to indicate if comments made by the students during the GIFT were generally agreed upon by all the students in the class or only a few students. The coach pointed out the items of class consensus by placing a (M) after the comment indicating that most of the students in the class agreed with that comment.

The following is an example of a GIFT done for this project in an undergraduate special education reading methods course. The course had twenty-four senior level students who were involved in a two-day per week field practicum while taking instructional methods courses on the other three-days per week. The students were required to design and implement lessons based on their course instruction while they were practicing in the field.

Question: What aspects of this course enhanced your learning?

- She offers "real life" example from her own teaching (M)

- We often do creative in-class activities (M)

- Her willingness to help students inside and outside of class (M)

- Her high expectations for students and supporting or scaffolding student learning (M)

- She is always very prompt and specific in her feedback on class assignments (M)

    Question: What aspects of this course hindered your learning?

- For some of the assignments, the amount of work required is disproportionate to the points given (specifically the children's book study)

- Some concepts are covered later in the course but are needed for the teaching practicum much sooner

    Suggestions:

- Give more points to the children's book study

- Discuss thematic unit development earlier in the semester.

- Keep it up! (M)

Review of graded work samples. Teachers have often asked students to review each others work. Its common practice to see students peer edit written work or grade each others papers. However, university faculty rarely evaluate each other by reviewing student work samples. As part of the Peer Coaching Plan described above, the instructors identified professional standards, goals, and/or objectives for a particular assignment given in a course. They then looked at the description of the project provided on the syllabus and in other material. Finally, the instructors looked at completed student work, and the assessment procedures used to grade the assignment. They evaluated the work to determine 1) if the work sample was addressing the standards, goals, and/or objectives stated, 2) if it represented quality work, 3) if the grading was consistent with the standards and provided quality feedback to the student and, 4) if it demonstrated student learning. Figure two shows an example of a graded work sample. This work sample came from a graduate level psychology class on working with adults in counseling and psychotherapy. The assignment reviewed was a mid-term project. Students were to apply their knowledge of four different theoretical orientations of psychotherapy (psychoanalytic/psychodynamic, humanistic, behavioral, and cognitive) to a case-study provided by the instructor. The students were to review the case-study and plan therapy using each of the four theoretical orientations. The coach reviewed the description of the mid-term assignment provided on the syllabus and handout, looked at the professional standards associated with the assignment, read five sample midterm assignments, and reviewed the instructors evaluation of the five sample midterm assignments. The coaches comments related to the work samples are as follows:

Figure 2: Work Sample Evaluation

Professional Standards

- Students will be able to differentiate between four different theoretical orientations

(psychoanalytic/psychodynamic, humanistic, behavioral, and cognitive).

- Students will be able to apply their knowledge of different theoretical orientations to conceptualization and planning as a therapist.

Feedback on Assignment Description from Syllabus and one page handout given to class:

- Very detailed

- Includes information and specifics on HOW to complete the assignment

- Case is well written and easy to understand with pertinent information given about the fictional client.

- Point value is established.

Feedback on the Assignment from the Coach:

- Grading rubric used.

- Rubric is general without categories describing point value. It might be beneficial to include more detail in the rubric categories instead of just assigning a point value.

- Grading rubric addressed all four theoretical orientations.

- Points were given for various components to each theory.

- Emphasis on designing therapy that is consistent with each theoretical orientation.

Evaluation on Work Sample One:

The student was able to explain in detail how each fictional therapy was conducted using each theoretical orientation. In following with directions for the assignment, reading the assignment was like reading therapy summaries, in that it described the fictional client's behaviors and conversation. The student created dialogue between the psychologist, and the client described in the case. Each therapy summary also contained notes regarding the therapist's thoughts regarding the case. There was a clear difference among theoretical orientation. The student was able to use language consistent with each therapy. Paper was well written. The instructor's evaluation of the paper, using the rubric, was consistent with the professional standards.

7.   Evaluation

Having started this project as a means to refine teaching, improve student outcomes, and provide demonstratable evidence of effective teaching for promotion documents, both participants felt equally satisfied that the two year peer coaching relationship was well worth the time and effort. From this peer coaching project, both participants were able to see clear goals established for students in the course syllabi and the project descriptions. Methodology and preparation were evaluated through observation and GIFTs. A review of student work products allowed the participants to align standards with assignments and assess the evaluation of those assignments. Finally, the professors engaged in a reflective critique of teaching and student learning.

These reflective critiques allowed honest evaluation of teaching and learning, established new and higher standards, and facilitated continuous improvement.

During the time period of this peer coaching project, one of the professors won a university teaching award and a regional teaching award. One of the professors was promoted to full professor and the other professor is in the process of being evaluated for full professor promotion. The Psychology Program was the recipient of an Award for Institutional Progress in Student Learning Outcomes given to programs across the United States.

8.   Future Directions and Recommendations

This case example demonstrates how peer coaching can be used effectively to improve the teaching of two professors. It is our opinion that the model can be extended beyond individual teaching to include program improvement as well. The future of peer coaching in higher education may be better utilized as a means to improve individual instructors and programs.

In order to encourage more instructors from higher education to implement a peer coaching project, the long term commitment and the amount of time required to participate in peer coaching must result in more than tenure and promotion for professors. If done solely for tenure and promotion, senior faculty may be less motivated to be involved in the process. The expertise and experience of tenured faculty is highly desirable in a coaching relationship. Seasoned instructors are able to give others valuable insight into teaching and offer ideas on "tried and true" teaching methodology. Likewise, the untenured professor may feel overwhelmed with the responsibilities associate with tenure and promotion and feel uneasy about making the time commitment for such a project. Junior faculty involvement is also critical. These instructors often bring information on the latest teaching strategies and are able to reinvigorate other faculty with their fresh ideas and approaches.

The desire for autonomy must also be addressed if peer coaching is to be more widely accepted and utilized. Academic freedom is a longstanding value in higher education. With the proper incentives for collegiality, peer coaching can include both untenured and tenured faculty and allow faculty to maintain their academic freedom. Participants in a peer coaching project should never feel forced into making specific changes in their teaching. Feedback from the coach should be seen as suggestions rather than ultimatums. For a coaching relationship to be viable, both parties need to feel comfortable giving and getting constructive feedback from each other. Academic freedom must be ensured while collaboration is valued.

9.   Program Assessment in a Learning Community

The use of peer coaching has been demonstrated to have a positive impact on teaching and learning in K-12 schools and higher education. The use of this model should not be restricted to improving individual instructor's skills. Extending the practice to all faculty within a discipline, can lead to overall assessment of program effectiveness as well as desired effects on individual teaching. Opening classrooms to colleagues can provide opportunities for peer feedback and a forum for making improvements to curriculum.

Critical Discourse and Reflection. Key to continuous improvement is the ability to ask difficult questions and to reflect on current practice. In 1991, in his book Behind Special Education, Thomas Skrtic explains that critical discourse is necessary to identify and address problems in a reflective manner. As a profession, educators must be able to "engage in critical reflective discourse that calls into question the implicit presuppositions embedded in models, assumptions, theories, and metatheories that stand behind our practices" (Skrtic, 1991, p. 215). If, in the assessment of our own teaching or our professional program, we only identify strengths, we have missed an opportunity to improve our practice. The Higher Learning Commission in their Academic Quality Improvement Program encourages reviewers to recognize weaknesses as opportunities because they provide actionable feedback (Spangehel, 2007). We can act upon those things identified as a weakness and turn them into an opportunity for improvement. However, we must be brave enough to have open conversations, identify flaws, reflect on our practice, and implement change.

Peer Coaching as Program Improvement. To extend peer coaching to program improvement and assessment, several issues must be addressed. Faculty must recognize the benefits of the practice and be willing to adopt an open classroom culture that models critical thinking and reflective discussion. Peer coaching, merely as a personal improvement endeavor, limits the participation of senior faculty who do not need documentation for the tenure and promotion process. Full professors and junior faculty can benefit from the give and take of a peer coaching model. The model we propose goes beyond issues of tenure and promotion and promotes continuous program improvement and quality.

The program review process would include peer coaches, within a single program, analyzing student work samples and syllabi as well as critical discourse of different opinions related to professional matters. Colleagues can share and discuss course requirements and assignments to better the scope and sequence of the overall program. When faculty in one program work together in a shared peer coaching project, faculty have a better understanding of what students are learning in all the classes and how that knowledge fits together to create a capable graduate. There will undoubtedly be differences of opinions, but respectful conversation and debate is the hallmark of higher education and quality programs. Discussions must be viewed as opportunities to identify critical need within a program and plan for improvement. Identifying actionable aspects of the program leads to overall enhancement.

Building on the Past. In an American Association of Higher Education Bulletin published in 1994, three lessons to build on were identified (Hutchins). These lessons asserted that: 1) faculty want to talk with each other about teaching, 2) classroom observation is only one strategy for peer review, and 3) peer review of teaching should be a part of the departmental culture (Hutchins, 1994). The peer coaching model described above incorporates each of these lessons. It takes peer review of teaching two steps further. The first step is to use multiple means of peer interaction, such as observation, interviews, syllabi evaluation, and work sample review as a means for identifying areas for improvement and a catalyst for reflection and change. The second step is to formalize the process of peer coaching within a particular program where all the instructors regularly participate in the activities of peer review and coaching and the

results are looked at programmatically. Program faculty can identify redundancy in courses through syllabi review. Student work sample evaluations might indicate that the students need support in the area of writing or a specialized skill within the discipline. Regular classroom observations would allow faculty to build upon topics discussed in other classes. Program changes could be instituted based upon the evidence presented from the collaborative peer coaching among faculty.

According to Jean Piaget the goal of education is to create individuals who are capable of doing new things, not simply repeating what other generations have done (Thinkexist.com, 2007). In order to accomplish this goal, we must be willing to continually raise the bar on our teaching and to work together to provide quality programs of excellence. We must also incorporate novel ideas of evaluation and strategies to facilitate improvement within our own practices. Peer coaching is one technique by which this can be done. The two professors involved in this project found that peer coaching enabled them to refine their teaching and provided them with a venue for self-reflection. The professors were able to learn and grow together. Peer coaching can empower faculty to transfer and internalize new skills fostering excellence in teaching that leads to continuous program improvement.

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