

Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 3

January 2011

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Recommended Citation

Potter, Mark; Haynes, Sandra; Heyl, Kathy; Phillips, Kenneth R.; Pozzi, Richard; Stroup, Linda; and Tull, Tara (2011) "Peer Observation of Teaching: A Case for Culture Change," *Teacher-Scholar: The Journal of the State Comprehensive University*. Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: 10.58809/BPWJ9721

Available at: <https://scholars.fhsu.edu/ts/vol3/iss1/3>

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Peer Observation of Teaching: A Case for Culture Change

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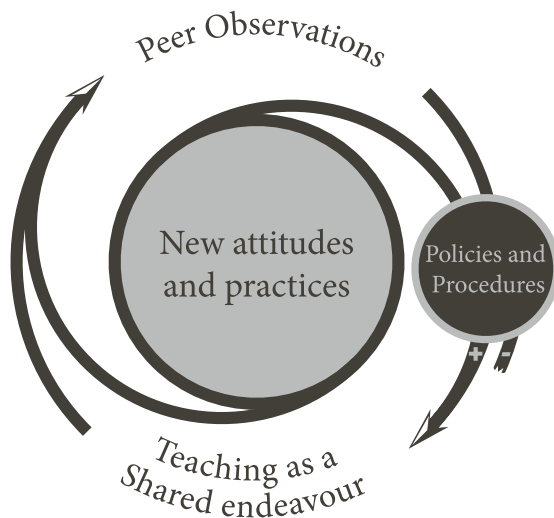
Teaching has long been an individualized and private affair within academia. Gerald Graff (2009) spoke of the default position of “coursecentrism” taken by university faculty in his 2008 Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association. The privatized classroom, he argues, is “out of step with the way the academic world works” and is damaging to students (Graff, 2009, p. 740). Coursecentrism causes students to focus on surface learning goals as a rational response to the perception that their courses are separate and distinct from one another, each with its own set of expectations, requirements, and classroom practices. In addition, faculty members forgo the opportunity to become better teachers that comes with taking “one another’s courses as reference points in [their] own” (Graff, 2009, p. 728). Weimer (2010) also recognizes the lost opportunity created by this culture of the privatized classroom, where our conversations about teaching rarely get beyond “pedagogical pleasantries.” In response, she urges faculty to take an intentional approach to “collecting colleagues.” While her suggestion provides an antidote to the coursecentrism described by Graff, its implementation relies upon faculty first becoming aware of both why and how they should make their teaching more public and then perceiving that any threats from doing so are minimal.

The ongoing shift within academia from the teaching to the learning paradigm has gradually chipped away at this default position of coursecentrism. While academia operated broadly under the “teaching paradigm,” the tendency toward coursecentrism did not raise alarms, as it was assumed that the main responsibility of the lecturer was to present knowledge from the field to an audience of students eager to absorb new information. If the faculty member’s scholarship—open to peer review, dissemination, and critique—was sound, then, logically, so too must have been the corresponding teaching. The learning paradigm (Barr and Tagg, 1995; Weimer, 2002), by comparison, emphasizes creating powerful learning environments to produce discovery, the construction of knowledge, and the development of skills by students. A learner-centered approach to teaching challenges the traditional distinction between teacher as expert and student as novice. The teacher’s primary function is to facilitate students’ learning, and as a consequence it is ever more incumbent upon the teacher to continue her own learning, not only within the discipline, but also regarding questions of how to create

powerful learning environments. A culture where teaching is an open and shared pursuit has the potential to turn all of our classrooms into laboratories of learning not only for our students, but for us teachers as well.

Peer observation of instruction is a clear means of opening classrooms to the potential for sharing and continuous learning on the part of instructors. Two general difficulties arise, though, with peer observations. Whereas the formative benefits of peer observation are well documented (Berk, 2006; Chism, 2007; Crumley & James, 2009; Siddiqui, Jonas-Dwyer & Carr, 2007), the use of observations for summative decisions has the potential to undermine the individual faculty member's commitment to reflection and improvement (Berk, 2006; Weimer, 2010). Also, peer observations have traditionally aligned in both their purpose and in their execution with the teaching paradigm, as Barr and Tagg describe: "An instructor is typically evaluated by her peers or dean on the basis of whether her lectures are organized, whether she covers the appropriate material, whether she shows interest in and understanding of the subject matter, whether she is prepared for class, and whether she respects her students' questions and comments" (1995). In our search for model programs, we have found only a small number of approaches that establish an explicit learner-centered approach to peer observations (Crumley & James, 2009; Jones, Sagendorf, Morris, Stockburger & Patterson, 2009). While there is broad agreement on several core good practices in peer-observation (Berk, 2006; Centra, 1993; Chism, 2007; DeZure, 1999; Siddiqui, Jonas-Dwyer & Carr, 2007), in situations where the purposes and processes of peer observation are muddy, the observations can in fact undermine instructors' commitment to learner-centeredness and can damage attempts to foster a culture of open and shared teaching.

This article examines efforts at Metropolitan State College of Denver (Metro State) to foster change in faculty attitudes and practices surrounding peer classroom observations. We believe that peer classroom observations are pivotal to fostering a culture in which teaching is an open and shared endeavor and in which there is a broad commitment to student learning. When done well, peer classroom observations provide the opportunities needed to share informed insights about teaching and learning; when done poorly, they hinder our movement toward honest and informed conversation about teaching. Within an optimal cycle, a healthy culture surrounding teaching encourages peer observations done well, and peer observations done well will advance a healthy culture surrounding teaching. Where we have found the cycle disrupted at Metro State, however, is in the outcomes produced by policies and procedures. (See Figure 1). It has not been enough to encourage new attitudes and practices; policy roadblocks need to be overcome as well.



Culture and Change at Metro State

Metro State's mission is to provide an affordable and accessible education primarily to the residents of the greater Denver metropolitan area. Its modified open admissions policy and its commitment "to prepare students for success in their education, career and life" create the need for a wide range of pedagogies that succeed in engaging students (Metropolitan State College of Denver, 2008). As with most state comprehensive universities and colleges (Henderson, 2009), Metro State attracts students from a variety of backgrounds and with a wide range of academic abilities and skill levels.

Faculty, too, come to the institution with a range of experience in teaching. Some are hired out of graduate programs where they have had varying degrees of exposure to teaching, while others are hired for their expertise in their professional fields and lack the teaching background that can optimize their confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. These differences in background and experience cut across all categories of newly hired faculty—tenure-track, visiting, and adjuncts. Such a wide range of faculty backgrounds creates a need for opportunities through which faculty can develop professionally and learn from their peers.

Creating a culture in which faculty can learn about teaching from each other requires trust, appropriate rewards, and incentives, along with the careful design of opportunities. Initial base-line research into prevailing attitudes about peer observations indicates that these elements have been lacking at Metro State. In response, groups of faculty and administrators have worked to overcome hurdles and create a context in which policies and culture interact in a positive way so that faculty

embrace peer observation as a useful instrument. Our triggering opportunity has not so much been a sense of urgency (Kotter, 1996), but rather a widely felt sense of deficiency in current practices (Ewell, 1997). Leadership for change around this particular matter has come from coalitions of faculty and administrators and has not been strictly top-down. This distinctive origin of change management has created both opportunities and challenges in arriving at our desired goals.

Initial Inquiry

In Spring 2009, a group of faculty and administrators from the School of Professional Studies undertook to document problems with peer observations and to generate ideas for improving the system. One of three schools that constitute the College, the School of Professional Studies (SPS) itself contains the wide array of faculty backgrounds described above, including expert teachers found in the Teacher Education departments and the more novice teachers hired to bring their professional expertise into many of the other departments. Faculty from across SPS have in common an interest in applying learning to real world experiences and in creating opportunities for students to learn by experiencing. They are thus poised to benefit from the potentially rich exchange of ideas and insight that can come from peer observations.

Under College policy, peer observations have been mandated for summative evaluation purposes. Tenure-track faculty are required to have a majority of their courses, meaning typically 5 every calendar year, observed and evaluated using an instrument attributed to Peter Seldin (1980). Yet, as the initial inquiry found, this mandate is not producing information useful for making summative decisions. Among 560 observations featured in reappointment dossiers in 2008, average scores for 2nd year and 4th year faculty, respectively, were 4.91 and 4.85 on a 5-point scale; 288 observations scored a perfect score of 5, and 455, or 81%, scored within the range of 4.8 to 5. This clustering of scores is a function more of systemic factors than of the Seldin instrument itself. There have been no institutional efforts to establish norms in the use of the instrument, and faculty have little sense of the criteria that distinguish between scores of "highest" (5), "satisfactory" (3), and "lowest" (1). Faculty "trade" observations with their peers who they can be reasonably sure will give them exemplary scores, and because of the very large number of observations that need to take place every year, faculty cannot take the time to be thorough and thoughtful with every classroom observation. Furthermore, the element of trust that must exist to allow faculty to engage in meaningful conversation about teaching has been crowded out by the false (though as yet insufficiently discredited) claim that we observe classes in order to make better summative decisions.

Faculty are widely aware of these systemic flaws. In both a February

2009 college-wide faculty workshop and a follow-up survey of 46 faculty in SPS, these points surfaced repeatedly. Faculty remarked that pre-observation conferences are often skipped, that there is never discussion about what the numbers on the rating scale mean, and that political considerations too easily enter into how observations are conducted. Eighty percent of the 46 respondents to the SPS faculty survey either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that “the current peer evaluation system provides an accurate assessment of teaching ability.” Faculty comments both during the workshop and in response to the SPS survey suggest that faculty understand what needs to happen for observations to be valued. One faculty member, for example, commented “the system could be one converted to a feedback and mentoring system disassociated from the evaluation process, and then maybe more suggestions for improvement would be given and acted on.”

First Response

With impressions confirmed, the SPS team of faculty and administrators partnered with the college’s Center for Faculty Development to develop a pilot approach to peer observations with a clear objective in mind—to create opportunities for classroom observation that faculty will embrace as valuable. We designed the pilot, “Peer Observation of Instruction for Continuous Improvement” (POICI), to provide a developmental forum for faculty where teaching would be opened up to collaboration, the sharing of expertise and insights, and the exchange of feedback. All assistant professors in the School of Professional Studies received an invitation to participate, and eleven volunteered for the pilot. In addition, the pilot group included two co-facilitators—one an assistant professor from the School of Professional Studies and the other the Director of the Center for Faculty Development. Rather than hand an instrument to faculty, ensure the confidentiality of their feedback to one another, and then set them loose for peer observations, we felt it important to involve the participants in the development of the protocol for observing.

We thus followed a cohort approach to peer observations in which participants worked together to develop both the expectations and the approach they would follow for the observations. Prior to breaking into triads to exchange peer observations, the cohort met twice, first to discuss what effective teaching looks like in the midst of a classroom observation, and second to design a feedback instrument, establish standard expectations for conducting the observations, and determine best practices for framing feedback. Discussions at these meetings were informed by shared readings: Bain and Zimmerman (2009), Chickering and Gamson (1987), and chapter 1 of Weimer (2002) in advance of the

first meeting; Chism (2007) and DeZure (1999) in advance of the second meeting. By meeting twice prior to conducting observations, cohort members were able to form a sense of community and trust and also establish norms with regard to their responsibilities and expectations in conducting the classroom visits.

Pilot participants provided feedback about their experiences both in response to a survey and in comments offered during a final debriefing meeting. When asked what specific changes they were likely to make to their teaching after having participated in this cohort approach to peer observation, all participants identified at least one change. Some of their specific responses were: "improve the quality of PowerPoint, i.e. ask questions on PPT slide; include answer on the next slide;" "I have added more choices to assignments [based on what I read in] the article on student-centered learning;" "develop and assign projects that allow students to actively participate;" and "seating arrangements make a huge difference in student learning. Take charge of your furniture!"

As forthcoming as the pilot participants were in identifying specific changes to their teaching, they also readily volunteered that they connected to a sense of community and purpose that they had not before felt as part of their teaching role. One participant noted, "I thought the consensus building around what constitutes effective teaching practice [was] a compelling strategy to develop a shared sense of purpose and esprit de corps." Another noted "the politics of being a good [departmental] colleague can get in the way of giving an honest review; I mean there were things that we were able to say in our [pilot] group that we said out of caring and concern..., and I felt I could be much more honest and open than when I'm just applying a number that I know is going to go in [the tenure and promotion] dossier." Participants saw this pilot opportunity as a safe venue free from evaluation where they could openly share their teaching experiences. In doing so, participants felt connected to something larger—to a community of teaching peers—that some remarked they had not previously felt at Metro State.

Since the Pilot

The cohort approach of the pilot program placed ownership of peer observations in the hands of faculty. Faculty participants determined the purposes of their observations, the type of feedback that they sought, and the protocol that they followed to accomplish their own goals. This element of faculty ownership explains much of the success of the pilot, as confirmed by participant feedback. On the other hand, this pilot stands as merely one faculty-driven response, and it has not addressed the broader systemic problems and pressures with peer observations at Metro State. Those problems and pressures have since made themselves

felt on subsequent attempts at continuing the cohort approach.

Attempts to repeat the cohort experience during subsequent semesters with new groups of faculty have produced mixed results. The program continues to offer the benefits that come from focusing on using peer observation as a formative tool, from building community, and from placing ownership of observations into the hands of faculty participants. However, three cohort opportunities offered since the pilot (two in Fall 2010 and one in Spring 2011) through the Center for Faculty Development have drawn only 15 total faculty participants, despite having been opened up to all faculty throughout the college. Why, then, after having expressed so much dissatisfaction with summative peer observations and after having stated a preference for something more meaningful and more responsive to their needs, have so few faculty taken advantage of this cohort-based program?

The answers, we think, are found in recognizing that changes to the culture are slow and take careful, sustained attention, and that college policies and faculty workload together have operated to weaken the incentive to participate. Communication and continued strategic coalition building are essential to the change process (Engelkemeyer and Landry, 2001). Because ours was an initiative not directed from the top at the outset, a clear need is now making itself felt to include the Provost and deans as participants in the communication strategy behind this initiative. Indeed, some of the enthusiasm shown for the pilot by SPS faculty stemmed in part from the personal encouragement conveyed by their dean, who reached out to individual faculty and talked with them about the importance of this initiative. In order for this change initiative to take stronger root and grow, that sort of personal touch and sense of value communicated by one dean can and should be replicated by all deans with their faculty.

Still, misaligned policies and procedures can potentially disrupt even the most carefully designed attempts at communicating and effecting positive cultural change. As long as faculty at Metro State, for example, are required to engage in five summative peer observations every year (frequently with little benefit to show from their efforts), it remains a major challenge to convince them that additional peer observations are worth their time and effort. Given the sheer number of summative peer observations that have to be done every year, faculty are not inclined to conceive of observations as useful tools, and in particular they are likely to question the time commitment needed to establish community and trust within a cohort setting.

Fortunately, two separately conceived, but mutually reinforcing, change processes have coincided to produce the needed policy and procedural alignments. Subsequent to the launch of this coalition-led

effort to improve the culture around teaching and peer observations, our College Provost initiated and is leading a task force charged with overhauling completely the system of faculty evaluation. As discussions within the task force have turned to the question of peer observations for summative purposes, our group's findings have informed the topic and ultimately the decisions reached by the task force. Exchanges of ideas and insights were facilitated by overlapping membership between the coalition spearheading a change in culture regarding peer observations and the Provost-led task force. In the end, we have been successful in aligning new policies in such a way as to enhance the potential for meaningful formative peer observations as part of a healthy and open culture of teaching at Metro State. Specifically, the new faculty evaluation process, which is transitioning into place during the 2011/12 academic year, insists on a sharp distinction that has not until now existed between observations done for summative purposes and observations done for formative purposes. Requirements for the former have been dramatically scaled down to only one observation prior to tenure, and the small corps of faculty who will conduct those observations will be trained to ensure consistency and fairness. Peer observations for formative purposes, on the other hand, will be encouraged but will remain optional. No longer will burdensome expectations for summative peer observations crowd-out opportunities for faculty to observe each other's teaching and to share feedback and insights in a helpful and trusting manner.

Conclusion

In contrast to traditional approaches to change management that establish objectives and then follow a plan to arrive at a clear end-point, this change initiative has been non-linear and adaptive (Lueddeke, 1999). In the early stages of this project, there was little assurance that the early efforts of the small team of SPS administrators and faculty would create lasting culture change. An optimal outcome was made possible in part by convergence with a more traditional, top-down, linear, and product-oriented process to improve how faculty are evaluated at Metro State. Though the change process will continue to be iterative and will likely undergo further study and adjustment, the outcome at present is promising: Metro State has aligned policies and procedures to now reinforce meaningful peer observations "owned" by the faculty, and programs are in place to respond to the known and documented desire of faculty to learn from one another and engage in trusting and honest conversation about teaching.

Structural change, as this experience has demonstrated, requires both the realignment of policies and procedures and sustained attention to the culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008). On the issue of peer observations

and their place in a culture of teaching, Metro State faculty registered their eagerness for change and, specifically, their desire to take ownership of peer observations and re-purpose them for their own formative ends. The widely felt sense of deficiency in the mandated summative peer observations created an opening for coalitions of faculty and administrators to lead change efforts. Through both the successes as well as the challenges and constraints faced along the way, we have learned that a shift in culture will be attained only with the development of an effective coalition of faculty and administrative leaders who act as agents of change and who seek to invest public value in their efforts. The importance of communication in such efforts cannot be overemphasized (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Engelkemeyer & Landry, 2001; Ewell, 1997; Kotter, 1996). Additionally, changes to one piece of a system—in this case peer observations—need to be linked to other key initiatives. By joining initiatives under one umbrella, faculty can see change as part of a larger whole and not as an “add-on” to an already stressed workforce.

Within a culture where teaching is an open and shared endeavor and where faculty can be truly supportive of one another, peer observations are too important to be compromised by their poorly designed use as summative tools. Our experience confirms the views of some that the summative and the formative purposes of peer observations should be kept separate, with distinct protocols in place that are appropriate for both (Berk, 2006; Weimer, 2010). Equally important, requirements for summative observations must not crowd out opportunities for faculty-driven formative observations. With changes now in place that clarify these distinctions, we are hopeful that a climate will develop at Metro State that is encouraging of honest and productive conversations about teaching our students.

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