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ABSTRACT

This monograph describes peer supervision as a helping relationship rather than an evaluative one. The need for peer supervision is discussed, and how to start such a program is described. Some practical issues are considered. Suggestions are made on funding and institutionalizing a peer supervision program. Eight brief case histories of peer supervision in action illustrate the effectiveness of this program. (JD)

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# Peer Support A Way of Professional Teaching

Daniel A. Heller

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Heller's interest in peer supervision spans several years. He has helped to develop and implement such plans at department, school-wide, and districtwide levels. He also leads workshops on the topic through the Vermont Department of Education's Resource Agent Program. He has made presentations on the Brattleboro Peer Supervision Program at conventions of the National Council of Teachers of English. He recently was appointed to the NCTE Committee to Study Teacher-Peer Evaluation Design

Series Editor, Derek L. Burleson

# **Peer Supervision: A Way of Professionalizing Teaching**

by  
Daniel A. Heller

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## What Is Peer Supervision?

The word *supervision* often conjures up an image of the boss walking up and down the assembly line making sure that everyone is doing his job and meeting the production quota. It connotes a hierarchical relationship, with the supervisor having superior knowledge and power. The term itself is derived from the two words *superior* and *vision*. Thus, a supervisor often is perceived as a superior who oversees an inferior.

This image of supervision may hold true for a factory setting, but it is inappropriate in the context of two or more professionals working together for purposes of growth and improvement. In this context supervision is a process by which persons with the same or different rank within an organization help each other for their mutual benefit. The process is not one of checking up on or evaluating one another. Rather, it is a helping relationship that provides mutual support. When this process involves individuals at the same rank within an organization, it is called *peer supervision*.

Despite the distinction made above in the meaning of the term "supervision," the word continues to present difficulties with the political structure of organizations. When one speaks of peer supervision among teachers, those in official supervisory positions may feel threatened, believing that teachers want to usurp their authority and take evaluation into their own hands. Sometimes teachers themselves fear the thought of being supervised or evaluated by a peer. All of this

stems from perceiving supervision as a process in which you are inspected and judgments are made about your performance.

Even the National Education Association, which supports the concept of peer supervision, dislikes the term. It prefers to label this concept "formative assistance," because it associates the term supervision with administration, and in no way does it want to cross that line. The NEA attitude is not uncommon. Peer supervision is an emotionally charged idea. Even the program with which I am involved has resorted to calling itself "peer assistance" to avoid using the "S" word. In my view, whatever term one uses is irrelevant. What is important is understanding the process of peer supervision.

Whenever the term "supervision" is used in this fastback, it refers to a process by which teachers work together for the purpose of mutual professional development. Then, they are practicing *peer supervision*. Remember, though, that most of the professional literature dealing with the topic, notably the work of Sergiovanni and Glickman, continues to use the "S" word. So anyone doing a literature search in the area should resign themselves to using the term, no matter how much he or she may dislike it

### **Who Is a Peer?**

Peers are colleagues whose jobs are at the same level within the school system hierarchy. Peers do not have to be in the same grade, subject area, experience level, or even in the same school building. However, one cannot be a peer if one has the official responsibility of evaluating teachers for purposes of promotion or tenure. While formal teacher evaluation is necessary to the operation of a school system, it cannot be allowed in the peer supervision process, as the following scenario makes clear.

Suppose the principal, Ms. Adams, agrees to enter into a cycle of clinical supervision with Mr. Jones, a beginning sixth-grade teacher. She and Jones agree at their pre-observation conference to work on his question-asking technique. The goal of the supervisory cycle is

to improve a specific instructional technique — and only that. However, when Ms. Adams observes in Mr. Jones' classroom, she finds that his questions lack clarity, are poorly sequenced, and are too high order for sixth-graders. Despite their agreement about the purpose of the supervision, when Ms. Adams has to write the annual evaluation report on Mr. Jones required by school district policy, she notes the weakness in his questioning technique as a negative factor in his teaching.

In this scenario, clearly the supervision and evaluation functions are in conflict. The expected trusting relationship of the clinical supervision cycle has been compromised. In a peer supervision relationship, Mr. Jones' partner, after observation and feedback, could have made him aware of some alternative ways of asking questions without the threat of being evaluated. Peers can admit weaknesses to each other and therefore grow and learn together. This is not likely to happen when one is being evaluated.

What administrators and others in positions of authority can do is to make it possible for the peer supervision process to work. This means relinquishing enough control to allow teachers to develop, run, and thus own the program. It means approving released time or hiring substitutes or covering a class so peers can have time together. It means allocating funds in the budget for this form of staff development. It means selling the program to the school board and community. The key here is trust — trust in the idea that teachers can help each other in ways no one else can do.

Although this fastback focuses on teachers, everyone in the school system can participate in peer supervision. Department heads can work with other department heads. Principals can work with other principals. Peer supervision can become the standard for an entire school system, because everyone has a peer group. People helping each other without evaluating is not the exclusive province of teachers.

## Why Do We Need Peer Supervision?

**I**f principals or central office staff are given official responsibility for teacher supervision and evaluation, why should we concern ourselves with peer supervision? The literature on supervision theory and practice offers many answers to this question. This chapter will touch on some of them.

Teaching has often been characterized as an isolating profession. Teachers seldom have time to share ideas and build mutual trust (Sparks 1983). They operate within the confines of their classroom walls with little opportunity for interaction except in the formal setting of a faculty meeting or casual contact in the teachers' lounge. Reducing teacher isolation, particularly in high schools, is the first step in any school improvement effort (Rothberg 1985). Sergiovanni (1971) calls the interaction of teachers the "lifeblood" of professional growth and program improvement. If schools are to be learning communities for teachers as well as students, then teachers must be provided time and a process through which they can engage in meaningful dialogue.

Time, or rather the lack of it, is a factor that makes the case for peer supervision so compelling. Acheson and Gall (1987) recommend six to eight cycles of clinical supervision per teacher per year in order to make a difference in teacher performance. If each cycle involves pre- and post-conferences as well as observations, then clearly time becomes a major factor. A department head, supervisor, or prin-

cial responsible for as many as 20 teachers cannot possibly fulfill this time commitment. Acheson and Gall suggest an alternative:

The most available source of expertise is teachers themselves: to analyze their own teaching on the basis of objective data, to observe others' classrooms and record data teachers cannot record themselves, to help one another analyze these data and make decisions about alternative strategies. (p. 194)

These authors go on to show how using teachers in a peer supervision role is linked to their personal growth, their sense of collegiality, and to improved instructional practices — all of which contribute to higher morale, greater job satisfaction, improved school climate, and ultimately higher student achievement.

Teachers are experts in many areas and have much to offer each other. They should be allowed the time and provided a structure for sharing their expertise. An NEA report on formative assistance maintains that teaching colleagues are often the only ones with the necessary experience and insight to help one another (Cameron 1986). Bruce Joyce echoes these sentiments in his article in *Educational Leadership* (February 1987), when he suggests that peers practicing a new skill on a daily basis can often be better coaches than supervisors. And because they are on the scene, they are available to help on short notice when a specific problem or concern arises.

If teaching is to be a true profession, then teachers must have greater autonomy for decision making. Whatever model of supervision is in place, teachers must have a role in both designing it and implementing it (Thompson 1979). Wildman and Niles (1987) attribute the lack of opportunity to exercise professional judgment as a major factor in teacher burnout. Peer supervision offers a way of empowering teachers to take control of their professional growth. It acknowledges the dignity and worth of teachers and provides a process through which their ideas and concerns are valued and become the focus for dialogue, which in turn leads to personal growth and instructional improvement.

Teachers do not have to rely on central office supervisors or university experts to find answers to instructional problems. As Armstrong and Ladd (1975) point out, we can't expect teachers to develop self-sufficiency and autonomy in their students when they themselves are not given the autonomy to direct their own professional development.

Goldsberry (1984) links change in instructional practice to a disposition for experimentation. Because of its non-evaluative, nonjudgmental nature, peer supervision encourages risk taking. A teacher is not as likely to experiment or take risks with an evaluator present. It is safer to go "by the book." By contrast, in a peer supervision observation cycle, one colleague gathers data for the other. There is no evaluation; instead the peer supervisor provides an extra pair of eyes and ears to record what is going on in the classroom, which is then followed up by discussion and sharing.

Peer supervision allows a teacher to observe a colleague introducing a unit that he will have to teach for the first time next term. It allows a teacher to see how students function in the class below and above the one he or she is teaching. It provides a process for teachers to share materials and plans. The process can lead to team teaching, joint projects, and extensive professional dialogue. As Alfonso and Goldsberry state, "Teachers consistently report that their primary source of help is other teachers" (in Sergiovanni 1982). Once the school acknowledges and supports this fact, there is no limit to the potential of peer supervision for professional growth.

## How to Start a Peer Supervision Program

One cannot mandate a peer supervision program. One cannot tell teachers (or anyone else for that matter) that they will have to observe each other, help each other, and put in extra time on supervision. Many will respond with, "That's somebody else's job." A decision to engage in peer supervision has to come from the peer group itself. The key is ownership; if teachers do not feel they own the project, then they will think somebody in the central office has a pet idea that is being forced on them.

One way to begin is to instigate discussions about supervision and evaluation among the faculty. It's a topic that usually generates many opinions and strong feelings. One could conduct a survey to find out what teachers think about supervision in general and about how it is carried out in their school or district. Then the planning group could review the survey returns, do some reading in the literature, and come to some decision about how to proceed. Something like this occurred in my own school.

For several years, members of the English Department in Brattleboro Union High School in Brattleboro, Vermont, would bring up various issues relating to supervision and evaluation, which they thought the full department should discuss. For one reason or another this discussion always seemed to get postponed. Finally, at the end of the 1985-86 school year, when we met to set some goals for the next school year, we made a commitment to look into these issues.

Our initial discussions revolved around the distinctions between evaluation and supervision and how they could be separated. We soon realized the inherent conflict in having one person be both evaluator and supervisor. And we became aware of how time constraints prevented one supervisor/evaluator from doing an effective job with either function. One of our group, who was intensively involved in local NEA activities, brought in information about "summative" and "formative" supervisory relationships. The terms were new to us, but the distinctions made between the two terms made good sense and reinforced what we had been discussing about the role conflicts between supervision and evaluation. All this led someone to suggest that we might begin by observing each other. The group agreed that this sounded like a good idea, and we were on our way.

The simple scenario of how we got started in my own high school belies the complexity of a number of issues that will emerge when attempting to launch a peer supervision program. The first issue is fear or anxiety. Put simply, many teachers do not like to be observed. While they must accept the official observations mandated in the teachers' contract, they are not eager to prolong the anxiety associated with such observations. Also, teachers may be anxious about observing each other. This anxiety is manifested in such questions as: What are we supposed to do? What kinds of information should we be looking for, and what should we do with it? Are we evaluating one another or simply making friendly visits? What if we discover a serious problem in the classroom of a colleague? Who am I to tell another teacher what to do to improve?

Breaking down the walls of isolation is no simple matter. Operating at the level of professionalism that peer supervision requires makes many teachers uneasy. A common response is: "We're not qualified to observe each other. We've had no training in supervision." What they don't realize is that many of those with official responsibility for supervision have had minimal training in observation and conference techniques. We have to break down the "I'm just a teacher" mind-set.

We have to convince teachers that they have expertise, which should be shared with others. In my own experience with peer supervision, this is becoming easier as teachers begin to function in a more professional role. And with increased professionalism comes increased responsibility and empowerment.

As the idea of peer supervision takes shape within a department or school, it must develop in its own way. There is no blueprint that will apply to any school or any group of teachers. The development process is organic, taking its form from the personalities involved and the interests they wish to pursue. For one school, peer supervision may mean teachers observing each other and then discussing what they observed. For other schools, it might mean group planning, team teaching, curriculum development, materials exchanges, or group problem solving. If the peer supervision experience reflects the needs and interests of teachers, then they feel they own it; it is not something imposed on them.

For the peer supervision process to work, there must be a great deal of group trust. Teachers have to feel comfortable with one another. What is observed in each other's classrooms and the ensuing discussions must remain confidential and never be used in a negative evaluative way. Building this group trust can take some time.

Once a group of teachers is committed to trying out the peer supervision concept, then the first round of classroom observations can be planned. Begin by setting a target date by which each member of the group agrees to observe a peer once and to be observed by a peer once. In secondary schools this might be scheduled during a teacher's free period; in elementary schools it might be necessary to hire a roving substitute to cover several teachers' classes when they are observing a peer. This simple structure will allow teachers to give the process a fair trial.

Sometime after the target date, the group convenes to share individual experiences and ideas. If the group is large, it may want to organize itself into smaller groups. It is easier to build trust in a smaller

group. A smaller group also helps to solve some logistical problems with scheduling. For example, a small group could arrange on the spot for Teacher A to cover Teacher B's class while Teacher B observes Teacher C, thus keeping the whole process quite simple.

Teachers probably will want to develop some system of record-keeping at this point, some sort of documentation of the observations. This can be a volatile issue, again pointing up the need for trust. Some teachers will insist that nothing be in writing. Such a request must be honored. Others will see the need to write down their impressions in order to refresh their memory during a feedback session with their peer. Initially, decisions about documentation should probably be left to each peer supervision team, with the understanding that under no circumstances will confidentiality be violated and that any written records will become the property of the observed peer. However, the issue of documentation cannot be dismissed, especially when trying to build a case for the peer supervision program. Eventually the program will need some type of documentation to convince a school board and administrators that the program is working and worth funding.

At my high school, the documentation evolved out of the way we decided to structure our peer supervision observations. One teacher in our group who had taken a graduate class in supervision brought in some materials describing Goldhammer's (1969) clinical supervision model. It consisted of three steps: a pre-conference, an observation, and a post-conference. (See fastback 111 *Teacher Improvement Through Clinical Supervision*, by Charles A. Reavis.) We agreed that this sequence was a structure we could work with, but what was to transpire in each of these three steps would remain open. Then we decided it would be useful to document in writing what occurred in each of the three steps.

While this structure worked for us, one must be careful at the outset not to impose too rigid a structure. Teachers should be allowed to design a structure that addresses their needs. This is how ownership of the program occurs. On the other hand, having no structure

leaves people confused and floundering. The balance between structure and flexibility must be redefined for each peer group. If teachers are allowed to experiment within a loose framework, they will come to some agreement on a structure that works for them.

Once into the peer supervision process, teachers will discover other issues they must deal with. Taking on new roles can be intimidating. Most likely the peer group teams will need help in defining these roles. Here is where an outside expert can be useful for a few sessions devoted to observation skills, recording methods, conference techniques, and group problem-solving skills. Also, teachers should become familiar with the literature on supervision (See Bibliography), particularly on peer supervision and coaching (See fastback 277 *Improving Teaching Through Coaching*, by Gloria A. Neubert). As individual teachers gain expertise in relevant areas through reading, workshops, or courses, they then can run inservice sessions for others new to the peer supervision group.

Another issue concerns leadership of the peer supervision program. If the principal or department head leads the program (even if they are supportive of the idea), the peer concept is vitiated. Nevertheless, there are a variety of administrative tasks that have to be done. Someone has to call the meetings, prepare an agenda, make contacts for inservice sessions, arrange schedules, as well as other chores. Our solution was to elect a member of the peer group to direct our efforts and be our spokesperson for one year. The following year another person in the group will be elected.

## Some Practical Issues Surrounding Peer Supervision

Several practical issues emerge as a group of teachers undertake to implement a peer supervision program. The first is whether participation should be voluntary or compulsory. In the initial enthusiasm of getting the program started, there may be some pressure to have everyone involved. But peer supervision demands time, and not everyone will be willing to give the time required. It also demands some risk-taking, and not everyone is willing or ready to take risks. Therefore, participation should be voluntary. Remember, peer supervision can work with as few as two people.

Once success with the program has been demonstrated, others will want to participate. In my own high school, the program began in the English department, although not all the English teachers were involved. It has since spread to other departments in the high school, and there currently is districtwide interest in peer supervision.

A second issue that arises is defining and redefining a common approach to the peer supervision process. Again, some flexibility is needed for the process to evolve. As English teachers in my high school reported on their experiences, they expressed divergent views on how the process should work. Some were strictly following the three-step clinical supervision model. Others asked if it was permissible sometimes to skip the pre-observation conference. Some wanted to be observed by colleagues outside the department. Still others wanted their peer partner to say only positive things about what they observed.

Although the group could agree on the general concept of peer supervision, questions remained about implementing the process. Therefore, we decided to do a simulation to model the process. We asked the department chair if he would be willing to be videotaped teaching a class. He agreed. Another teacher volunteered to conduct a live pre-observation conference with the department head. Then we all watched the videotaped class session, taking notes as we observed. This was followed by a live post-conference between the department head and the teacher. At this point, the rest of the group added our comments and impressions based on our own observation of the videotape. This simple modeling exercise gave all of us a better sense of how the process could work. As a result, several teachers who were reluctant to participate because they were not sure what to do agreed to join the program.

As we became more comfortable with the peer supervision process, we began to deal with the next major problem, documentation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, decisions about the specific documentation procedures to be used were to be made on a case-by-case basis. However, since the program was new, we agreed that some form of program documentation was needed.

All of these issues – voluntarism, process, documentation – needed to be resolved in a way that balanced structure with flexibility. We addressed these issues during the first year of our program. By the beginning of the second year we had drafted the following statement of philosophy and goals:

### **Peer Assistance Program Brattleboro Union Junior/Senior High School**

#### **Philosophy:**

We value a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect among students and adults because it enhances human dignity.

Opportunities should be provided for sharing of individual talents and strengths in order to enrich the total school community. In addition, the environment should allow for communication of ideas, recog-

nition of needs and successes of individuals, and participation in decision making.

### **Goals:**

To develop and document a voluntary program of peer support among English department staff, which demonstrates practices in keeping with our philosophy statement.

To allow the English department staff to observe their colleagues at different grade levels, thus becoming familiar with and appreciative of the work done by the department as a whole.

To help each other to develop professionally and to improve our instructional techniques.

To provide positive feedback for each other.

To present and publish our findings for the perusal and review of our district colleagues, community members, and national professional associations.

To establish a broad-based system for professional growth, which will augment the present contractual evaluation methods.

### **Approaches:**

Participation in the program will be voluntary.

Participants may choose any methods they wish.

Each participant will write a two-page report describing his/her involvement for 1987-88, and submit it for review and/or publication by June 1, 1988.

Once the group agrees on a statement of philosophy, goals, and approaches, then it must deal with specific methods for carrying out the peer supervision process. Since many teachers suffer performance anxiety when being observed, the role of the peer observer takes on particular significance. This role is defined and negotiated during the pre-conference.

First, no one observes another without an invitation. There are no surprise visits. (One way to involve reluctant peers is to invite them into your classroom to observe.) When teachers control when and by whom they are observed, much of the anxiety can be alleviated.

Teachers exercise further control during the pre-conference by setting the parameters of what is to be observed. For example, a teacher may request specific feedback on questioning skills, classroom management techniques, keeping students on task, or use of nonverbal communication. Sometimes, the observer will be asked to watch the behavior of a particular student who is presenting problems. Out of this discussion will come one or two behaviors that will become the focus for the observation.

Also during the pre-conference, the teacher and peer observer negotiate how the observation will be documented. Should the peer observer note individual student behaviors on a seating chart? Should she write down all of the teacher's questions? Should she keep a narrative account of what happens in class? Again, the observed teacher controls the method of documentation, which also helps to lessen anxiety.

Of course, some teachers want the observer to make subjective judgments about the class climate or the effectiveness of the teaching techniques used. However, it is better to make objective observations than to offer value judgments. "Billy made a mess of your class" is a value judgment. "Billy called out an answer three times" is an objective observation. By sticking to objective observations and sharing them in a nonjudgmental way, the observed teacher can draw his own conclusions about the class. The goal of peer supervision is assistance and professional growth, not evaluation.

As teachers gain more experience with the peer supervision process, they come to realize that time is a critical factor. We found that a full observation cycle takes about 100 minutes, which includes a pre-conference, the actual observation, a post-conference, some thinking time, and some writing time. Most school schedules cannot accommodate such time allotments. The principal and department heads may agree to cover classes from time to time. However, this is a stop-gap measure and not a permanent solution. Other time must be found in the school day if teachers are to become effective peer supervisors.

Our solution at Brattleboro was to secure funds from the staff development budget and from some grants, which allowed us to hire a noninstructional department aide to cover all those extra duties that take so much teacher time: monitoring hallways and restrooms, patrolling the cafeteria, and supervising study halls, to name a few. We were able to spend teachers' valuable time on professional endeavors; we traded nonprofessional time for professional time.

One time factor relates to how many peer observation cycles one teacher should go through. This is not easy to answer. The number is pretty much an individual decision based on interest, enthusiasm, and available time. Still another consideration is whether teachers should work with several peer partners or with just one or two. Working with several partners allows one to receive input from peers with a diversity of experience; working with only one or two partners develops strong bonds of trust, which are important for a sustained peer relationship.

As teachers grapple with these and other issues, they will arrive at solutions that work for them. The grassroots nature of peer supervision gives teachers a sense of ownership and control over their own professional development. At the same time, they experience the self-esteem that comes from having their knowledge and craft validated by a peer.

## **Funding and Institutionalizing the Peer Supervision Program**

**I**nitial funding for a peer supervision program is difficult to obtain, especially when you have little to offer except a kernel of an idea and lots of enthusiasm. We did obtain some local district project funds, which enabled us to begin our second year with a department aide. Foundations, although supportive of our efforts, were not ready to give us money, so we began to look to local business and industry. Our reasoning was that, since we were trying to improve the local education system, local businesses ought to be supportive. We were right. Major financial support for our program came from the Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation, which operates a local power plant. But more important, it runs a training facility in Brattleboro for its plant operators and was interested in using our peer supervision model with its own trainers. The power company's initial support included the use of its seminar rooms for our inservice programs, and it continued to support us in the third year of our program. Funding for educational projects can be found in the most unexpected places.

Our good fortune in Brattleboro may not be easy to replicate, so other avenues of creative funding will be necessary until the peer supervision program is well established. The challenge facing the developers of the program is to make it so indispensable to the overall school improvement effort that a regular appropriation will be made in the district's staff development budget to fund it. This takes time, many uncompensated hours, and a lot of faith.

The developers need to sell the program to the power structure. Invite school board members to observe teachers in an observation cycle, or videotape the cycle and show it at a board meeting. Run inservice sessions at department level or full faculty meetings. Have sharing sessions with peer supervision teams and invite principals and other administrators to sit in on these sessions and ask questions. Use every means available to give visibility to the program.

At Brattleboro, most administrators quickly recognized the value of what the English department was doing and lent their support. The principal asked us to present our work to the full faculty; and soon after, other departments began to develop their own peer supervision programs. Rather than adopting the English department's model, each department came up with its own model reflecting the interests and concerns of a particular group of peers. This, of course, is consistent with the organic nature of the peer supervision process. Soon several cross-discipline contacts were made, which, if they continue, will result in teachers from various academic disciplines working together and learning from each other in a true educational community.

We documented our efforts over the first two years in a report, which included anecdotal records by individual teachers as well as statistical information from several surveys. In this way, we were able to present something substantial to administrators and the school board and to our funding sources. In addition to continuing our cycles of peer contacts, there have been several spin-offs resulting from the program. A few examples are:

*Department Experts List.* This list identifies teachers with particular areas of expertise. For instance, if a teacher wanted someone to deliver background lectures on nineteenth century American literature, the teacher would consult this list to see if someone was an expert in this area. If so, then that teacher could be called on as a resource.

*Department Newsletter.* Once a week, the department circulates a one-page newsletter containing teacher requests for units of study or materials and announcements of special events coming up in individual classrooms.

*Mini-Seminars.* Once a month, a department meeting could be devoted to brief seminars. For instance, on a given afternoon, there might be three topics from which to choose: Teaching *The Great Gatsby*, journal writing, and speech warm-up activities. Teachers decide which mini-seminar they wish to attend and bring materials to share. The session would take about an hour.

*Group Planning Time and Materials Exchange.* As an alternative to peer observation cycles, time is provided for teachers to meet to exchange materials, discuss common problems, or engage in cooperative planning.

Maintaining the organic structure of the peer supervision process, while at the same time institutionalizing the program to ensure its funding, is a difficult balancing act. Accountability issues are bound to arise. In Vermont, as in many states, teachers must be periodically recertified. They can earn recertification credits by taking college courses, attending workshops, or participating in other types of professional development activities. We established a precedent for a different type of accountability by requesting and winning credit for our peer supervision work. By gaining acceptance for these credits, we validated peer supervision institutionally, even though the work we engaged in was quite different from more conventional forms of recertification accountability, such as earning additional college credits. Our accountability was in the documentation we provided on the number of peer contacts we made, the personal anecdotes the teachers wrote, the inservice sessions we participated in, and the schoolwide presentations we made.

Peer supervision demands a rethinking about the purpose and nature of supervision in school settings. It demands a high level of trust in the professional integrity of teachers. School officials have to understand that as teachers work together and are engaged more fully in the teaching process, they will feel better about themselves professionally, the quality of instruction will improve, and the school climate will be enhanced. Such is the power of peer supervision.

## Case Studies of Peer Supervision in Action

**P**erhaps the best way to understand the peer supervision process and to realize its potential is to examine some case studies of the process in action. The following case studies are real, but I have changed the names and many of the particulars to preserve the confidentiality of the individuals involved.

### Case Study One: An Unruly Class

Mr. Jones teaches the lowest academic level of ninth-graders. He did this by choice and spent a lot of time developing lessons for these students. He invited Ms. Smith to observe his class. She readily accepted because Mr. Jones had a reputation in the school for being successful with this kind of student, and she wanted to learn more about his techniques.

During the observation, Ms. Smith noticed that Mr. Jones orchestrated every minute of the class period. There was no slack time. He carefully structured his lesson plan so that the students were prepared to answer each question he asked. And they were eager to answer. But in their eagerness, they would interrupt each other, shout out answers, and become unruly. Yet Mr. Jones remained perfectly calm at all times.

During the post-conference, the issue of unruliness came up and the two of them explored its origins. Previously, these students had

been in heterogeneously grouped classes, where the more academically able students answered almost all the questions and dominated the discussions. In Mr. Jones' class, where they did not have this competition, they felt more comfortable answering questions and participating in discussions. However, they lacked the social skills to do this in a civil manner.

At the time Ms. Smith was taking a graduate course in teaching strategies with a focus on cooperative learning techniques. She suggested that the cooperative learning approach might be one way of teaching these students better self-control. She provided some readings for Mr. Jones. He was aware of some of these techniques and had already invited a local expert to work with this class on group-building skills.

*Commentary.* Mr. Jones' district might have had an inservice day devoted to cooperative learning. A probable scenario is that an expensive consultant would be invited to give a presentation, usually in the form of a lecture, but with no preparation by the teachers and little follow-up. The presentation information might be relevant to a few teachers. Others would attend but forget about it in a few days. In the case study above, relevant information about teaching strategies was applied to a specific situation, and at no expense to the school system. At any given time, many teachers are taking courses or attending workshops, where they learn current information about teaching theory and techniques. Peer supervision gives them the opportunity to share their knowledge.

### **Case Study Two: An Action Research Project**

Ms. Green started each class with a brief vocabulary lesson. After five lessons, she gave her class a quiz. The results were disappointing. Since she was taking a graduate course dealing with action research, she decided to design an action research project with the goal of improving student performance on the vocabulary quizzes. However, she did not want to spend much more time on the brief lessons.

Ms. Green invited Mr. Garfield to observe her vocabulary lessons for 10 days. She asked him to time each lesson and to count the number of students who actually participated by answering her questions. For the first five days she taught her vocabulary lessons in the usual way and gave her quiz. The next five days she changed her teaching strategy. She spent a little more time on the lesson and she allowed more wait time before asking students to answer her questions. The second quiz showed a marked improvement in student performance.

With the data collected by Mr. Garfield, which she could not have collected herself while teaching, Ms. Green was able to show that by spending a few additional minutes a day on the vocabulary lesson and by using more wait time before asking students to answer her questions, she was getting more students to participate and, as a result, their quiz scores improved. Later, at the peer supervision group's sharing session, Ms. Green and Mr. Garfield reported on how they collaborated on this action research project. As a result, several other teachers indicated they wanted to try the techniques and asked to observe Ms. Green's class.

*Commentary.* Peer supervision encourages risk-taking and experimentation, both necessary ingredients for professional growth. The availability of a peer allowed Ms. Green to experiment as she carried out her action research project. No evaluator was involved here. No one was making judgments about how she taught her vocabulary lessons. The peer observer's role was simply to collect data. Once it was collected, Ms. Green could review it, make her own judgments, and draw her own conclusions.

### **Case Study Three: Increasing Student Participation**

Mr. Brown was concerned with the level of student participation during class discussions. He invited Mr. Hines to observe his class to see if his concern was justified. In their pre-conference, they decided that Mr. Hines would use a class seating chart and put a checkmark by the name of a student each time that student contributed to the class discussion.

After the observation, Mr. Brown and Mr. Hines met and looked at the seating chart. It showed two patterns of student participation. First, almost every student had spoken at least once during discussion. This was encouraging to Mr. Brown and alleviated his concern that not everyone was participating. The second pattern showed that students who had several checkmarks on the seating chart were clustered around the teacher's desk at the front of the room, where Mr. Brown usually conducted his discussions. After reflecting about this pattern, they agreed that Mr. Brown might get more student involvement if he moved around the room, since teacher proximity seemed to be a factor influencing student response.

There was also an unexpected and serendipitous outcome from this peer supervision contact. That day's lesson happened to be about a novel that Mr. Hines also taught. Although he had taught this novel for several years, he learned a whole new approach and interpretation to the novel by being in Mr. Brown's class that day.

*Commentary.* Again, the peer supervision contact in this case provided data to document a specific concern. The seating chart provided a simple means for objectively recording student interaction patterns. With the data in hand, Mr. Brown could see that his concern was not a serious problem, but a concrete suggestion for improvement resulted. The unexpected benefit for Mr. Hines was a new perspective on content he was teaching. This happens frequently as teachers observe each other. They learn a great deal about both content and technique as they observe each other teach.

#### **Case Study Four: Learning from a Veteran Teacher**

Ms. Decker was a highly respected, veteran teacher with considerable scholarship in twentieth century American literature. Mr. Clark, a third-year teacher with a new master's degree in American literature, asked if he could observe her while she was giving background lectures on U.S. cultural history in the 1920s to her advanced senior literature class. She consented but asked Mr. Clark if he would be

willing to note and comment on any aspects of her teaching style. He agreed but, somewhat in awe of her senior status and years of experience, expressed doubts that he would have much to offer. During the observation, Mr. Clark took notes on the lectures for his own enlightenment, but he did notice a few aspects of her teaching style that he thought she might find interesting. These were that she tended to teach to the right side of the room and that she called on males more frequently than females. These were not presented as criticisms but as objective observations, for which Ms. Decker expressed honest gratitude.

*Commentary.* In this case, Mr. Clark initiated the observation cycle because he knew he could learn more about his own academic field from a respected peer. We can and should be learning from each other. If colleagues deal with the same content you teach, then by all means ask to observe them. Invite them to observe you. This also works when colleagues teach the same students. You can learn a lot by observing your students in other learning environments. Peer supervision is a two-sided proposition, with both parties learning from each other in different ways.

### **Case Study Five: Selling the Peer Supervision Program**

Ms. Peach and Mr. Hunt have developed a strong peer relationship by observing each other's classes several times. They have built up sufficient trust to allow them to be completely honest with one another. They felt secure enough to invite two school board members to watch a complete observation cycle, from pre-conference to post-conference. The cycle also was videotaped. Between segments of the cycle, the board members questioned Ms. Peach and Mr. Hunt about the program. When the board members left, Ms. Peach and Mr. Hunt were assured that at least two persons in a position to influence policy understood the program thoroughly. And the videotape was available to show administrators how the process works.

*Commentary.* Because peer supervision is a departure from conventional approaches to supervision, it is necessary to sell the pro-

gram. This was an effective method of demonstrating the nature of the program to those ultimately responsible for funding and continuing support. These two teachers took it on themselves to get board members directly involved in the process, so they could experience it firsthand. The board members still wanted facts and figures, but their understanding of the process was the first step in gaining support.

### **Case Study Six: Helping the Novice Teacher**

Mr. Breen, a first-year teacher, invited Mr. Sharp to observe his literature class. Because Mr. Breen was new to teaching, he did not have a specific area he wanted feedback on; rather, he requested a general critique of his teaching. Mr. Sharp, who had been teaching 10 years, consented and observed Mr. Breen teaching for a full period.

Mr. Breen's presentation was well organized and informative. His transitions were smooth, and his explanations were clear. However, classroom discipline was another matter. Typical of first-year teachers, Mr. Breen had problems controlling student behavior. Despite the quality of his lesson plans and his presentation skills, students were learning little because they were not paying attention, were off task, and were generally disruptive.

In the post-conference, Mr. Sharp had little to say about the presentation of the lesson; instead he presented Mr. Breen with a list of students' off-task behaviors. Needless to say, Mr. Breen was upset at the number and variety of off-task or disruptive student behaviors and asked for assistance. Mr. Sharp was able to offer him a list of classroom management strategies based on his 10 years of teaching lively adolescents. Several weeks later, Mr. Breen invited Mr. Sharp back to observe, and he saw a much more controlled class. Later, Mr. Breen observed Mr. Sharp's class and was able to offer him several good suggestions for improving his presentations.

*Commentary.* Admitting your classroom discipline problems to a supervisor whose responsibility is to evaluate you would certainly be threatening. However, as the case above shows, through peer super-

vision Mr. Breen received assistance on specific strategies for controlling student behavior. He had the benefit of Mr. Sharp's 10 years of experience, and there was no evaluative component to the process. A promising young teacher was helped with a specific problem. The result was an improved teacher. In some ways Mr. Sharp served as a mentor for Mr. Breen. But later Mr. Breen was able to give Mr. Sharp a few tips on teaching. The least experienced can help the most experienced on many occasions when trust and respect are present.

### **Case Study Seven: Cross Age-Level Teaching**

Ms. Glass taught seventh grade. Ms. Krupp taught seniors. They had been through about 12 observation cycles with one another over two years. They were completely comfortable working with one another and enjoyed it. They decided that they were ready to push the limits of peer supervision and move beyond just observation. They wanted to teach a common piece of literature and somehow connect their two classes. They chose a novel, *I Am the Cheese*, by Robert Cormier, and then began to plan strategies for bringing their respective classes together.

They found the link in student journals. Each day, the seventh-grade students would write in their journals, responding to what they had read, asking questions, and generally speculating about the novel. The journals were numbered but had no names on them. Later each day, the seniors, reading the same novel, received the seventh-graders' journals and responded in writing to what the younger students had written. They answered questions, gave advice, made suggestions, and asked their own questions. The journal exchanges took place daily.

Ms. Glass and Ms. Krupp observed and taught each other's classes several times, which gave them a better understanding of teaching another age level. Also, they were able to see that it was possible to teach a novel at different levels of sophistication, giving them some insights about curriculum continuity in the English department at Brattleboro, which serves seventh grade through twelfth grade. The joint

venture ended with the two classes coming together to watch a film version of the novel.

*Commentary.* The benefits of this type of peer supervision activity were many for the two teachers involved. The student journal-writing activity brought further benefits. Students were asking each other questions, encouraging each other, and teaching each other. Seniors were rereading passages of the novel in order to answer seventh-graders' questions. Seventh-graders stated that they found it easier asking the seniors questions than asking their teacher. Getting written responses to their ideas and opinions spurred them on to write more. In other words, teaching and learning from one's peers was easier and more enjoyable than learning from a teacher. These students were engaged in a form of peer supervision at their own peer level. Other teachers have begun journal exchanges as a result of this project.

### **Case Study Eight: Cross-Discipline Peer Supervision**

Ms. Hurst, a business teacher, had heard about the peer supervision program in the English department and wanted to try it. She invited Mr. Douglas, an English teacher, to observe her class. In the pre-conference, she requested specific feedback regarding her questioning techniques. Mr. Douglas suggested that he use an observation technique called "selective verbatim," in which the observer writes down the exact wording used by the teacher. In this case, he would write down every question that Ms. Hurst asked.

During the observation, Mr. Douglas wrote down verbatim more than 80 questions Ms. Hurst had used. During the post-conference when they went over the questions, Ms. Hurst noticed that her questions came in cycles, beginning with questions to establish the facts needed to answer the main problem, then moving to the main problem, and finally shifting back to the simple factual questions in preparation for the next problem. This cyclical pattern was satisfactory to her and gave her confidence in her questioning technique. About a week later, Ms. Hurst observed Mr. Douglas' English class with the

assignment to chart student on-task behavior. She also was able to graph the class energy level and relate this to specific classroom events.

*Commentary.* This case illustrates that teachers do not have to be competent in the same field to be peer supervisors. They share generic teaching skills, and that is all that is needed. Here, both teachers were able to give useful feedback to each other.

These eight case studies represent a range of peer supervision activities, but by no means do they cover all the possible variations. They show teachers at all levels of experience assisting each other, teaching each other, and learning from each other. All this took place within a supportive, nonthreatening environment. All peer supervision contacts are not as successful as these. Sometimes observers become judgmental. Sometimes what is to be observed is not well defined. Sometimes there are personality conflicts. Learning to be an objective observer and to use effective conference skills takes time and practice. With each peer supervision experience, teachers learn and grow. That is what it is all about.

## Conclusion

**P**eer supervision is a dynamic process. It cannot be cloned and imposed on one school after another. Essentially, it is a state of mind, a way of looking at teachers and their professional growth. It can open new avenues for collaborative teaching and learning. Its only limits are those imposed by the participants' imaginations.

Peer supervision starts with the assumption that teachers are trained professionals with the ability to solve real problems in specific classrooms. It assumes that teachers have the necessary knowledge and expertise to carry on continuous inservice among themselves. Who knows the problems of students better than practicing teachers? They deal with them every day. While theory is valuable and necessary, so is practice. In fact, most theory grows out of good practice. Teachers are in a position to test theory and experiment with new ideas every day.

Peer supervision gives teachers a feeling of self-worth and esteem. Their knowledge and craft are validated when they are allowed to solve their own problems together. No one has all the answers to problems or the time to deal with them, which is why involving as many people as possible in the supervision process makes so much sense.

Peer supervision frees teachers from the constricting fear of being judged or evaluated. Within the process, they are free to experiment, to take risks, to ask for help, and thus to grow. Teachers feel better about themselves and their jobs when they are allowed to control their own professional growth as other professions do.

Peer supervision breaks down the isolation of teachers. They begin to care about one another as people as well as professionals. A spirit of collegiality develops when a department or full faculty unite to work on improving instruction for students. When this spirit pervades a school, attitudes change and the climate improves. When students see teachers working in each others' classrooms on a regular basis, they know they are in a cooperative learning community.

Peer supervision should not be perceived as a threat to those in official supervisory roles. The process does not replace formal supervision and evaluation. Rather, it enhances it, supplements it, and distributes the responsibility so that more minds can be applied to solving problems. Everyone needs to belong to a peer group, where one can work with others to solve problems or exchange ideas without the threat of being judged or evaluated. The essence of peer supervision is helping, sharing, and caring.

Finally, peer supervision is empowering, not in the sense of political power for controlling people, but in the sense of having the power to make decisions about the course of one's career and professional growth. Empowering teachers means respecting their expertise and ideas and giving them the opportunity to try out and share those ideas.

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