

Learning By Observing Our Peers

Dave Berry
University of Victoria

This essay describes the administration of peer observation programs with a focus on supporting scholarly teaching. The factors found to be influential in designing these programs are emphasized in an attempt to provide a framework on which others may build their own variations of a self-study group.

Introduction

Many of us learn by watching others. We also learn by doing. I think these two sentences sum up the value of peer observations. This is a technique that I am not always consciously thrusting onto my students, but it nevertheless occurs quite frequently. I teach in a science lab and ask my students to critically review anonymous work from other students in the same second-year class. They find this very enlightening as they are effectively viewing the diversity within the class through the instructor's lens. In a different senior two-semester class, I ask the new students to attend the final oral presentations of the senior students. They watch how others present familiar material (the new students have also done the same experiment), and know that they will present another experiment the following semester. This exercise gives the new students a chance to reinforce or reject presentation techniques.

Moving closer to the instructional realm, the participants in Instructional Skills Workshops (ISW

Network, 2007) spend more than half of their time analyzing the mini-lessons of their co-participants in a non-expert atmosphere. It proves to be a very powerful way for many adults to learn and to develop their own techniques.

In this paper, I wish to relate our experiences with two programs that we currently offer for instructional development. Neither program is a new concept created at this institution, but in the interests of promoting peer observation, they may be helpful to others who wish to construct their own ideas. These two ideas, along with many others, have been brought to our attention by the electronic newsletter, *Tomorrow's Professor* (Reis, 2007).

Teaching Squares

Anne Wessely from St. Louis Community College is credited with the creation of Teaching Squares

(Rhem, 2004). Briefly, four instructors agree to work together over the course of a term. Each instructor visits one or two classes given by the other instructors in their scheduled courses. Only one observer is present at a time, and each visit is followed-up within a few days, by a one-on-one discussion - often over coffee. The intention is that all discussions will be from the point of view of the observer's advantage. In other words, the observer identifies which teaching techniques work and which do not by watching an undergraduate audience react to the class, instructor, etc. The original concept is emphatic about avoiding the critical approach of a peer evaluation.

We have offered this program since January 2005 to instructors on campus. We have had some forty instructors from a wide variety of disciplines participate. Most participants have been pre-tenure faculty with several years of experience, or experienced instructors in non tenure-track positions. In addition, there have been three graduate students and five tenured faculty members. About 60% of these volunteers are female, but to draw a meaningful conclusion to this statement, a full analysis of disciplines and gender balance is needed. This will be done once the total numbers have increased. Classes have been in every form imaginable - large undergraduate classes, small graduate seminars or workshops, laboratories, problem-based learning groups, etc.

My role has been that of administrator. Before the term begins, I am responsible for advertising and holding information sessions. I now find that many who sign up do so by recommendation, but I still do explain, in detail, the depth of commitment of time and effort. In the current climate, time is viewed as a very precious commodity. A distinct advantage of this particular program is that there is a relatively low demand on a participant's scheduled time. Typically, each observation takes 60-90 minutes, with a 30-minute discussion scheduled a few days later. For a group of three undergoing two cycles of observations, that amounts to 4-6 hours of observation and 4 hours of discussion for each participant.

Once I have a commitment, I ask for a copy of the volunteer's average weekly schedule. I find that arranging the groups is the most challenging task to administer. Typically, the compatibility of schedules

often proves to be the limiting factor in creating the groups. Other criteria that I employ include diversity of discipline and social connectivity. There is generally a feeling of reluctance to work in a group of colleagues within the same discipline. Some attribute this to an air of departmental distrust; others find that the expected familiarity with the course content a distraction. On the occasions when friends have joined the program, there has been a preference to work in separate groups. For many of the above reasons, we tend to run triangles rather than squares. The consequence is that the number of observations is likely to be less, but conversely, it makes the chance of a second cycle within the same term more appealing. This amounts to a trade of less variety with perhaps more depth in the observations.

The next step is for the group/triangle to meet with the administrator. Taking time for personal introductions, and describing the course is important. Naturally, syllabi are exchanged, but it is useful to understand why each participant has chosen to join the program, while they are teaching this particular course. It is at this time that we discuss the planned irregular perturbations of the weekly schedules and I explain the framework (Figure 1).

The bulk of the meeting is devoted to creating a robust agreement of confidentiality. It is important to recognize that all groups develop their own persona and will emphasize different themes. On several occasions, a need for this discussion has not been perceived, so I usually present a few items that could be considered (included below). Although I am unaware whether we have had a major breakdown of confidentiality, it is very clear that the ground rules for the post-observation discussions must be clarified. In contrast to the original concept of teaching squares, some participants do want a degree of evaluation included. As the administrator, I try to explain the advantages of avoiding criticism, but some groups determine that they prefer to treat this as a mock-tenure evaluation, or would like to have written comments from peer observers to include in their teaching dossiers. The group is intended to be self-directing, so I remain the impartial administrator but ensure that everyone receives a written version of the final agreement.

FIGURE 1

The framework of one cycle of observations for a group of three participants

A =

B =

C =

The first group meeting will be _____

Round 1 will be in the week of _____

Round 2 will be in the week of _____

Round 3 will be in the week of _____

Round 4 will be in the week of _____

Round 1	Round 2	Round 3	Round 4
A observes B	C observes A	B observes A	A observes C
B observes C		C observes B	
C does not observe	A & B do not observe	A does not observe	B & C do not observe
A is not observed	B & C are not observed	C is not observed	A & B are not observed

Confidentiality items related to the group atmosphere:

- to support one another in a collegial fashion with respectful, constructive comments based on the observer's experience in the class;
- to have a preliminary communication prior to an observation, to set the context of the forthcoming class;
- to be free to ask for specific and focused feedback;
- to not allow future objectivity to be compromised by this teaching squares experience; and
- to be able to modify this agreement by mutual consent anytime.

Confidentiality items related to the process:

- to confine specific details of an observation to the ensuing one-on-one discussion;
- to provide clear and constructive feedback in a timely fashion – normally within a week. This may be either oral or written if requested, but it will remain an informal document;
- to be able to use the ideas generated in discussions beyond the boundaries of this group, but with no names or identifying labels; and
- to translate teaching ideas into how it might affect the observer's teaching.

After this meeting, I present the group with a schedule describing the week in which each observation

should take place. The refining of the dates is left to the individuals. I encourage them to have a brief pre-observation communication by phone or email - unlike the post-observation meeting which is strongly recommended to be face-to-face.

Apart from checking with the group collectively by email, I leave them alone to run through their one or two cycles of observations. I arrange a meeting at the end of term in a social environment, such as over a hosted lunch. It is heart-warming to hear the level of constructive discussion around teaching issues. Many instances of positive reinforcement are cited and the overall results have been sufficiently inspiring as to encourage participation in a new group in a subsequent term. Some groups have retained cohesion beyond that term and the conversations have often moved towards building a partnership for a scholarly activity in teaching. A final social meeting is arranged so that parallel groups can meet and exchange ideas, as well as have a senior university administrator present a certificate of participation. This informal ceremony has proved to be very useful advertising for future groups.

Lecture Club

A variation of this type of observational learning is described by lecture clubs (Sommer & Sommer, 2006). In the summer of 2007, we ran a pilot version of this program (Secanell, 2007). On six occasions, a group of five graduate students and I visited an undergraduate class at the same time. Each visit was arranged by the administrator in advance with an exemplary instructor. Prior to the first visit, we met to discuss our confidentiality agreement and also to have a practice observation. We viewed a ten-minute video clip of an instructor teaching, recording our notes individually. We followed this with a discussion of what we had seen and how the techniques might apply to our own disciplines. We then reviewed the same video clip to check on the accuracy of details. Although this is a poor mimic of a true observation, it did give us a chance to hear what points each participant noted, and how they were expressed in the discussion.

A few days after each classroom visit (a moderate interval of 3-5 days was preferred) we met for a one-hour discussion. The instructor was not present at this debrief, and the facilitator's (administrator's) role was to provoke the discussion with "what if?" and "how would *you* do that?" questions. Again, the atmosphere is intended to be non-judgmental and peer- rather than expert-based. The cycle continued throughout the term, using different instructors and different disciplines.

I anticipated that the lecture club would appeal more to graduate students, who most typically do not teach in a setting that is as intense as a formal lecture, and might therefore feel less likely to join teaching squares, which would require them to be observed. Participation in the lecture club could be viewed as less threatening for new instructors, and as observers, they can adopt a passive role. Surprisingly, half of the participants in the lecture club in Spring 2008 were faculty (one tenure, one pre-tenure, and one sessional). More details will be presented in a forthcoming presentation (Berry & Korpan, 2008).

Summary

This article is intended to describe the mechanical proceedings of facilitating groups for peer observation. It will be evident from the above descriptions that the strength of the concept is that each group develops its own agenda and outcomes. Better learning takes place when the details can be developed by each group using a scaffold provided for them.

References

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