



Mentoring in the 21st Century

Issue VI

by Paula Rutherford

This issue focuses on peer observation and how it is becoming an integral part of school culture. A great tool for peer observation is available to duplicate at the end of this newsletter.

Peer Observation Possibilities

At last, the practice of peer observations is becoming part of the fabric of school cultures. It is about time!

It was in the 1980s that peer observations first become a topic of conversation among the staff developers with whom I worked. We quickly embraced the idea because we believed that Judith Warren Little was right on the mark with her research findings. She found that student achievement could be directly linked to collegial collaboration when it included frequent concrete talk about teaching, use of a common vocabulary and concept system, asking for and providing one another assistance, and frequent observation of one another in our practice. Embracing the idea was one thing; implementation was another story. Despite the best counsel of Sue Wells Welsh and Beverly Showers and words of wisdom from Art Costa and Bob Garmston, teachers with whom we worked in the 80s and 90s tended to complete the rounds of peer observations required as a part of course work. They then retreated back into the privacy of their classrooms. This occurred even though almost all the teachers who completed those required peer observations wrote glowingly about how much they learned from the experience. The reason for not continuing was almost always the same. Time! That is, there was no time to do the observation, participate in planning or reflective conferences, prepare the lesson plans to leave for the substitute, or to deal with the fall-out from having a substitute in the classroom. Perhaps we managed to make the process too complex.

Over twenty years later peer observation is coming into its own. One of the primary reasons is the increase in the number of induction and mentoring programs that require, or at least recommend, peer observations as a format for mentoring interactions. Another reason for the wide spread use of this professional development approach is that many colleges and universities include classroom visitations in their teacher preparation programs and require pre-service teachers to both observe and be observed with more focus and frequency. A third reason is that we are re-defining peer observation to better match the realities of the work life of teachers. Finally, the Gen Xers and Millennials, who have grown up receiving information and instant feedback through technology, want and expect instant feedback at work. Two or three observations a year culminating in a formal appraisal in the spring is not their idea of instant feedback. In fact, most young teachers are more than eager to not only be observed but to be given the opportunity to observe other teachers in their practice.

There are many options for engaging in peer observation in addition to the traditional and important format of mentor observing the protégée and providing growth producing feedback. To get the observation process started, it is highly recommended that the mentor first invite the novice teacher to observe in the mentor's classroom. Such observations provide an opportunity for the mentor to model a collaborative open-door policy. They also give the novice teacher a chance to observe teaching and learning with a critical eye and ask pointed questions about what went into the instructional decision-making process. This also provides the novice teacher an opportunity to explicitly shop for strategies and approaches to use in his/her own classroom. If the novice teacher can schedule such observations without having to make substitute plans, so much the better! Later, when the mentor is scheduled to observe in the novice teacher's classroom any anxiety is minimized because the collaborative relationship is already established.

If such "peer poaching" or observing to gather ideas to use in one's own classroom is the norm in a school, new teachers readily pick up on the process. Dianna Lindsay, former principal of New Trier High School, Winnetka, Illinois; Worthington-Kilbourne High School, Worthington, Ohio; and Ridgefield High School, Ridgefield, Connecticut; and now Executive Director of Secondary Instruction and Staff Development in Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools, Virginia; implemented a Peer Poaching Pass program designed to promote classroom observations by all teachers. She provided each staff member with three peer poaching passes (Peer Poaching Pass format at the end of this newsletter.) Upon leaving a classroom they had visited for the purpose of "poaching" teaching and learning strategies, teachers left their passes on the observed teacher's desk. The teacher who was observed signed the pass and put it in a fish bowl in the front office. Once a month Dianna drew a pass out of the fish bowl to identify winners who were applauded for their collaborative practice and public teaching with time to talk and plan or materials they could use in their instructional programs.

If it seems impossible to provide release time for teachers to get into one another's classrooms, the use of technology can fill the void. Having mentors and protégées, or all staff members, watch videotaped episodes of teaching and learning together can provide a powerful alternative to actual classroom visitations. If staff members are not quite ready to videotape themselves for self or peer analysis, there are many commercially prepared videotapes that provide exemplars of teaching and learning suitable for viewing and analysis by educators. One of the richest sources of such videotapes is the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's (ASCD) Lesson Collection which can be accessed on-line at www.ascd.org. These tapes run from ten to twenty minutes in length and are organized by grade level and content area.

Watching and analyzing such videotaped teaching and learning episodes can lead to a strong desire by mentor and protégée to observe together in actual classrooms in their own school or at other school sites. These peer observations can be extended and focused observations of expert teachers or a series of short visits in multiple classrooms across the school. When a particular area of interest or need for growth is identified in the protégée's practice, a twenty to twenty-five minute walk through multiple classrooms observing how different teachers handle that situation provides rich data for dialogue about repertoire and decision making.

In any case, novice teachers who have spent a few weeks or months in their own classrooms have much to gain from observing other teachers. While they may have spent weeks engaged in a student teaching experience, at that time, they did not necessarily know what to notice. Now that they have their own classrooms they have a much more clearly defined notion of what to study when they observe other teachers engaged in their work. In many districts a significant number of new teachers are in alternative certification programs and may have done little or no student teaching. For them, the need is even more crucial.

It is our responsibility as mentors to provide novice teachers multiple opportunities and multiple formats for observing others in the teaching and learning process.

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