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AN ASSESSMENT OF PEER COACHING TO DRIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND REFLECTIVE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

Given the competing demands on a librarian's time, teaching and instruction are often professional responsibilities experienced in isolation with minimal colleague feedback beyond summative assessment. This article will describe a peer coaching pilot designed to increase teacher reflection, to augment teacher collaboration, and to identify future training and professional development needs. The article will report on the program's assessment facilitated by participant surveys. The peer coaching program described offers a model for fostering a community of teachers who are intent on improving and invigorating teaching practice.

INTRODUCTION

The desire among librarians for instructional improvement opportunities and a teaching community is evident at the University of Colorado at Boulder (UCB). However, identifying a sustainable program given competing demands on their time has been a challenge. Teaching librarians typically divide their time between collection development, reference services, and instruction. A 2008 survey revealed that instruction is a secondary responsibility for 53% of UCB teaching librarians (Alexander & Sinkinson, 2008, p. 5). In the past, the Research and Instruction Department has attempted instructional improvement strategies such as discussion groups, material and curriculum libraries, and an instruction blog. All received minimal success which was largely attributed to lack of time or schedule conflicts. Despite these failed attempts, teaching librarians continuously voice a desire to enter professional conversation with colleagues and cite colleagues as the preferred resource used for instructional planning and design (Alexander & Sinkinson, 2008).

A desire for more conversation is not surprising given that teaching librarians experience teaching as an isolated act. At UCB teaching librarians plan and prepare for classes with a high level of autonomy and minimal guidance. Novice librarians may observe classes initially, but beyond this, most teaching activity is insulated within one's own classroom and within one's own approaches. The drawbacks of this isolation are obvious. One may leave a classroom elated about the positive rapport

with students, the successful application of a new activity, or the complimentary faculty feedback, but often one does not have the opportunity to explore the reasons for success. Or alternatively, one may experience an unsuccessful class and simply remain discouraged without opportunity to dissect the classroom event. Without a community of practice, teaching librarians are left alone to ask essential reflective questions: Why am I doing what I do? Is it effective? Are students learning? How can I improve as a teaching librarian? (Farrell, 2004). Lacking dedicated time for reflection and analysis, isolated teaching

librarians are denied an opportunity to learn from classroom moments in order to inform future practice.

In many instances, librarians find themselves adopting a teaching role with little formal training and without ample opportunity for teacher development. Several library schools and professional organizations offer teacher-training opportunities for librarians, but to encourage intentional, thoughtful, and effective teaching, libraries would benefit from addressing local teaching librarian development. Towards that end, the University of Colorado at Boulder Libraries Research and Instruction Department sought to encourage instructional improvement through a program that fosters community and increased teacher reflection. In Fall 2009, the department piloted a peer coaching program and administered participant surveys in order to assess the program's effectiveness and sustainability. The pilot project investigated the potential of peer coaching to reduce teaching librarian

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isolation, to promote teacher reflection, and to identify future training and development needs. Through partnering relationships among diverse teaching librarians, the program aimed to encourage open professional dialog on teaching practices within organizational constraints.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In traditional school settings, teaching practitioners have sought strategies to combat teacher isolation and effectively to foster continued teacher development. Since the 1980s, staff developers have used collaborative teacher relationships as one solution (Showers, 1985). Most often referred to as peer coaching, teachers form structured partnerships that enable peer learning and support. The application of peer coaching may take a variety of forms but tends to fall within three main categories: collegial coaching, technical coaching and challenge coaching. Collegial coaching promotes observation of current practice; technical coaching supports classroom application of a new teaching strategy; and challenge coaching addresses specific classroom problems and seeks to locate solutions (Garmston, 1987). Whether the focus is to study current practice, to model innovative teaching strategies, or to address specific problems, peer coaching impacts student learning through continual teacher development. Rather than study teaching strategies abstractly through seminars, lectures, or in-services, peer partnerships allow teachers to study applications in the classroom. Showers and Joyce (1996) claim that this form of professional development improves the likelihood of long term implementation of learned strategies and solutions. Additionally, teachers immediately experience a reduced sense of isolation.

Library staff development programs have also employed peer coaching strategies. Formerly, the bulk of these examples had been applied to reference services and not to library instruction (Arthur, 1990; Nyren, 1986; Gers & Seward, 1988; Huling, 1999). But Levene and Frank (1993) made the argument for wider adoption of peer coaching for instruction librarians. Drawing from a thorough review of education literature, Levene and Frank's article offers a number of best practices and suggestions for peer coaching programs. The authors emphasize that a successful program should be confidential, voluntary, and developmental rather than judgmental (p. 36). Librarians form pairs who meet for pre-observation, observation, and post-observation conferences. In this model of coaching, the inviting-teacher assumes a great deal of autonomy and control by directing the focus of observation and the flow of discussions. Rather than giving judgments, the coach acts as a facilitator to prompt reflection in the inviting-teacher. According to the authors, the teacher-driven structure promotes a safe environment in which "librarians can learn to be reflective about their teaching and more sensitive to what they are actually doing in the classroom" (p. 36). Because the program is voluntary and confidential, "participants own the process" and direct their learning as teachers (p. 36).

Several libraries' peer coaching programs have loosely mimicked Levene and Frank's model with some modification. These programs are described by Burnam (1993), Arbeeny and Hartman (2008), and Samson and McCrea (2008). The majority use similar collegial coaching in which the goal is to improve existing practice. While Levene and Frank stress focus on observable teacher-defined behaviors, these adaptations looked at specific areas of

teacher performance including content, subject knowledge, delivery, preparedness, material design, or student interaction. Teams choose to focus on all areas or to designate one area for concentrated observation. The post observation meeting is facilitated by an observation checklist (Samson & Mcree, 2008), an evaluation form (Burnam, 1993), or a written report (Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008). These programs continue to encourage formative assessment through peer observation, but provide pre-determined assessment measures and observation tools. A 2005 ARL Spec Kit details other libraries which have adopted similar peer feedback programs including Syracuse, Notre Dame, and Dartmouth (Walters & Hinchliffe, 2005). Evaluation measures and program descriptions are described on these institutions' web sites (Syracuse University Library, 2007; University of Notre Dame; 2008, Dartmouth College Library, 2010).

The University of Nevada Las Vegas libraries implemented a peer planning program that leans towards technical or challenge coaching (Finley, Skarl, Cox, & van Derpol, 2005). Members of the instruction department formed an enhancement team designed to encourage classroom experimentation. Other librarians seeking assistance in active learning or group work classroom design may request consultation with the enhancement team. Librarians meet with the team for a brainstorming and classroom strategy conference. Then, a team member may co-teach with the librarian or simply observe the session. This structure helps librarians "revitalize their teaching in a supportive and structured way" and encourages experimentation with "new techniques and approaches to stimulate and improve student engagement" (p. 121).

The peer coaching described by Vidmar (2005) eliminates observation tools and observation entirely. The teacher drives the sessions through self-assessment and evaluation. The coach and teacher meet prior to the class to discuss intentions and then meet again following the class, but the coach never enters the classroom. The coach encourages the teacher to uncover patterns in the "critical incidents" of one's teaching solely through reflection (p. 144). The process eliminates any potential for judgment or unsolicited criticism, because it relies completely on self as observer. The coach's role is to "actively listen without judgment and to facilitate thinking and talking about teaching by the instructor" (p. 141). The non-evaluative nature is assisted by the presence of a mediator to monitor for critical or judgmental language.

Hensley (2010) describes a model to establish a supportive peer learning community among librarians who are seeking professional development and growth. The model includes four main elements: building progressive teaching environments, establishing mentor relationships, developing internal and external professional growth and assessing peer learning environments (p. 180). Central to each of these elements is fostering a reflective community of librarians, because "learning through professional development opportunities is best realized by an alignment between practical and reflexive practice in order to promote true growth as a teacher" (p. 181). Peer coaching is explicitly cited as a means to develop progressive teaching environments and to establish mentor relationships. Peer communities and partnerships foster "collaboration from which to draw upon as library instruction programs continue to gain strength within the larger agenda of higher education curriculum" (p. 184).

Due to the increased teaching demands on librarians in the twenty-first century, professional development centered on teaching and student learning are vital (Hensley, 2010, p.180). Peer coaching offers a method of professional development which encourages reflection, community, and innovation. A notable shift occurs when practitioners experience peer collaboration and observation as a tool for reflection and development contrasting traditional observation used for promotion, reappointment, and tenure (Vidmar, 2005, p.137). Teaching becomes a central object of study in which the goal is not teacher evaluation but rather teacher improvement and enhanced community.

DESCRIPTION

At UCB, peer coaching offered the possibility of transforming the existing teaching culture, which isolated teaching librarians, into a community of teachers who consider and solve problems together. In Fall 2009, the Research and Instruction Department piloted a peer coaching program in order to invigorate the study of teaching through open reflective dialog. As partners, librarians could investigate their teaching and reflect on practice that either impeded or encouraged student learning. While the pilot drew teaching librarians' attention to existing practice as an object of study, the program's goal was also to encourage change, holding true to the intentions of reflective teaching, which can be best understood as "a systematic and structured process in which we look at concrete aspects of teaching and learning with the overall goal of personal change and more effective practice" (Farrell, 2004, p. 27). By first establishing an investigative community, the pilot might spark change in teaching practice.

An additional goal of the pilot was to reveal either the professional development needs of individual teaching librarians or shared needs common to all department members. Following the pilot program, aspects of teacher development identified by teaching librarians would be collected and might serve to map future professional development programming. In effect, teaching librarians would direct their own professional development program while also establishing a community of teachers, "who continuously engage in the study of their craft" (Showers, 1985, p. 43). The pilot design worked both as a catalyst to community building and as a needs analysis for teaching librarian professional development.

PILOT STRUCTURE

Members of the Research and Instruction Department were invited to participate in the peer coaching pilot on a voluntary basis. A total of eight teaching librarians volunteered and attended an introductory workshop in which they were introduced to peer coaching, to the program structure, and to the overarching program goals. The workshop began with a discussion in which participants were asked to share past observation experiences and to describe discomforts and concerns about peer observation. These initial discussions set the tone for open, reflective, and safe communication, and differentiated peer coaching from evaluative observation practices.

Following these discussions, the roles of the peer coaching participants were clearly outlined (Table 1). Each participant would act in turn as inviting-teacher and peer coach. Both the participant and the partner would alternate roles for a three phased process: pre-observation meeting,

observation, and post-observation meeting (total of six meetings). The Instruction Coordinator assigned coaching pairs based on partner preferences submitted by the participants. Each participant received a program packet detailing the program guidelines. The packet included pre-meeting and post-meeting questionnaires designed to facilitate conversation and reflection. These questions were largely based on Robbins’ (1991) text, “How To Plan and Implement a Peer Coaching Program.” Additional support materials included potential observation strategies and tips for reflective questioning borrowed from Gottesman’s (2000) “Peer Coaching for Educators.”

During the pre-observation meeting, the inviting-teacher and coach begin to establish a relationship of trust. After identifying a class session for observation, the inviting-teacher describes student needs, class objectives, and any concerns about the session. The pilot did not dictate areas for observation or provide pre-determined evaluation methods. Therefore, the pair also discusses the inviting-teacher’s preference

for observation and methods of collecting observation data. To facilitate this process, participant packets included sample foci and observation techniques. For example, if the inviting-teacher was most interested in the pacing of the session, the coach might track classroom events with a time line map. Other sample strategies included proximity maps, behavior check-lists, verbatim logs, teacher language tracking, question wait time, or student time spent on task.

Because teacher reflection and individual development were central to the pilot’s goals, it was important that the program be driven by individual librarian concerns. Therefore, the autonomy emphasized in Levene and Frank’s (1993) model was replicated. Rather than imposing a set of criteria for observation or supplying a check-list, the program intended to draw out individual teaching librarian concerns. As Robbins (1991) suggests, participants were encouraged to choose an observation focus that aligns with the teaching librarian’s philosophies and interests (p. 22). By allowing the inviting-teacher to control the observation focus, reflection and analysis

| TABLE 1 — PEER COACHING ROLES AND GUIDELINES. | |
|---|--|
| Inviting-Teacher | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directs the process. Chooses date and time for observation. Defines focus of observation. Determines form of data collection. Provides guidelines for the coach. |
| Coach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supports inviting-teacher’s inquiry. Collects only data specified. Maintains complete confidentiality. Refrains from making evaluative comments. Uses probing questions to encourage reflection. |

would be intrinsically driven and meaningful. Furthermore, an analysis of the pilot's overall focus choices would reveal shared needs or interests within the department.

During the post-observation meeting, the coach and inviting-teacher recall classroom events, analyze data collected, and reflect on intended and actual outcomes. The coach's role is to provide the observed data and to encourage an atmosphere of reflection and inquiry, not judgment. The coach asks questions drawn from Gottesman (2000) such as: What surprises you about the data collected? What happened as you expected? What librarian and student behaviors contributed to the class outcomes? As the inviting-teacher responds, rather than offering agreement or disagreement, the coach continues to probe using reflective language by paraphrasing and clarifying.

ASSESSMENT

Following the pilot program, all participants (N=8) completed an anonymous online feedback and evaluation survey (see appendix). The survey intended to answer a few core questions about the pilot program. First, the program was designed to accommodate the busy-schedules of teaching librarians and to fit within larger organizational limits; therefore, the survey asked participants' if the program was sustainable in terms of time, and if they had interest in continuing participation. Second, the survey asked participants to report their level of comfort with peer relationships and the effectiveness of shared reflection. These ratings would distinguish the program's ability to foster a collegial and open community of teachers. And finally, the survey collected information on the chosen focus of observation in order to determine common, shared, or disparate areas for

future teacher trainings and professional development. The small number of participants (N=8) prevents generalized conclusions based on the pilot, but the survey responses provide measurement of the program's success and direction for future programming. Collection of data through a participant survey responded to the need identified by Arbeeney and Hartman (2008) for libraries to, "assess their peer coaching programs and report the data in library literature" (p. 44).

Yes/No questions were used to assess interest in future participation and if librarians would encourage colleagues to participate as well. Responses to both questions were unanimously affirmative. When asked if the program provided a stronger sense of community among teaching librarians, all participants also answered affirmatively. Comments showed appreciation for the program and for the opportunity to glimpse colleagues' classroom practices. In addition to continued interest, participants voiced a desire for inclusion of teaching librarians beyond the department in order to widen perspectives and approaches. Contributing to the continued interest was the fact that all participants found the time commitment manageable. One participant expressed surprise at the ease with which the program fit into other job responsibilities: "It involved far less time than I expected and wasn't onerous at all."

The survey sought feedback from participants in their role as both the coach and inviting-teacher. The questions aimed to measure overall comfort, comfort with facilitating reflection, and comfort with peer observation. Participants reported comfort with the coaching role in high percentages; however, as might be expected, comfort levels of the observed-teacher were slightly

| TABLE 2 — PARTICIPANT COMFORT WITH INVITING-TEACHER AND COACH ROLE | | |
|--|---------|------------------|
| | Coach | Inviting-teacher |
| Uncomfortable | 0% (0) | 0% (0) |
| Not very comfortable | 0% (0) | 25% (2) |
| Comfortable | 88% (7) | 62% (5) |
| Very comfortable | 12% (1) | 12% (1) |

lower (Table 2). The survey respondents confirmed that observation continues to intimidate and recall experiences of evaluative assessment. Both novice librarians and experienced librarians felt unease: “I didn't think I'd be as nervous as I was... funny how that happens no matter how long you've been teaching” and “To this point, I have not taught many library instruction classes, so I am still in the process of getting used to [it].” One participant’s unease with observation required an adjustment of the process. Rather than observation, the coach met with the inviting-teacher to discuss objectives and concerns prior to the session. And following the class, the team met to discuss the inviting-teacher’s own reflections.

The survey also intended to assess whether peer partnerships successfully promoted reflection. Partnerships were perceived as successfully promoting reflection from the perspective of the inviting-teacher, but coaches were more self-critical of their ability to encourage reflection (Table 3).

Coaches’ lower ratings may be attributed to their inability to gauge how much reflection occurred, as stated in question comments: “I believe I was successful, but [my partner] didn't tell me specifically how much reflection my comments caused.” Coaches also cited first experiences as hindering reflective questioning skills: “As this was the first time, I found it hard to ask in-depth questions.” Nonetheless, inviting-teacher responses indicated overall satisfaction with the post-observation sessions. All participants felt that the observation data was useful. Survey responses reported that coaches were successful in avoiding evaluative language suggesting that the post-observation sessions established a collaborative and encouraging tone.

The survey recorded the behavior chosen for observation and the method for recording data. The chosen focus of observation varied, including: student off-task behavior, distracting teacher gestures, teacher questioning and student response, student replication of teacher demonstration, and

| TABLE 3 — PERCEIVED SUCCESS IN PROMOTING REFLECTION BY ROLE | | |
|---|---------|------------------|
| | Coach | Inviting-teacher |
| Unsuccessful | 0% (0) | 0% (0) |
| Not very successful | 38% (3) | 0% (0) |
| Successful | 62% (5) | 50% (4) |
| Very successful | 0% (0) | 50% (4) |

spacing. Coach recording methods included verbatim logs, time maps, predefined behavior check-lists, and five-minute interval checks of students on task. Coaches reported that data collection was manageable. However, choosing a method of observation was challenging for several participants. For example, those interested in measuring student off-task behavior struggled to identify a method of measurement:

We realized that we didn't define off-task behavior well enough to observe it in the classroom. Is it off-task when a student is doing anything different than what the instructor is asking for or can a student be doing something different that expands upon what the instructor has been doing?

Despite this challenge, all of the inviting-teachers found the collected data to be useful and reported that the coach collected the data as specified.

Participants reported that the program identified areas for development in their teaching or continued focus on known concerns. Some interests listed in open-ended comments were authentic dialog strategies, interactive activities, and methods for surveying students. In addition to these individual interests, six participants located shared areas of concern, interest or need for improvement with their partners. Student engagement and tailored sessions for specific disciplines were cited as shared concerns, as was measurement of student application of skills. The survey also asked participants what types of training workshops might be useful for future instructional development.

Acting both as coach and inviting-teacher provided opportunity for learning and

development. Several comments illustrated the potential for the coach to learn from observation as much as the teacher:

I've always enjoyed sitting in on other classes. I learn from the instructors and I learn from the students and I think that makes me a better teacher!

[The pilot] pointed out the need to gain more experience through both teaching and observing how other people teach.

Peer partnerships may take a variety of forms in which the coach acts not only as mirror, but perhaps as co-planner, as co-teacher, or as evaluator. Other partnerships emphasize the observer as a learner who studies the teacher's strategies. Participants were asked to rank preference for these variations for future offerings of the pilot (Figure 1). Rankings did not reveal unanimous preference, but the highest first choices were continued peer coaching and peer planning.

OUTCOMES

Results from the survey were largely positive and support continuation of the program; nonetheless, a few significant portions of the pilot warrant extended attention. As was anticipated, peer observation is not experienced without anxiety and unease. Most participants had only experienced peer observation for evaluative reasons and not for personal improvement. Continued partnering and observation may serve to eliminate discomfort as one survey respondent suggests: "always a bit unnerving to show your teaching capabilities to respected colleagues. But the more often we experience this, the easier it is, I believe." However, in addition to comfort over time,

future program workshops will stress the formative intentions of observation and prominently stress the confidential nature of the program. Individual adaptations may also be made for those significantly averse to observation, as was done for one pilot participant. Ideally, as teaching librarians more fully develop the collaborative community, resistance to observation will diminish.

The pilot encouraged the study of classroom practice through reflective dialogue with peers. Given the numerous demands on librarians' time, most find it difficult to reflect regularly on teaching and have little experience with structured reflective practice. The pilot exposed participants to one form of reflection which resulted in participants' willingness to continue. Participants recognized the potential to invigorate teaching strategies through dedicated study of teaching. One participant's comment nicely captures these outcomes: "I'm discovering now that I'm still thinking about my teaching, several weeks after teaching finished for the semester ... I discovered that I can think of changes on my own and that I can maybe make differences in the future." In order to support reflective practice, future workshops will address reflective question strategies for coaches and reflection exercises for individuals.

Additional professional development programs will be designed based on teaching librarian needs exposed through the pilot. Participants had the autonomy to select areas for observation with which they were most concerned. An analysis of these focus areas has revealed a department-wide concern with improving student-engagement. This interest was underscored when participants rated an interactive teaching strategies workshop as the most

popular, in terms of future professional development offerings. In response to these discoveries, the department will host a series of workshops on interactive teaching strategies. Teaching librarians will be invited to demonstrate a new or previously used classroom activity, after which, the group will discuss applications, improvements, and adaptations. The workshops will continue to foster a community of practice, while also fulfilling the pilot's goal to tailor professional development based on local librarian needs.

The Research and Instruction Department intends to continue the peer coaching program in Fall 2010. The pilot's core aspect, fostering a reflective community of practice, will remain unchanged, but other aspects of the pilot will shift to be more open and flexible. In the second iteration, participants may choose to implement a new strategy (technical coaching) or continue to study existing practice (collegial coaching). As partners, participants will establish goals and choose their desired structure. All participants will meet for community meetings periodically throughout the semester to share experiences and approaches. The flexibility in combination with community meetings will insure that peer coaching remains a responsive participant-directed professional development program.

CONCLUSION

Peer coaching has proven to enliven teaching librarians individually and to nurture a community of teachers at UCB. Because the local culture may not reflect that of all library teaching communities, the results may differ at other institutions. However, this example has reinforced studies which suggest peer coaching's effectiveness as a professional development

solution. Additionally, UCB's experience has shown that peer coaching is a useful tool for uncovering local community needs and the design of tailored professional development. Study of the program's direct impact on student learning will be explored in the future, but that reaches beyond the scope of this initial pilot.

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