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Peer Visits: How to Start Productive Conversations on Teaching

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It is odd indeed that our profession is simultaneously open and yet insular. Although our students are initially strangers to us, we speak openly about serious matters with them, beginning with the first meeting of a semester. However, there are colleagues we have known for years but whose classroom persona we don't know at all. Sometimes we don't even know how they organize their courses. We suffer a diminished sense of community with our teaching colleagues as a result of this insularity. Our peers are valuable sources of assistance, encouragement, and ideas that we can incorporate into our teaching. To alter this insularity, we suggest a few carefully planned, non-evaluative and reciprocal visits to a colleague's class—visits that encourage reflection and promote productive discussions about teaching. Even a modest time investment in such visits and follow-up conversations can be a catalyst for renewed vigor in your teaching.

Drop By and Talk

For the past several years we have organized a group of faculty interested in promoting discussion of teaching stimulated by visits to a colleague's classroom. The Peer Visit Group meets initially in early September to welcome new members, describe a recommended format for visits, and, most importantly, to find partners for all members and arrange convenient visit times. We recommend that partners be from different disciplines. Why? We find it results in a greater variety of discussion topics, more cross-disciplinary contacts, and a reduction in the tendency to be judgmental. The format for visits is simple: schedule reciprocal visits as close to one another as possible—perhaps the same day. Prior to the visits, meet briefly to discuss what will go on in class, what special aspect you may want your partner to observe, how (or if) he or she will be introduced to the class. Plan to meet as soon as possible after the visits, the same day if possible, so the experiences are still fresh in mind.

The post-visit conversation is the most important and interesting part of the activity. Even though these are non-evaluative visits, it is sometimes awkward to begin a conversation; a good starting point for discussion is a topic or two from



the pre-visit conversation. It will become apparent quickly that the visit prompts discussion on topics much more interesting than squeaking chalk, effective use of the blackboard, and readability of handouts. Discussion topics have included:

- how does the instructor decide if the students are involved with the material in a lecture class;
- how can you set the pace of a class;
- what are some similarities and differences between disciplinary approaches to course organization;
- what is the real purpose of class meetings;
- what are some effects on the instructor or the students of having an observer in the classroom; are there effects as well on the observer in viewing a colleague's class;
- how were some of the classroom management techniques discovered.

The list is nearly endless and is usually stimulated by what you just observed in your colleague's class. Indeed, after visiting each other's classes for several years, we were surprised when a recent visit still prompted an intense discussion, lasting well over an hour.

Talk Helps

The most important thing we have learned from the visits and discussions is that they are productive. They produce stimulating conversations with your colleagues about teaching (that are completely different from complaining about students), they stimulate your own thoughts on what can be done differently in your classes, they promote interdisciplinary conversations and show that there are many ways of teaching effectively, and last, they reenergize your teaching.

Visiting your colleague's class requires no financial support from your college or university, but we have found that some organization, planning and promotion are essential for a successful Peer Visits Group. Our program is driven completely by faculty interest and requires minimal assistance from the administration. Begin small. Find a colleague and begin visiting, perhaps two or three visits this semester. Next semester, double the participation by finding new partners. Plan on having lunch with the participants and discussing the visits. Develop plans to make a general announcement to the campus, inviting others to attend a short meet-

ing designed to arrange peer pairs. Personally contacting a few colleagues is often the most useful method of encouraging participation.

The initial meeting of your Peer Visits Group should include some recommendations on how to have productive visits (see www.ntlf.com for a handout filled with suggestions), in addition to helping people find a partner to visit. Before closing, set a time for the group to reconvene to relate experiences. Late Friday afternoon once a month seems to work best for us.

Planning Helps

Participants want to tell some details of their visits and share their interest and excitement in this venture. To have the first and subsequent meetings be more than a relating of anecdotes, the meetings must be planned just like classes. Save time for the participants to relate experiences, but also have a focus for the meeting. We have developed a variety of activities for promoting discussion of wider topics in teaching as well as the specific topic of peer visits. Some examples: show a part of a videotaped class and have a "group" peer visit; discuss a case study on how an instructor interacted with a student who was reluctant to participate in class; construct a list of ways to promote active participation in class; discuss "the most unanticipated aspect of your post-visit conversation;" characterize your teaching persona; discuss the terms "teacher-centered" and "student-centered." Each of these topics met with varying degrees of success, but each also had a point that the group was able to take away from the meeting.

The entire project is faculty driven. The only support we needed for these meetings was someone to arrange a suitable room and provide some coffee, cookies, and soft drinks. Our Office for Teaching Excellence and Faculty Development also has sponsored a lunch for participants at the end of each semester. After lunch there is a focused discussion on a peer visits-related topic. In several of these lunch programs, a "final exam" on peer visiting has served as a discussion starter on the benefits of peer visiting. (Subscribers will find a copy of the "exam" posted at www.ntlf.com.)

Feedback from our colleagues indicates that they find peer visits interesting and stimulating. They also find the group meetings worthwhile, not only for sharing ideas, but also for the

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Editor's Note:

Normally, I've known "brainstorming" to mean a lot of people throwing out half-baked ideas because work obliged them to. A discussion that broke out like a summer squall recently on one of the listservs I read blunted my cynicism. This was a genuine storm full of passions and dark power, bits of information thrown down in lightning bolts of clear argument, brooding clouds of contending values and deep caring. Somewhere in the middle of it **James Zull** spoke up and said he wished there were more writing about this exciting material. I challenged him to do some. He met the challenge with his wonderful overview of the latest research on the brain, learning, and emotion.

Few phenomena further wither my cynicism more than faculty learning together, not in disciplinary enclaves and professional meetings, but in cross-disciplinary study groups devoted to improving their teaching and their campus as a learning environment. It doesn't get much publicity, but it is happening increasingly all over the country. With the help of **Ellen and George Sims** the *Forum* looks in on two such groups at Belmont University in Nashville.

Suppose you wanted to immerse yourself in the best, most wide-ranging understandings of effective teaching right now. How would you do it? Perhaps you'd attend a summer intensive on teaching for faculty. Perhaps you'd learn about the "Boot Camp" organized by **Ed Nuhfer** at University of Colorado. Despite its authoritarian name, the Boot Camp's authority rests on the quality of the research and information provided. No cookie cutter approach to good teaching predominates. There are no uniforms. No haircut is required. Here, too, faculty learn a lot simply from talking openly with each other about their teaching.

Peers can do amazing things for each other simply by sharing their observations of each other's teaching. **Barbara Frase** and **Michael McAsey** have seen good things come of peer visits time and again. Their article on the peer visit program at Bradley University suggests how these visits stimulate a valuable conversation on teaching.

Students aren't peers exactly, but their learning remains at the heart of why colleges exist. In this technological age, have students changed? In many ways, no. Like the rest of us, they're going to the Web for answers and information. Like us, they won't wait all day for a homepage to load. In this issue's TECHPED column, **Tom Creed** joins forces with **Kathryn Plank** to outline seven principles of good course Web design. A good course Web page, they argue, is one that is pedagogically sound as well as technically savvy.

Finally, **Elouise Bell** of Brigham Young University offers a forthright reminder that teachers don't just lead students over barriers and boundaries, they often have to push them. But the quality of Bell's pushing is not strained. Review the "pushing" questions she recommends and you see her idea of teaching sailing like high white clouds over Utah's mountain peaks. Not a brainstorm, but a balloon flight: "What else might you try?" she asks.

On the *Forum's* Web site, subscribers will find a rich cache of supplemental materials for three of the stories in this issue: The Virtual Companion supporting the Creed-Plank TECHPED pulls together the best resources for building an effective course Web site and contains dozens of links to still further resources. Frase and McAsey share a useful handout on starting peer visit conversations and a "final exam" on peer visiting. And finally, we've posted a Survey of Classroom Skills that Nuhfer's "Boot Camp" finds to be a useful pretest on one's teaching. As always, click on www.ntlf.com and learn more.

—James Rhem

collegiality they promote. Reciprocal visits and subsequent discussions with a colleague are easy, useful, and enjoyable ways to promote stimulating discussions on teaching and help to stimulate new ideas in your teaching. Try it and then spread the word. ■■

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Submitting Manuscripts

Isn't it time you spoke up? We're not just hearing the same old voices speaking about teaching and learning anymore. Faculty of all kinds have begun to feel the importance of thinking more concretely about their teaching and writing about it. I encourage subscribers to consider drafting a manuscript for the *Forum*.

Articles may address any aspect of college teaching and learning, and may be discipline-specific or general in nature.

Submissions may not exceed 1500 words (six ordinary typed pages), except in extremely unusual circumstances, and should be shorter whenever possible. Submissions in electronic form are highly encouraged. Indeed, submissions through E-mail are welcome.

Editorial submissions should be sent directly to Dr. James Rhem, Executive Editor, *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, 213 Potter Street, Madison, WI 53715-2050

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