Faculty Peer Review and Coaching: A Brief Review of Literature

Introduction

According to Huston & Weaver (2008), peer coaching is a "collegial process whereby two faculty members voluntarily work together to improve or expand their approaches to teaching"; unlike peer reviews, which may be include summative assessments that impact personnel decisions, peer coaching focuses solely on the improvement of teaching (DeZure, 1999; Huston & Weaver, 2008). Peer coaching should be formative assessments that are "confidential between the instructor and the observer(s) and tied to recommendations for future development activities and opportunities for improvement" (DeZure, 1999). All activities in an institution's peer coaching program should be consistent in their purpose (such as formative vs. summative assessment) and processes.

There are two types of formative peer coaching: reciprocal and one-way coaching. In reciprocal peer coaching, each instructor serves as the coach for the other, while in one-way coaching, one instructor serves as the coach while the other identifies areas of focus and/or improvement and seeks feedback and guidance from the coach (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Peer coaching usually includes three steps: (1) an initial consultation, or pre-observation meeting; (2) classroom observation(s) by the coach(es); and (3) a post-observation debriefing meeting which may include a summary report (Davis, 2011; DeZure, 1999; Huston & Weaver, 2008).

Rationale and Benefits

Peer coaching is also an ideal faculty development format for experienced faculty because the coaches focus on real, individually selected, practice-centered problems. (Huston & Weaver, 2008). More recent research on faculty expertise indicates that one thing excellent teachers have in common is that they regularly and purposefully reflect on their teaching (Huston & Weaver, 2008)

Peer coaching is one platform that aligns with several key dimensions of the SoTL, including making teaching public and increasing content and pedagogical knowledge (Huston & Weaver, 2008). If teaching is to be considered scholarship, there is no debate about the fact that it must be reviewed by peers, just as any other form of scholarship is scrutinized by other community members (Huston & Weaver, 2008). Because peer review is a way to making teaching public, it is also seen as enhancing the value of teaching and engaging peers in scholarly examination of their profession. (Davis, 2011)

- The process of peer observation and review can provide value for improvement of teaching and in the scholarship of teaching, thus elevating teaching to the same status as research at the university level. (Davis, 2011) Historically, teaching has not been evaluated in an open forum, such as through peer observation. Instead, evaluation of teaching has typically occurred in isolation, relying primarily on student evaluations or the quantity and quality of research and publications produced by the subject teacher. (Davis, 2011)
- Just as quality research finds its basis in the quality of peer-reviewed publications, peer review of teaching seeks to accomplish similar goals, that is, to ensure that the product passes the muster of learned peers and thus achieves a certain level of quality. (p. 107) (Davis, 2011)
- Benefits of peer observation appear throughout the literature and include improvement of teaching, faculty ownership, and enhancement of teaching effectiveness. Furthermore, the process provides documentation of teaching and places attention on the craft of teaching. Peer observation can also stimulate reflection on the teaching process, development of collegial relationships between faculty, improvement of faculty morale, decreased feelings of teacher isolation, and elevation of teaching to a scholarly activity. (Davis, 2011)
- Faculty members saw different teaching styles and teaching technologies used. Through observation, faculty members were able to see how to use a variety of active learning strategies and how the students responded to the differences in teaching styles. (Davis, 2011)
- Not just for new instructors. Engaging experienced faculty in peer coaching also offers tangible benefits for the institution: it offers opportunities for faculty members to contribute to the growing scholarship of teaching and learning, it creates a climate in which teaching is "community property", and it provides a way for experienced faculty to give back to their community. (Huston & Weaver, 2008)
- Given that peer coaching, by definition, involves explaining one's choices and decisions to another experienced teacher, peer coaching provides a context-centered opportunity to target improvement strategies and analyze the impact of those strategies, including the impact on student learning. (Huston & Weaver, 2008)
- Peer coaching provides an opportunity to improve faculty pedagogical and content knowledge. If peers are selected from different disciplines, coaching can focus on cross- disciplinary exchanges and pedagogical issues common to all faculty members. In addition, those who are not familiar with the

content being taught may be able to ask both pedagogical and content questions that reflect the students' point of view. If peers coach someone from the same discipline, they can provide content expertise that may assist with both pedagogical decisions and with discipline-related issues such as content inclusion and sequencing. (Huston & Weaver, 2008)

Challenges

Peer coaching requires time and paperwork. According to DeZure (1999), the time requirement for observers is considerable, as it should include at least:

- One training session (2 hours); preferably two sessions (4 hours)
- A pre-observation meeting (30 minutes)
- A review of materials (30 minutes)
- At least one classroom observation (75 minutes)
- Preparation of the report, including discussion with other observers (60 minutes)
- The post-observation meeting with the instructor (45 minutes)

In addition to demanding time requirements, Brent and Felder (2004) describe several possible barriers related to peer coaching, including "wide variations in faculty opinions about what constitutes good teaching, controversies over who is qualified to be a peer reviewer, and the possibility of personal biases affecting ratings." Instructors may feel that the class session observed was not representative of their best teaching or even of a typical class meeting. Faculty participants may feel scrutinized and may worry that the observations will be biased and/or unreliable, and faculty coaches may be uncomfortable assessing their colleagues, but these negative concerns can de minimized by ensuring that feedback is "constructive and offered as advice, not as a mandate to change" (Davis, 2011).

Recommendations and Strategies to Consider

Based on the review of literature, the following issues, strategies, and ideas should be considered before creating a faculty peer-coaching program.

Institutional Support

Developed the program based on the University's mission statement (Davis, 2011)

- Should be based on the mission and strategic plan
- Should have faculty feedback from the initial planning and brainstorming stage

- One year pilot test and evaluation of the program
- Pilot for a year then assess, include training and planning and handbook (Huston & Weaver, 2008)
- The sixth and final recommendation is that an effective peer coaching program, like other programs supporting advances in teaching and learning, requires central institutional support from a provost's office or other central academic office. Such support is necessary because there must be clarity about the purpose and use of peer review of teaching in an institution, including those designed to provide formative feedback. Central institutional support is also needed because coaches need to see that the institution values the service they are providing; and faculty members, in general, need to see that the provost's office values and invests in teaching improvement. Faculty members may also need evidence that the faculty is supported at all career stages. The provost (or chief academic officer) can support peer coaching by: providing funding for the program, publicizing and marketing the program, nominating potential coaches (or asking deans to nominate coaches), and sponsoring events to honor the coaches. (Huston & Weaver, 2008)
- (DeZure, 1999) educate the campus on the benefits of peer review
- (DeZure, 1999) the purpose and processes of the program should be clear and consistent

Definition of Good Teaching

- (DeZure, 1999) consensus is needed about what constitutes good teaching and there should be agreement on the criteria for teaching effectiveness that serves as the basis for the observation
- 7 Practices plus MS&T Strategic Plan

Voluntary, Formative Assessment & Goal Setting

It is a process of formative assessment; however, faculty are afforded the opportunity to include peer evaluations in dossiers for promotion and/or tenure. (Davis, 2011).

Goals & specific areas of focus should be determined by the instructor being coached.

Selection of Coaches

Reviewers (both summative and formative) should be: tenured faculty or faculty or non-tenure-track faculty with primarily teaching and advising responsibilities. Untenured assistant professors should not have to rate colleagues who may later be in a position of evaluating their candidacy for tenure. (Another way to avoid this situation is to use raters from different departments, subject to the knowledgeability condition of Criterion 3.) These reviewers should be experienced (at least three years of teaching experience), knowledgeable (of the peer review criteria, the broad discipline of the course, competent at teaching, flexible in terms of what defines good teaching, and unbiased toward the instructor they will be observing. (Brent & Felder, 2004).

(DeZure, 1999) instructors should have input in choosing their reviewers from a selected pool, should be able to choose the class(es) to be observed, and should have input in any final written reports.

Training for Coaches

- Development programming was offered to the faculty peers to prepare them to act as faculty peer observers. (Davis, 2011)
- The development programming included information about what the peers should include in the observation, such as the classroom environment, student engagement, teaching methodology used, and nonverbal communication between faculty and students. In addition, specifics about how to record the observation were shared along with tips for a successful observation. A thorough discussion of bias was included in the development process. Faculty was encouraged to record what was actually seen in the classroom and to write questions about what was observed. Making a judgment about the quality of teaching was not the purpose. All feedback was to be constructive and not critical. (Davis, 2011)
- Provide a 1–2 hour training session to the raters. The trainer (an experienced rater from previous years or a faculty development consultant) should present an illustrative set of course materials and one or two mini-lectures or videotaped excerpts of real lectures, and the participants should complete the rating forms and discuss their reasons for assigning the ratings they did. Presenting two mini-lectures that vary in quality makes the experience more instructive. (Brent & Felder, 2004)
- (DeZure, 1999) observers need training in order to reduce bias. Training should include deep understanding of the criteria, observation and notetaking skills, and how to provide constructive feedback. Also how to review instructional materials (syllabi, assignments, etc) and how to prepare the final report

Multiple Observers and Multiple Observations

- a team of two individuals—a content peer and the department's instructional design specialist (IDS)—participates in each observation. It is believed that the use of a pair of observers mitigates concerns of bias, and in this case, the IDS and content expert can both focus on the particular aspects of teaching with which they are comfortable. (Davis, 2011)
- (DeZure, 1999) multiple observations made by more than one reviewer are recommended

Three-Part Process

An observation consists formally of a pre-observation meeting, two visits to the classroom, and a post-observation meeting. (Davis, 2011)

Before the observation, a pre-observation meeting occurs that allows the faculty member to share with the observation team artifacts of the lecture, such as the course syllabus, course goals and objectives, teaching strategies, assessment methods, the instructor's teaching philosophy, and specific concerns or areas of focus. During this meeting, the observation team also learns about the instructor's role in the course, including level of input in syllabus and course design. (Davis, 2011)

Simply watching someone teach a single class provides little information about the currency or accuracy of the course content, the appropriateness of the assignments and tests, and whether or not the students are being equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to move on in the curriculum and to satisfy program accreditation requirements. the N.C. State University Chemical Engineering Department involves evaluation of instructional materials and at least two class observations by two or more independent reviewers, who subsequently reconcile their ratings. (Brent & Felder, 2004)

the instructor may video tape a class and share it with the reviewers instead of having reviewers observe a live class

- the peer review process includes more than class observation
    - instructional materials (syllabus, learning objectives, assignments, tests, and other items) and at least two class observations
- one observation is not enough

Checklists and Focused Narratives

The department faculty committee assigned to formulate a peer review procedure began by developing checklist rating forms for classroom observations and course materials, with the checklist items being selected from lists of well-established characteristics of effective teaching (Brent & Felder, 2004).

- (DeZure, 1999) checklists and focused narratives (based on open ended questions) is better than open narrative; also (Millis, 1999)

Constructive Feedback and Confidentiality

(DeZure, 1999) Constructive feedback is more descriptive than evaluative, is specific and focuses on behavior that is observable. Should be positive and action oriented rather than focusing on the instructor's personality or the observer's beliefs about teaching; also (Millis, 1999)

The content of the coaching relationship-including the colleague's questions, the coach's suggestions, and the colleague's receptiveness (or lack thereof) to those suggestions-must remain confidential between the two faculty members (Huston & Weaver, 2008). In keeping with the notion that the recipient owns the feedback process, the colleague decides when, how, and with whom they will share information about the coaching relationship. (Huston & Weaver, 2008)

Additional Notes

- the one being coached would benefit from observing a couple of peers
- reflection is key
- trust, respect and collegiality are required
- (DeZure, 1999) a validated observation instrument should be used
- (DeZure, 1999) instructors should be given a list of 4-5 observers and be able to select the two they wish to work with
- (DeZure, 1999) one observer is insufficient – two is ideal
- (DeZure, 1999) multiple observations are recommended; also (Millis, 1999)
- (DeZure, 1999) observer training is essential
- (DeZure, 1999) "Because training and observations are time consuming and challenging, institutions may want to consider rewarding instructors who devote time to observer training either as trainers or participants. Rewards may take the form of released time, credit for department service, payment in bonuses, or additional travel funds

- minimum observation time should be 50 minutes and should include time before and after the class to watch transitional activity; the observer should always arrive a few minutes early
- online components of the course should be reviewed too
- instructor should introduce the observer, explain why they are there and then move on; the observer should not participate in instruction
- observer should sit at the back of the room but not talk to or question students
- (DeZure, 1999) pre-observation meeting: instructor's course goals; instructional methods used in the class; objectives for the class; who the students are in the class; how student learning is assessed; materials that are relevant (syllabus, exams, assignments, electronic course materials such as Blackboard); show the observation form to the instructor; set the post-observation meeting date and timetable for the final report
- (DeZure, 1999) instructor and observer should meet for five minutes immediately after the observation for clarifications. Was this a typical class, etc?
- (DeZure, 1999) post observation meeting should occur within 3-7 days and the instructor should be given a copy of the report at least one day ahead of time
- Rather than a single visit that results in a quick but isolated snapshot, class observations are most effective when they are part of an ongoing series. (Millis, 1999)
- Preobservation: Instructors should identify areas of their teaching on which they particularly want feed- back (transitions between topics, pacing, relevance of anecdotes, for exam- ple) and anything special about the class, such as exceptionally motivated students, a disruptive clique sitting in the back, or poor room design (Millis, 1999)
- Many observers use a notepad to record a virtual transcript of what unfolds; in the margin they note comments for the instructor, such as, "Three students left the room," or, "Ten students raised their hands." If specific feedback forms are used, they should not be completed on the spot. Reflective, insightful commentary is essential. (Millis, 1999)
- Successful classroom observations should accomplish at least two goals. They should reinforce positive behaviors (things that the instructor is doing right), and they should lead to changes in behaviors to improve teaching (things the instructor could improve). Thus a skilled observer will both offer information and provide inspiration. Based on the results of the con- sultation, the instructor should not only know what to change but also be motivated to expend the necessary effort to do so. It is helpful to record

teaching improvement ideas—a sort of teaching action plan that emerges from the postvisit discussion. Subsequent classroom observations to evaluate the effectiveness of the changes will ensure a process of continuous improvement. (Millis, 1999)

- Recommendation 1: Goal-Setting: the colleague, not the coach, should set the goals so they "own" the the goals and process (Huston & Weaver, 2008)
- The second guideline follows directly from the first: a peer coaching program must be voluntary. More explicitly, the program must be voluntary for both the coach and the colleague (Huston & Weaver, 2008)

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