Improving College Teaching Through Peer Observation

Gerald Skoog

*Journal of Teacher Education* 1980 31: 23
DOI: 10.1177/002248718003100206

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What is This?
Improving College Teaching Through Peer Observation

Gerald Skoog
Texas Tech University

On the premise that faculty members can and should combine their knowledge and skills in various ways to improve instruction, a particular process of peer observation has been used since 1973 in the College of Education at Texas Tech University to describe, analyze, assess, and modify instruction. The process evolved from a model of clinical supervision developed by Cogan (1973) and several others at Harvard University between 1955-1962. The clinical supervision model requires a peer observation cycle which emphasizes collection and analysis of data drawn from events in the classroom or where faculty are working with students. In contrast to observation or supervision that is nonspecific, this peer observation cycle is specific in that the observee identifies problems and concerns to guide colleagues in observing, describing, and critiquing teaching. The process has been described as inherently humane, conceptually tough, and "intended to increase teachers' incentive and skills for self-supervision" (Goldhammer, 1969, p. 55).

Peer Observation Cycle Mechanics

Clinical supervision as explained by Cogan and Goldhammer is generally conducted by a supervisor with a teacher. At Texas Tech, a team concept is followed. A team consists of a professor who will be observed (the observee), an observation team leader, one to three other professors, and an occasional graduate student. If the team stays together, which is preferable, roles change as everyone both observes and has a turn as observation team leader. It is helpful if the observation team leader has participated in a previous cycle (Krajewski, Denham, & Anderson, 1976).

Once they are assembled and familiarized with the process, teams work through the five following stages: (1) preobservation conference; (2) observation; (3) analysis and strategy session; (4) postobservation conference; and (5) postobservation analysis.

Stage 1: Preobservation Conference

During this stage, relationships are shaped, information is shared, and goals are set. A contract and ground rules are established for the observation session.

The observee tells the team about the session to be observed—its objectives, what instructional modes will be used, what the student role will be, plus other orientation information. A contract based upon the observee’s requests for specific feedback is developed. Ground rules are set concerning observation time and length, observation, observers' seating arrangements, and the permissibility of using recording equipment or talking with students. Finally, a time is set for the postobservation session.

Throughout this stage, the observee has firm control over contract details and ground rule establishment. Though the contract is not restrictive, it does assure that the observation and feedback will be directed toward the observee's concerns.

Stage 2: Observation

Prior to the observation, the observing team decides what data are needed to address the concerns expressed by the observee in the contract. Methods to gather the desired data are developed. Objective data related to the contract are sought and a transcript of the classroom dialogue is maintained for use during analysis when the session will be reconstructed and described.

At the time specified by the ground rules, the observers, each with a specific task, enter the classroom and collect the data. Generally, the team will observe for only 15-20 minutes, since ample data can be collected by two or three observers in a short time.

Stage 3: Analysis and Strategy Session

After individual team members organize their available data, the team meets to reconstruct the details of the session observed. In order to create credibility, eliminate arbitrary decisions, and provide descriptive feedback, the team considers objective data and focuses on the behaviors observed. During at least the first 10 minutes, no value judgments are made concerning the effectiveness of the teaching strategies observed.

As details are reconstructed, patterns detected, and critical incidents identified, the team relates its findings to the concerns stated in the contract and to unspecified items where descriptive feedback might be useful. As the team works out feedback strategies, it gives priority to data and suggestions that will enhance or build on existing patterns of strength in the faculty member's teaching repertoire.

In contrast, traditional supervisory procedures usually focus on the identification and remediation of weaknesses. Weaknesses are not ignored in this model of feedback.
EDUCATIONAL EXPENSES

Taking summer courses? Be sure to get Internal Revenue Service Publication 508 to see if you can deduct these expenses from your 1980 Income Tax. Some expenses are deductible as adjustments to income and others as itemized deductions. Be sure to keep records and receipts.

The feedback strategy should be accepted by all team members and adhered to in the post-observation conference.

Clinical supervision but are “dealt with when they interact with a strength” (Cogan, 1973, p. 204). The feedback strategy developed should be accepted by all team members and adhered to in the postobservation conference. This conference, which is very important to the observee, may generate anxiety. As a result, unplanned comments and suggestions which might trigger undesirable reactions should not be given. Furthermore, the observee’s confidence in the team’s ability to observe and critique teaching episodes will be enhanced by planned, systematic feedback.

Overall, this stage has two purposes: “to make sense out of the observational data,” and “to plan the management of the supervision conference to follow, that is, what issues to treat, which data to cite, what goals to aim for, how to begin, where to end, and who should do what” (Goldhammer, 1969, p. 63).

Stage 4: Postobservation Conference

During this stage, the team meets with the observee. Contract details are reviewed and the strategy planned in Stage 3 is implemented. As a full participant in the process, the observee should be involved in asking questions and reacting to the team’s observations and suggestions. The observee, with the team’s help and on the basis of the feedback, should develop a plan designed to strengthen his/her instruction in one of the specific areas discussed.

This stage often takes more time than planned because discussions of various aspects of teaching develop. These discussions add a valuable dimension to the entire process, and the pressures of time should not be allowed to subvert them.

Stage 5: Postconference Analysis

Observers critique their own practices and behaviors during the observation cycle. They discuss and make judgments about the effectiveness of their strategy during the postobservation conference. An obvious concern is whether the faculty member observed was assisted and will use the data and suggestions. The observation team leader’s role is also critiqued. The critiques provide the team with additional opportunity for professional growth as various models and methods of supervision are discussed.

The complete cycle ordinarily takes about two hours. Stages 3 and 4 are time consuming, but beneficial; serious discussions about teaching occur.

Peer Observation Cycle Benefits

What benefits accrue from participation in a series of peer observation cycles? Obviously, faculty members who are seriously concerned with improving their teaching have access to valuable data and expert assistance from team colleagues. The data, feedback, and assistance should be facilitative because it is directed to concerns identified by the faculty member. In contrast, feedback provided by other sources—e.g., students and administrators—may not address the faculty member’s concerns and may be more evaluative than facilitative.

Because teaching is given increased attention, its role in the reward systems of colleges and universities may be enhanced.

By observing, critiquing, and planning strategies for the improvement of the teaching of colleagues, faculty members acquire knowledge, insights, and strategies useful for self-supervision and self-improvement. Also, as a team works together, supportive relationships are established and discussions concerning teaching become more common, lengthy, and sophisticated. Ownership of common and unique teaching problems is acknowledged more openly. Increased satisfaction and pride in teaching can result. Furthermore, because teaching is given increased attention, its role in the reward systems of colleges and universities may be enhanced. Faculty members, through their involvement in the peer observation cycle, communicate to students their conviction that teaching and self-improvement are important responsibilities deserving high priority. The modeling behavior of these faculty members may influence students to become involved in programs of self-improvement in their chosen careers.

Barriers to Success

Time is a major problem as two or more hours often are required to complete each cycle. All team members must be observed and critiqued. Furthermore, the process must be repeated and continued if teams are to develop trust and get beyond atypical teaching episodes. Many faculty members object to this time expenditure. They are willing to devote a great deal of time to research and writing but are not equally willing to spend time on teaching, since improved teaching may not help much in the campaign for tenure and promotion. National reputations are seldom gained through teaching excellence. Furthermore, improvement of teaching may be slow. Finally, the time spent in the peer observation cycle is demanding and risky as colleagues critique each other’s teaching, challenge individual and group practices, and
work through differences of opinion. This interaction not only takes time but sometimes results in a diminishing of pride and ego.

The organizational structure and academic traditions of most colleges or departments encourage most faculty members to set goals, plan, and teach in isolation from colleagues. As a result, professorial autonomy is developed, sustained, and prized. Assistance from colleagues is not sought and, if given, is often resisted. Furthermore, colleagues prizing this autonomy often are reluctant to offer suggestions or to criticize the teaching of other faculty members. Thus, in the peer observation cycle, observers may be reluctant to challenge or discuss certain decisions and actions of the observee.

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These barriers, plus the reluctance of many faculty members to have important aspects of their teaching critiqued, can result in the development of insignificant and contrived contracts and perfunctory observation, analysis, and feedback sessions.

Accompanying Activities

Because of these problems, peer observation should be accompanied by other activities. Collaborative efforts in establishing course, program, department, and college goals should occur. The dialogue necessary for the formulation of these goals should continue in peer observation sessions as activities are critiqued in the context of established goals. The peer observation cycle is most effective in an atmosphere of trust. Faculty members will not list serious concerns for colleagues to consider unless trust is present. The development of trust takes time. Thus it is important that individuals form and stay in a specific observation team over an extended period. Team-building activities that increase trust and develop group unity among team members need to be conducted regularly.

An increase in team planning and teaching would facilitate peer observation and allow it to occur within the context of shared goals and plans. Peer observation cycles would be a regular activity of teaching teams. They would occur more spontaneously and naturally as faculty members became accustomed to collaborative efforts to maximize teaching effectiveness.

Increased recognition of teaching excellence would encourage professors to give more time to activities such as the peer observation cycle. Most institutions give less recognition for excellence in teaching than for mediocrity in research and writing. Until these responsibilities are valued equally by faculty, administrators, and governing boards, faculty will be reluctant to give more time to improving teaching.

Related Issues

Many other issues surround the use of peer observation. Alfonso (1978) argued that proponents of peer observation are using it as a substitute for formal, organizational supervision, and that teacher organizations are using it to weaken or gain power from administrators. Where there are no formal methods of supervision, or where administrators do not evaluate teaching actively and regularly, Alfonso's argument does not apply. However, it is important that peer observation activities not exist in isolation from regular supervisory and evaluative procedures.

Administrative pressure to use peer observation for evaluative rather than developmental purposes should be resisted. The danger in that emphasis is that observation contracts will be developed more on the basis of strengths than on areas where help is needed. Also, if peer observation is made compulsory and used for evaluation, contrived and perfunctory cycles could become more frequent. Therefore it is important that the faculty and administration agree about the purpose of peer observation.

Peer observation should be accompanied by collaborative efforts in other areas of professorial responsibility.

Individuals who excel in teaching often resist peer observation activities as poor investments of time. Proponents of peer observation argue that good teachers have an obligation to share their talents and to participate for the benefit of their colleagues. Both arguments are persuasive and can best be reconciled by a staff development program with many dimensions and options for improvement in areas of professorial responsibility.

Overall, peer observation activities have the potential to bring colleagues together in collaborative efforts to improve instruction in higher education. However, peer observation should be accompanied by collaborative efforts in other areas of professorial responsibility. It should be made a part of a total faculty development program. Faculty and administrators who value teaching will find that the peer observation cycle strengthens such a program greatly.

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March-April 1980   Volume XXXI   Number 2   25