Reflective peer coaching: Crafting collaborative self-assessment in teaching

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Abstract

Reflective peer coaching is a formative model for improving teaching and learning by examining intentions prior to teaching, then reflecting upon the experience. The goal of reflective peer coaching is to promote self-assessment and collaboration for better teaching and ultimately better learning. There are obvious benefits to colleagues collaborating and sharing ideas, thoughts, and observations. However, many models of assessing teaching effectiveness focus on summative evaluation in which colleagues observe each other once or twice a year and fill out institutional evaluation forms. Rarely do colleagues engage in formative conversations about teaching that are guided by the instructor’s personal goals and objectives. Reflective peer coaching necessitates a ten-minute planning conversation prior to the actual lesson and a ten-minute reflective conversation after the lesson. These conversations happen regularly and frequently to build self-awareness and self-assessment of the personal craft of teaching. The following article outlines the dynamics of the reflective peer coaching process as a formative assessment model that leads to better learning through improved teaching.

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The quality of student learning is directly, although not exclusively, related to the quality of teaching. Therefore, one of the most promising ways to improve learning is to improve teaching.

– Thomas Angelo

*Classroom Assessment Techniques*

1. Introduction

Librarians are teachers. At the reference desk, in the classroom, in one-on-one conferences, and even when organizing information or cataloging materials, librarians teach. Whether instruction occurs in the library or anywhere else on or off campus, “good” teaching ultimately translates into student learning. An instructor decides what to teach and how to teach, but the measure of effectiveness is whether or not the students master the material. In the library, teaching is as much a question of what are the students doing and how do they demonstrate their understanding as it is a question of what is taught and how is it taught. Reflective peer coaching is a process geared toward improving teaching in the classroom through a formative practice of self-inquiry and critical reflection. In as much as the focus is on improving teaching, reflective peer coaching, as Angelo (1993) points out, is an effective means to improve student learning as well. For librarians, this can translate into effectively teaching information literacy proficiencies in our libraries and on our campuses.

Reflective peer coaching is based on the cognitive coaching process developed by emeritus professors of education and co-developers of the Institute for Intelligent Behavior, Arthur Costa and Robert Garmston. Costa and Garmston pioneered a coaching model that centers upon self-assessment and critical reflection. But the roots of reflective peer coaching extend further to Parker Palmer, an educational activist, who advocated finding the “heart” in personal teaching or discovering the “teacher within” (Palmer, 1998). Central to the process is creating a non-threatening relationship that encourages conversation and collaboration between peers without necessarily having a colleague go into the classroom of another to “evaluate” the effectiveness of an individual session. The relationship between peers is collegial. There are no mentors leading or providing guidance. Peers are self-directed partners in learning. The conversations are directed toward articulating intentions prior to a class session, then reflections afterwards.

As instructors reflect upon their experience in the classroom with a colleague, they discover important information about the intended results in comparison with the actual lesson. They share both accomplishments and frustrations. By making the collegial conversations part of instruction, instructors build upon the everyday classroom experiences, complementing class time with the conversations before and after teaching. They learn to be conscious in the classroom, using the thinking that goes along with performance to manage their actions. They address and self-monitor their teaching practice on a continual basis, ultimately learning not by experience alone, but through critical reflection upon their experiences.
2. Summative evaluation versus formative assessment

Typically, assessment of one’s teaching practice primarily revolves around summative evaluation as opposed to formative processes. Summative evaluation focuses on the “great teacher” or “good job” aspects of teaching. Generally, others decide the specific criteria that determine a good lesson or effective teaching. Although instructors may know the criteria in advance, they often have little or no input in the development of the criteria. Consequently, the criteria rarely address personal teaching aspirations or concerns. Often a checklist or a form with a list of attributes is used as a “grading” tool.

Summative evaluation primarily facilitates organizational decisions such as promotion and tenure (Lapp, Lascher, Matthews, Papalewis, & Stoner, 2002). Collegial teams or supervisors observe an instructor in a classroom setting to evaluate teaching. The instructor knows in advance that the observation is going to occur on a specific date for a specific class. Therefore, the instructor has the opportunity to prepare in a different way that exceeds the normal preparation for a class. The instructor may provide a written lesson plan that includes goals and objectives or perhaps an articulation of the enduring understandings that will result from the lesson. The plan can be read and used by the observers to critique the instructor. But such preparation is not necessarily part of the instructor’s regular regimen. So what is being observed may be an atypical view of the instructor that is the result of an observation process with high stakes such as promotion or tenure. Feedback from the observation is usually shared with the instructor, but generally there is little opportunity for the instructor to engage in self-assessment or personal reflection.

On the surface, this summative form of evaluation may seem acceptable or at least necessary. But it could be argued that observations generally occurring on an occasional basis do not offer evaluators enough insight into the nature and teaching philosophy of the instructor. What is the basis for forming opinions regarding the effectiveness of an instructor based on the successes and/or failures of a single lesson? Comments from one-time observations will likely produce a negative experience for even the most proficient instructor. What stands out for an instructor is the negative feedback. The language of the process—supervise, observe, and evaluate—elicits a variety of emotions for an instructor (Costa & Garmston, 1994). External criticism, however constructive in its intent, may impair the process of improvement (Garmston, 1997). If the goal is the professional development of an instructor, observation should lead to intrinsic motivation to improve in an environment that is non-threatening and encourages risk-taking (Uzat, 1998). Institutional goals such as promotion may lead to achieving professional goals, but they do not necessarily inspire better teaching. For positive change to occur, frequent opportunities for meaningful dialogue are necessary to adequately assess an instructor’s professional skill in the classroom.

In contrast, formative assessment promotes progress toward specific objectives that originate from the instructor. The primary goal is to facilitate change toward personal growth and development. Ideas about teaching are shaped by the individual preferences and the personality of an instructor (Cranton & King, 2003). Although personal experiences and understanding are difficult to contemplate because of their abstract and illusive nature, they are powerful guides to future actions (Freppon & MacGillvary, 1996). The focus of formative
assessment is a constructivist process of self-assessment and self-development in which learning builds upon learning (Hunt & Pellegrino, 2002). Instructors are both teachers and learners—simultaneously engaging in a very personal activity to enable them to construct and reconstruct knowledge and meaning while teaching. In a formative environment, teaching is a continual progression toward improvement in which the instructor regularly engages in activities integral to personal growth and learning.

Reflective peer coaching is a formative process that facilitates introspection and self-awareness prior to, during, and after teaching. Instructors work collaboratively and systematically to talk about their teaching, outlining intended outcomes prior to teaching, then reflecting upon the actual teaching experience afterwards. They meet repeatedly and actively engage in conversations aimed at building upon each experience in a non-threatening dialogue. As a result, instructors gain an awareness of their actions in the classroom and the effect their teaching has on their students. Instructors develop their own criteria for assessment intent on improving their practice. Significant, meaningful, and long-term positive change will be achieved only when it comes as a decision by the instructor (Lapp et al., 2002). Although formative assessment is not directly associated with institutional decisions, the intention is to create positive change that ultimately results in improved teaching practices.

3. What is reflection?

To reflect is to think about where you have been and/or what has happened in order to clarify an experience. Reflection is fundamental to assessment, decision-making, and a deeper understanding of the teaching practice. The act of reflection is primarily concerned with developing insights and discovering solutions to difficulties—or what might be described more correctly as learning opportunities. Teaching is similar to the old adage about skiing. That is, if you do not fall, then you are not skiing to the best of your ability. Similarly, if you never have a lesson fall flat, then you probably are not placing yourself in a position to realize something novel about your pedagogy. When something goes awry in the classroom, the instructor has an opportunity to improve. A reflective instructor constantly observes conditions and gathers information about what is happening in the classroom as well as how to address what is happening (Eby, Herrell, & Hicks, 2002). What are the students doing? More importantly, what are the students doing to demonstrate their comprehension? The goal of reflection is not only better teaching, but ultimately improved student learning (Rodgers, 2002). Reflections are not only focused on teaching activities, they are focused on the activities of the students. When the instruction is not as successful as planned, an instructor can change what might seem to be a “mistake” into a learning opportunity. Reflection draws upon the experience to develop and strengthen sound habits.

Engaging in a reflective conversation with a peer about teaching may be as natural as it is productive. Many instructors seek out colleagues to talk about classroom experiences afterward, but they do not incorporate peer coaching as a regular activity. As individuals reflect upon their experience in the classroom with a colleague, they discover important information
about the intended results in comparison with the actual lesson. We learn by doing, but we enhance learning by reflecting upon the doing. These reflections will then impact future classroom experiences as part of the decision-making process and instructional design.

4. Why reflection?

Teaching requires spontaneous, immediate, and appropriate actions in response to various situations. The instructor’s intentions take the form of well-constructed goals and objectives—a theoretical plan of what will happen in the classroom during the preparation stage. The preparation stage allows the instructor the luxury to think of how best to implement a plan of action. In the classroom, however, there is little time to stop and think about complex theories or to make decisions about an alternative course of action when needed. While the experience is a good teacher in and of itself, we do not learn as much from experience as we learn from reflecting on that experience (Farrell, 2004). Reflection about the classroom experience provides a contextual source of practical experience that supports both assessment and further planning. When making sense of experience informs decision making and future action, making sense is transformed learning—learning that is often the result of a situation which does not match preconceived notions, beliefs, or patterns (Mezirow, 1990). Reflection elicits a deeper awareness of the situation or event in order to inform future practice.

Schön (1987) describes three different levels of consciousness or thinking within professional practice: (1) “knowing in action” in which thinking about teaching is embedded in the act of doing; (2) “reflection in action” in which teaching is informed by interpretation of the immediate situation without stopping; and (3) “reflection on action” occurs when the instructor thinks about what happened and articulates it afterwards. Reflection in action is perhaps the most demanding type of reflection because it requires an individual to think about an experience and create a sense of order as it occurs. On the other hand, reflection on action allows individuals time to think about what has occurred, then use past experiences to inform future decisions. As such, reflection on action will generally prepare individuals to better clarify real-time experiences based on what was done in the past. Ultimately, however, the focus of reflection must be relevant to improving the instructor’s effectiveness in the accomplishments of students (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere, & Montie, 2001).

5. Laying the groundwork for reflective peer coaching

Reflective conversations will not come easily to everyone. Self-disclosure is a risk-taking venture that can cause uncertainty, discomfort, or embarrassment at times. With the correct prompts, instructors will engage in conversations about teaching with their colleagues to inform and improve their practice. But to do so requires a non-threatening, formative environment without the high stakes risks of a colleague evaluation. Brookfield (1995)
suggests beginning with some reflective inventory exercises in which each member of the peer group introduce themselves by answering questions such as the following:

- What am I most proud of as an instructor?
- What would I like my students to say about me after class?
- What do I most need to learn about or improve in my teaching?
- What do I worry about most in my work as an instructor?
- How do I know when I have taught well?
- What mistake have I learned the most from as an instructor?

These questions will provide a framework to guide conversations between peers and serve as a basis for understanding each other better. Farrell (2004) also offers several “reflective breaks” to help cultivate introspective thinking and talking about their teaching:

- What is the best aspect of your life as an instructor?
- What is the worst aspect of your life as an instructor?
- Do you spend much time thinking about new ideas or methods for teaching your classes?
- Do you discuss teaching with your colleagues informally such as in the staff room or a meeting?
- Do you ever ask a colleague to watch you teach beyond a periodical colleague evaluation?
- Are there things you would like to change about your teaching?
- What have you learned about yourself so far?

The last question is an important question to repeat during the reflective peer coaching because it directs individuals to think about changes over a continuum. Remember, reflective peer coaching is an on-going process with regular meetings. It is useful to point out that there is a continual progression toward improvement as well as a day-to-day development. Although not all groups will need to complete every question, working some of these examples into starting exercises will help establish rapport, ease some of the anxiety of reluctant participants, and enhance the depth of conversations between peers.

How can an institution support and promote reflection? What conditions enhance an individual’s ability to develop the capacity to think deeply about the craft of teaching? Individuals at any institution will have differing abilities and opportunities to reflect upon what they do and to willingly share their thoughts about their practice. Although instructors generally act alone in the classroom, they often share teaching experiences with colleagues. These shared experiences are a potential source of rich insight into teaching and learning. Colleagues who take the time to reflect together can establish a community of teachers who are learners. Each day in the classroom is as much a learning experience as a teaching experience. But moreover, the sharing of intentions—what we want to do and want to happen—prior to teaching enhances the learning experience. Afterwards, the instructor examines the discrepancies between the intended outcomes and what actually occurred during the class session. By collaborating with a colleague, the instructor works a better understanding of their teaching practice.
Reflective peer coaching aims at fostering self-assessment and self-management by providing repeated opportunities to build upon an instructor’s pedagogy as related to personal goals and objectives. As such, two essential elements to meaningful collaboration and reflection are to create a trusting relationship and to promote thought and inquiry (York-Barr et al., 2001). The relationship between an instructor and a coach must be supportive as well as safe. Self-reflection requires honesty and trust between both parties. At the same time, reflection may involve emotional risk and discomfort as they examine beliefs, values, and feelings that are a part of teaching (Eby et al., 2002). The role of a coach is to actively listen without judgment and to facilitate thinking and talking about teaching by the instructor. The coach builds trust through ongoing conversations that encourage instructors to speak openly about their practice in the classroom.

Depending on the environment of an institution, teaching can sometimes seem like a solo, isolated, or competitive act. The tendency is to value objective, scientific knowledge over socially constructed knowledge. But teaching is primarily a communicative process that necessitates critical questioning and reflection (Cranton & King, 2003). Reflective peer conversations offer colleagues the opportunity to work collaboratively to interact and construct meaning in a social context. Learning is mutual and each individual within the peer coaching group has the capacity and potential to grow from their experience. Starting with direct and relatively simple, concrete experience, their understanding grows richer as they explore and develop connections to both past and future experiences with each peer conversation. As individuals find those connections, the brain changes, leading toward better comprehension and deeper understanding (Zull, 2002). The search and desire to discover patterns of meaning are natural to human experience and a key to brain-based learning (Costa, 2001). It is the reason instructors often look for colleagues after a class. They want to share and relate some aspect that made an impression or occurred while teaching in what Costa (2001) calls constructive learning—a reciprocal process in that individuals influence each other.

Improving one’s personal practice can serve as motivation for professional development (York-Barr et al., 2001), but as Skinner and Welch (1996) noted, finding time to participate and meet with a colleague is one of the most challenging aspects of peer coaching. Ellison and Hayes (2003) indicate that solving the issue of time so teachers can examine their practices in meaningful ways is a problem that must be addressed. It is important to note that reflective peer coaching generally requires about ten minutes before and after a class session. The length of time to conduct planning and reflective conversations can occur during a coffee break. Also, the type of interaction does not involve the types of scheduling conflicts that can occur when trying to arrange for colleagues to observe each other in the classroom. Not only is finding the time easier, but also the process is less intimidating. Colleagues have an easier time committing to ten-minute planning and reflective conferences, and they also appreciate not having someone “grade” their teaching from the back of the classroom. Since they are generally willing to talk about their teaching anyway—what went well and what may have needed attention—they appreciate having a more structured process for the conversations. In the classroom, the instructor maintains the same teacher–student relationships without shifting the focus to an outside observer. Both experienced and inexperienced instructors generally are relieved to not have a colleague visit their classroom unless they are invited.
6. Reflective peer coaching

Thinking and talking about teaching with peers help create an environment that promotes self-directed, purposeful changes in the instructor. Reflective peer coaching is an ongoing process of development between peers revolving around conversations prior to teaching and after teaching. It differs from the casual conversation that occurs between colleagues in that it is a planned activity between peers. Although reflective peer coaching is based on the same planning and reflective conversations of the cognitive coaching process, it differs from cognitive coaching in that a “skilled” coach does not need to “apply specific strategies to enhance another person’s perceptions, decisions, and intellectual functions” (Costa & Garmston, 1994). In cognitive coaching, the coach requires “extensive training” and functions as an expert drawing out an instructor’s capacity to self-monitor and self-evaluate (Garmston et al., 1993). The cognitive coach functions almost as a mentor who guides and directs the conversation with a more precise questioning strategy. In contrast, reflective peer coaching is a reciprocal relationship between peers in which the focal point is conversation of the instructor. The coach acts as a facilitator offering prompts to further the dialogue and encourage the instructor’s self-exploration. The focus is on the instructor and the points the instructor chooses to respond to in the peer conversations. The coach’s responsibility is to encourage the instructor to talk, to purposefully listen to what the instructor says, and to build trust by not responding by correcting, suggesting, or taking over the conversation.

Prior to teaching, the instructor articulates the intentions, goals, objectives, activities of the instructor and the students, and what the instructor will regard as evidence that the students are understanding and achieving the intended outcomes. After teaching, the instructor will reflect upon what actually occurred in the class. Costa and Garmston (1994) use the term “basic map” to describe the steps involved in the conversation because colleagues can choose their own path to achieving the desired results. In fact, the desired result may vary from instructor to instructor. Most importantly, the individual goals of the instructor drive the process. The coach works within the parameter set by the instructor to promote conscious, self-directed learning and discovery.

Reflective peer coaching can start with a two-person group in which two colleagues collaborate and exchange roles as coach and teacher. However, even more effective, particularly in the developmental stages, is a three-person group in which three colleagues alternate roles as instructor, coach, and observer. The third person as observer watches the process and serves as a guide to both the instructor and the coach by insuring the process is working or by reporting something not readily apparent to the coach or instructor. Also, if a coach inadvertently steps out of the coaching role and begins to advise or correct the instructor, the observer can intervene to the benefit of the entire group. The observer can also be take notes that can be shared afterwards with the instructor.

7. Planning conversation

The planning conversation plays a pivotal role and sets the foundation for reflective peer coaching. The planning conversation is designed to foster a positive, collaborative growth
experience between peers. Prior to the planning stage, instructors prepare the basic plan of the instruction session—strategies, activities, and outcomes. The basic plan is used as a guide for the instructor and is not meant to be a handout that can be read by the coach or observer. If the goal is self-coaching (Costa & Garmston, 1994), then the planning conference requires the articulation of the plan verbally by the instructor. During the planning conference, the coach will construct a relatively short interview of about ten minutes. It is a time of mental rehearsal for the instructor who will be asked to share intentions, goals and objectives, concerns, or potential difficulties. According to Bandura, “people motivate themselves and guide their actions anticipatorily by the exercise of forethought” (1995). The planning conference will not only shape the lesson but will often affect the outcome as well by helping articulate how the instructor will teach.

Instructors clarify their intentions in order to articulate what they are trying to accomplish. They state what they are trying to achieve (goals), how they will get there (objectives), and how they know the students got there (outcomes). They outline the teaching strategy and procedures of what they plan to do in the classroom. So the planning conference sets the stage to determine how the lesson will unfold—the design and organization, what the students will be doing, and how the students will demonstrate they are achieving the intended outcomes. The instructor will also have an opportunity to discuss any self-assessment data that are important. For example, if an instructor has any specific concerns relative to their teaching, the planning conference offers the opportunity to focus on strategies to address those concerns. The coach or the observer can note a particular concern and explore that concern later during the reflective conversation.

When starting a reflective peer coaching process, there can be a learning curve that requires some practice to gain facility with the various roles. Providing a list of questions to both the coach and the instructor will help overcome a potentially significant hurdle. Once colleagues begin to discuss their practice within the context of intentions and reflections, sample questions will play less of a role and merely serve as cues. Other questions will develop as colleagues learn more about each other and what is important to them. In the planning conversation, the questions pursue what the instructor will be doing; what the students will be doing; how the instructor will assess the success of the students’ learning; and any particular issues regarding teaching that the instructor is concerned with or wants to bring to the table. More than anything, coaches should have a clear sense of what the instructor wants to accomplish in the teaching session.

The following are some sample questions for organizing a planning conversation (Costa & Garmston, 1994):

- What is the session going to be about?
- As you teach, what will the students do?
- What would you like students to take from the session?
- What will you do to achieve your intended outcomes?
- What will you do at the beginning, the middle, and the end of the session?
- How long will each section of the session take?
- How will you know whether or not the students are learning what you intend?
• What will they do or say that indicates the session is successful?
• Is there anything about the session or your teaching that you would like to address prior to the class?

These questions and the actions of the coach set the groundwork for building trust and encouraging critical reflection. Coaches create a constructive foundation by leading the instructor to expanded ways of thinking and genuine inquiry (York-Barr et al., 2001). Coaches generate deeper thinking by asking open-ended questions. Coaches should acknowledge the speaker by using positive nonverbal responses such as nodding, smiling, or leaning forward. A coach can interject comments that further the conversation such as “Tell me more about…” or “Could you elaborate on…” A coach can seek clarification to extend the conversation or to demonstrate a desire to understand and really hear what the instructor is saying. Good examples of clarifying behavior are as follows: “Let me make sure I understand what you are getting at.” “Am I understanding this correctly?” Reflective peer coaching begins with individuals who are willing to develop the kind of relationships needed to support positive change and development.

8. The reflective conference

The reflective conference offers instructors the opportunity to assess what happened in the teaching session. According to Smagorinsky, Cook, and Johnson (2003), a gulf often exists between the theory and practice of teaching. This separation between what instructors think and what they do in the classroom affects their teaching effectiveness and, ultimately, student learning. The reflective conference is a “systematic” activity that promotes the development of an instructor’s conception of teaching. It reduces the chasm between theory and practice by providing a regular forum for colleagues to explore the practice of teaching. If active learning is something the instructor aspires to in the classroom, the coach can direct the questions that pursue how that is being put into practice. In the reflective conference, an instructor recalls data or specific examples to support reflections. In collaboration with the coach, the instructor compares intentions articulated prior to teaching the actual session, thinking back to what was supposed to occur.

The instructor assesses if what actually occurred was different and why it may have been different. If something was changed or altered something during the lesson—what Schön (1987) referred to as “reflection-in-action”—what was the reason for the change? Brookfield (1995) calls these “critical incidents” which can serve as the focus of conversations. Critical incidents can be puzzling, curious, or perplexing events (Loughran, 2002) or transformative events in which something unexpected occurs. What happened here? Why is this important? These questions lead to an examination of alternatives in the complex context of teaching and learning (Cranton & King, 2003). What an instructor perceives or fails to perceive is influenced significantly by habits of expectations making up a frame of reference (Mezirow, 1990). These expectations are guided by intention—particularly intentions articulated prior to teaching. Changes occurring during the actual lesson that differ from the original intent are fruitful areas for critical examination. Classroom experiences are in essence a personal textbook informing an
instructor’s theoretical knowledge base. The instructor addresses the effect an incident may have on future lessons looking specifically for discoveries and insights. A critical incident may seem like a mistake or a failure, when it is actually an opportunity for learning and self-actualization. The perception of mistakes and failures become such only when left unexplored. A primary objective of the reflective conference is to move experiences within the classroom from short-term or working memory into long-term memory. In the classroom, an instructor may only need memory for a short time to resolve a problem or change an outcome. The experience of what happened and why it happened is generally lost and forgotten once the task is accomplished (Zull, 2002). After a class session, the opportunity for learning from the teaching experience is gradually reduced unless there is some mechanism for recalling what happened (Costa & Garmston, 1994). The reflective conference focuses on the events within the classroom—the impressions and thoughts of the instructor. The reflections of an instructor can be made up of both what Zull calls explicit or conscious thoughts and/or implicit or unconscious thoughts (2002). Reflection is an activity in which individuals can learn to summon up implicit thoughts by recalling explicit memories.

A reflective conference may take a life of its own after the first question with some instructors needing only the slightest prompt to launch into intimate details. Others may be more reticent and difficult, needing open ended questions and encouragement. As part of the process, the instructor and the coach comment upon the coaching process involving the third person observer, if appropriate, to refine the process if necessary. The following are some sample questions for organizing a reflective conversation (Costa & Garmston, 1994):

- How do you think the session went?
- What were your students doing or saying to indicate how the session went?
- What do you recall about what you were doing during the session?
- How did you observe happening with your students compare with what you planned?
- How did what you actually did in class compare to what you had planned?
- Did the students achieve the goals and objectives/outcomes you set for them?
- Was there any part of the session that you changed?
  - Why did you make the change?
  - What were you aware of about the students that made you change?
- Did all students perform as planned? If not, why do you think some students performed as planned and others did not?
- What did you do to produce the results you wanted?
- What new ideas or insights did you discover about your teaching?
- As you plan future sessions, what ideas could be carried over and used?
- What has the coaching/evaluation session done for you?
  - What would you have liked to see happen in the coaching process?
  - What could your coach do differently in future peer conferences?

The reflective conversation employs a similar strategy as the planning conference. The role of the coach is still that of a conscious and active listener who encourages the instructor to
explore and elaborate on what actually occurred in the classroom. The role of a third-person observer is to note any thought-provoking comments that could be shared and further explored by the group as well as to monitor the coach. One difficulty many individuals have in coaching is to refrain from trying to solve a problem for a colleague or reacting subjectively either verbally or nonverbally to a comment by the instructor. A nonverbal response can be as powerful as a verbal response. A frown or a questioning look, a sudden movement or fidgeting may send a signal to the instructor that something is wrong just as easily as saying, “No, no, no.” Coaches need to monitor and manage their responses and how those responses become apparent in behaviors (Ellison & Hays, 2003). Even if the solution to a problem seems readily apparent to coaches, it is more important to let instructors discover solutions for themselves. Again, one of the benefits of a three-person reflective peer coaching team is that the third-person acts as an observer, noting any irregularities in the interaction between the coach and instructor. The difficulty for the coach at first will be to regulate nonverbal behaviors. However, with practice both the coach and the observer will become more adept and will learn to watch for clues from the instructor.

9. Conclusion

Reflective peer coaching is a formative model that examines intentions prior to teaching and reflections afterwards. The purpose of reflective peer coaching is to promote self-assessment in a non-threatening, supportive arena. Colleagues engage in ten-minute planning conversations and ten-minute reflective conversations. These conversations happen regularly and frequently and are intended to promote change and profound thinking about an instructor’s personal craft of teaching. The two main elements of reflective peer coach are outlined as follows:

1. Planning conference
   • Clarify intentions: What are the lesson goals and objectives?
   • Teaching strategy and procedures: What will the teacher do?
   • Student achievement: What will the students do to indicate success?
   • Data to support self-assessment: What is important to the teacher?

2. Reflective conference
   • Assessment of lesson: How did the lesson go?
   • Recall data to support reflections
   • Compare intentions with the actual lesson: What was different and why?
   • Effect on future lessons: New learning, discoveries, insights
   • Comment on the coaching process and refine as needed

As the roles of instructor, coach, and observer rotate within a three-person team or those of instructor and coach within a two-person team, each member will become more versed in the practice of reflective peer coaching. Each member will begin to establish a deeper understanding of their colleagues and the individual concerns they may share or that may distinguish them from one another. Some individuals who are more introspective and flexible
in their teaching and learning style may seem to progress more initially. On the other hand, those who are more reluctant to self-disclose or who really look to someone else to mediate their teaching by observing them and making critical comments may experience moments of epiphany, suddenly realizing something significant about their teaching. The peer coaching team must be cognizant of differences within their colleagues and should honor and respect those differences. Central to the process is a genuine respect for each other, honor the process, and stay open to the possibilities for growth and mutual learning.

Reflective peer coaching takes advantage of a natural tendency to talk with colleagues but in a more purposeful way that reduces that gap between theory and practice. It is non-intrusive in that colleagues do not need to observe each other to make a difference in their teaching. Enacting a process of self-assessment and self-discovery through reflection leads to a more collaborative and trusting environment with colleagues learning together as cohorts. The development of reflective peer coaching teams will promote changes in a purposeful manner—changes that not only make for better teaching but for better student learning as well.

References


