

Peer Coaching at New Mexico State University

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NMSU's Peer Coaching program was founded in 1996. Since then, the program has been offered four times, with about 130 teachers completing the program. This paper summarizes the structure and evaluative data from the spring 2002 Peer Coaching program.

In spring 2002, 20 faculty and six graduate students from across campus joined the peer coaching program. The program began close to the beginning of the semester with a 2.5 hour opening workshop orienting participants to the structure of the program and training participants to give and receive constructive feedback from peers. During the orientation, participants reviewed constructive ways to give criticism and role played a situation in which a "teacher" is "coached" by a peer after a less than stellar class. Participants learned that they would work in three-person teams, including a team leader who had successfully completed the program previously. Participants also learned that to successfully complete the program they must exchange two classroom visits with each of their teammates (for a total of four classroom visits) and share observations afterwards. For example, if Laura and Tara were in a team, Laura would observe Tara's class, Tara would observe Laura's class and then we would meet to discuss our observations. Participants who completed these observations were invited to a graduation celebration and given a \$100 honorarium by their dean.

Team leaders were responsible for facilitating classroom visits by helping their team schedule classroom visits, reminding teammates of upcoming visits, and generally encouraging enthusiasm for the program and esprit de corps among the team. Team leaders also participated fully in the program, exchanging classroom visits with each of their teammates and sharing observations afterwards. Team leaders were given a \$350 honorarium (\$250 for their service as team leaders and \$100 for acting as participants) by their dean.

Participants were encouraged to use their second classroom visit with each team member to conduct student interviews in class using a variation of the small group instructional diagnosis procedure (see Clark & Redmond, 1982; Diamond, 1988; Nyquist and Wulff, 1988). This procedure has three steps: 1) a twenty-to-thirty minute student interview facilitated by the peer coach; 2) a post-interview discussion between the peer coach and the instructor; and 3) a brief discussion between the instructor and the class regarding the feedback produced by the interview.

During the first step, the student interview, the instructor left the room, her peer coach introduced herself and explained that the interview and the peer coaching process are designed to improve teaching techniques. Students were told that the

interview process is anonymous in that the instructor would receive a compilation of students' feedback that would not be attributed to any particular student. The peer coach then asked students to form groups of six to eight to discuss two questions: 1) What aspects of this course are helping you learn? 2) What changes could be made in the course to facilitate your learning? Each group discussed these questions for approximately 10 minutes after which the peer coach asked each group to share the consensus responses. The coach recorded these responses on the board, asking students for clarification or amplification on ambiguous points. On certain critical issues, she may also have determined (using a show of hands) how many students in class agreed or disagreed with a given statement.

After the peer coaches exchanged student interviews (i.e., Tara interviews my class and I interview Tara's class), they met to share the results of the interviews, focusing on issues where there was the greatest consensus among students. The coaches then helped each other reflect on which issues were amenable to change and various strategies for making the changes. The reciprocal nature of these interviews reduces defensiveness and promotes teaching improvement.

During the final step of the interview process, the instructor discussed the results of the interview with her class. She explained which aspects of the course she was willing and able to change and how she would do so. She also explained why she was unwilling or unable to make all the changes that students may have requested. Although class interviews were not required by the program, a number of participants indicated they were one of the best sources of information about their teaching (see below for more evaluative data).

At the conclusion of the program (close to the end of the semester), all participants attended a 2.5 hour closing workshop. The closing workshop was used to help participants reflect on what they learned during the program and to collect evaluative data of the program. The closing workshop ended with an award ceremony during which participants were presented with a certificate of completion and had an opportunity to chat with other participants over cake and cookies.

During the evaluative portion of the closing workshop, we asked participants to complete a seven-page questionnaire containing open- and closed-ended questions. The closed-ended questions were designed to explore participants' perceptions of the usefulness of the program, the quality of feedback they received from their peer coach, and (for those pairs who conducted them), the effectiveness of class interviews. Table 1 lists the closed-ended evaluative items with descriptive statistics. The open-ended items asked participants to describe why they participated in peer coaching, the benefits they received from the program,

ways in which the program might be improved, and (for those who conducted interviews) the relative value of class interviews compared to other aspects of peer coaching.

[Table 1 about here]

The program was completed by 19 faculty members. Although most of the faculty at NMSU are tenured and most are men, most of our participants were untenured and female. Participants had taught for an average of 4.5 years although the range was from 0 – 20 years. Table 2 provides more information about the participants and their fields of study.

[Table 2 about here]

During the semester, each participant spent at least one hour discussing teaching with their peer coach and the majority (53%) spent three or more hours. The typical team spent about 8 to 14 hours on this process, including time for attending the orientation, observing classes, holding discussions after classes, and attending the closing workshop. All but one participant had their peer coach interview their students.

Participants in our program reported many benefits of peer coaching. Almost all the participants (95%) reported receiving helpful feedback from the interview. Furthermore, 72% indicated they would have a colleague interview their students in future semesters and 83% would recommend student interviews to their colleagues. Over two-thirds (73 percent) agreed that peer coaching helped them communicate better with their students and 58% agreed peer coaching would help their students learn more.

All the participants felt that they received supportive feedback and that their teaching benefited from visits to colleagues' classes. Almost all the participants (95%) reported peer coaching confirmed that at least some of what they were doing in the classroom was right and 90% reported that peer coaching helped them improve their teaching. Perhaps the best testament to the participants' enthusiasm for peer coaching is that virtually everyone (90%) would recommend peer coaching to their colleagues and everyone agreed an ongoing peer coaching program would improve teaching at NMSU.

CONCLUSION

Peer coaching serves a number of important functions on a college campus. It is an effective way to improve teaching and provides a relatively non-threatening structure for teachers to solicit constructive feedback from students. It also builds

community among teachers by reassuring them that they do not face the challenges of the classroom alone. Peer coaching is definitely a program that provides “a lot of bang for the buck.”

References

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Table 1. Closed-ended items and descriptive statistics

Item	Median	SD
My teaching benefited from visits to colleagues' classes.	6.0	.86
My teaching benefited from the discussions I had with my peer coach(es) following our classroom visits.	6.0	.96
It was reassuring to see other teachers face some of the problems I face in the classroom.	6.0	1.37
I found a companion (one or more) among my peer coaches, someone with whom I can think out loud.	6.0	1.27
I received supportive feedback.	7.0	.78
I received constructive criticism.	6.0	1.26
My peer coaches seemed so concerned about hurting my feelings that they could not be frank about challenges I face in my teaching.	2.0	1.23
My peer coaches were overly harsh in their feedback.	1.0	.43
Peer coaching helped me communicate better with my students (e.g., by helping me see where the students are confused or don't understand).	5.0	1.11
I got help with specific teaching challenges that I face.	5.5	1.37
Peer coaching helped me critically examine my teaching techniques.	6.0	1.18
Peer coaching affirmed that at least some of what I am doing in the classroom is right.	6.0	.61
Peer coaching helped reduce the frustration I sometimes feel toward my students.	5.0	1.64
Peer coaching helped me enjoy teaching more.	5.0	1.39
Because of peer coaching, I feel I am better able to take risks in the classroom.	6.0	1.64
Initially, I felt nervous or anxious to have a colleague visit my class.	2.0	2.20
For the benefits offered, peer coaching was too time-consuming.	2.0	1.67
Peer coaching will help my students learn more from me.	6.0	1.29
Peer coaching helped me improve my teaching.	6.0	1.16
An ongoing peer coaching program would improve teaching on campus.	6.0	.79
I will recommend peer coaching to my colleagues.	6.0	1.18
I will participate in peer coaching again.	6.0	1.81
I received helpful feedback from the interview my coach(es) conducted with my students. (If your students were NOT interviewed, please skip this and the following two items.)	7.0	1.26
I will have a colleague interview my students in future semesters.	5.5	1.85
I will recommend student interviews to my peers.	6.0	1.28

Note: Participants responded to each item using a seven-point Likert-type scale with 1, *strongly disagree*, and 7, *strongly agree*. Median responses are reported because the data were skewed.

Table 2. Participant characteristics

Characteristics	Percent
Female	68%
Non-tenured	90%
Field of Study:	
Social sciences	16%
Business	10%
Sciences/engineering	37%
Education	16%
Languages	5%
Other	16%
Years teaching full-time	
< 1	21%
1	26%
2-7	32%
> 7	21%