

Peer Coaching for Online Instruction: An Emerging Model for Faculty Development

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Ensuring Quality in Online Instruction

One of the challenges resulting from the growing popularity of online education is how to effectively evaluate online instruction. The central question isn't whether this new approach to education is effective—the plethora of “no significant difference” studies largely render that question moot—but what steps can be taken to not only ensure that individual courses are effective but provide the necessarily guidance to promote faculty growth and development as they teach online.

In their 2000 report *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education*, the researchers at The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) identified twenty four benchmarks for ensuring effective online education. Among the faculty support benchmarks were the following:

- Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction and are assessed during the process.
- Instructor training and assistance, including peer mentoring, continues through the progression of the online course.

Reliance upon student and faculty self-reporting instruments as the sole forms of evaluation are particularly problematic since the online learning environment is significantly less familiar to participants than the classroom. Such unfamiliarity is likely to result in feedback which by itself is ill-suited to meeting these quality benchmarks. Incorporating peer mentoring or coaching into the instructors' training and support plan may enhance initial experiences with the online environment, which may contribute to improved teaching effectiveness. Furthermore, the use of peer coaching as a means of regular professional development will encourage faculty toward continual improvement of their online pedagogical strategies in light of increasing student and technological sophistication.

Peer observation and coaching activities are an accepted means of generating data for assessing teaching effectiveness; furthermore, the practice reinforces the concept that faculty are the best judges of institutional quality (DeZure, 1999). However, in the absence of established procedures and adequate training, peer coaching is benign at best and in many cases wastes valuable faculty resources.

Peer Coaching Cycle

Regent University has employed a method of peer coaching for face-to-face courses throughout the past six years. This method is taught in a year-long teaching improvement seminar. Participants engage in a coaching cycle with another colleague, sharing their findings with the larger group when the process has been completed. A team of experienced online instructors is currently adapting this peer coaching model for the online environment and has performed preliminary online peer coaching during this past academic year.

The peer coaching cycle used for face-to-face instruction consists of three stages: a planning conference, instructional observation, and a reflecting conference. The planning conference is a structured meeting in which the instructor and his/her peer coach discuss their collaborative effort with a particular focus on the goals of the instructor. Unlike other observation and feedback models, this peer coaching model does not promote open-ended feedback. Rather, during the planning conference the instructor briefs the peer coach on the specifics of the upcoming class session including such factors as the topic under consideration, the objectives for the session, the planned teaching and learning activities, the sequence and pacing of the session, and formal or informal assessments included in the session. With this background established, the instructor requests specific aspects that he/she would like the peer coach to observe. For example, the instructor may have difficulty sustaining a robust class discussion and would like the peer coach to observe the discussion dynamics and offer recommendations for improvement. It's important that the instructor have a clear purpose for engaging in peer coaching and can communicate such requests to the peer coach during the planning conference especially since feedback on topics other than these pre-arranged ones is generally off-limits. Such focused requests help to build trust between the instructor and coach, ensure that the observation and feedback will support the instructor's goals, and promotes genuineness and vulnerability (rather than an instructional "performance") during the lesson.

The second phase in the peer coaching cycle is the actual instructional observation. For face-to-face classes, we expect that the peer coach will spend between 45 and 90 minutes observing the selected class. The peer coach takes notes based on his/her observations of the class, using the planning conference requests as a framework. In addition, there are many observations which we encourage the peer coach to make, even if he/she doesn't directly communicate the findings to the instructor. The classroom environment, instructor placement and movement, student reactions, questions posed to the class (e.g., type, frequency counts, and even time between question and answer), interaction patterns, instructor mannerisms, content knowledge, visual aids, and use of class time are all facets which the peer coach could use to assist in the evaluation of the instructor's requests. Following the observation exercise, the peer coach is encouraged to review and organize his/her notes in preparation for the follow-up conference

The final phase is the reflecting or post-observation conference in which the instructor and peer coach meet to debrief the observed class session. During this meeting, the peer coach begins by providing the instructor with feedback based on his/her observations of the class. The feedback presentation typically includes describing the relevant observations, analyzing and interpreting the observations in light of the questions posed during the pre-observation meeting, and offering additional data which support the focus questions. After presenting such feedback to the instructor in an informational (vs. judgmental) manner, the peer coach elicits the instructor's inferences, opinions, and feelings. This provides an opportunity for the pair to dialogue about the observations and their consequences rather than having the peer coach simply debrief the instructor. The peer coach is discouraged from giving direct advice but instead to listen intently, ask clarifying questions, focus on the specific observations rather than offer personal commentary, and seek to agree together as to the meaning of the observations. The peer coach then closes the conference on a positive and productive note by helping the instructor develop an action plan to improve in the focus areas.

As a postscript to the peer coaching process, we have encouraged peer coaches to document their relevant observations in an essay or letter to the instructor as a means of helping the instructor use the experience for significant professional development. Furthermore, subsequent to the reflecting conference, the instructor is asked to comment on the collaborative coaching process (preferably in writing). This provides a final opportunity for reflection by the instructor and also helps to provide feedback which can be used to improve the peer coaching process.

Although the online peer coaching process is still under development, our initial efforts have largely been to adapt the three-phase cycle to the online learning environment. This has required some modification of

the procedures to accommodate the uniqueness of online learning. For example, rather than the peer coach observing a face-to-face class session for 45-90 minutes, we recommend that the peer coach log into the Blackboard course site multiple times during the course of a week. Since the majority of our online classes follow a traditional semester schedule but break the lessons into week-long intervals (highlighted by asynchronous threaded discussions), one week in Blackboard is equivalent to a week's worth of face-to-face class time. In addition, we encourage the online peer coach to take particular notice of the virtual classroom environment and interpersonal communication dynamics. Such facets include the design and layout of the Blackboard Web pages, the tone of the announcements and course materials, the level of learner-instructor and learner-learner engagement in class discussions, the types of media used for presenting materials, the ease of navigation, the clarity of course instructions, and the instructor's mastery of the course content and effectiveness at presenting it to the class.

Peer Coaching Checklist

The collaborative coaching model can be presented in a checklist format as follows:

Pre-Observation Meeting

1. Identify the instructor's concern about instruction
2. Translate the concerns into observable behavior
3. Identify procedures for improving the instructor's teaching and students' learning
4. Setting goals and content, arranging time for observation, and choosing appropriate instruments

Online Classroom Observation

- 5a. Class online atmosphere
- 5b. Learner-instructor interaction
- 5c. Learner-learner interaction
- 5d. Mastery of content
- 5e. Manner of presentation
- 5f. Media for presentation
- 5g. Use of Blackboard and the Internet
- 5h. Design usability

Post-Observation Meeting

6. Provide the instructor with feedback
7. Elicit instructor's inferences, opinions, and feelings
8. Close conference on a positive and productive note
9. Evaluate the process

References

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Biographical Sketches

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