WE NEVER TALK: PEER TO PEER OBSERVATION AND
FORMATIVE FEEDBACK AS STEPS TO
EVOLVING ACADEMIC CULTURE
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Abstract – This paper advocates for the introduction of peer-to-peer feedback between instructors as a way to promote increased discussion about teaching. A framework for peer observation is presented along with some guidelines for formative feedback. These tools are very much works in progress that are being refined, in part, through a “teaching triad” initiative being introduced in the Department of Chemical Engineering and Applied Chemistry at the University of Toronto. The hope is that increase conversations about teaching will promote a shift in culture that will encourage and support the exploration of new instructional pedagogies.

Keywords: Instructional assessment, Peer-observation, Formative feedback on instruction

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a very personal activity that we as instructors learn in public. Our learning strategy as instructors might at best be described as experiential, and often lacks any of the typical scaffolding or other tools to support learning, that we might provide our own students. Notably absent are elements of peer instruction or cooperative learning. Taking steps to incorporate these elements could help create a learning community for the instructors, that might serve as a role model of how learning should occur, for our students.

How we have ended up in this curious and perhaps paradoxical situation in not the subject of this paper. The focus here is on a first step that can be taken that may provide an easy way out. In particular, the value of formative feedback based on peer observation in widely recognised as a valuable learning tool [1]. While peer observation is increasingly being introduced as part of academic promotion, it is a shame that the first and often only time that a colleague visits our classrooms is for a high stakes assessment. Yet peer-instructor observation and feedback is not new; advocates have been promulgating the values of it for decades [2]. The case being proponed here is that even greater value can be leveraged from infusing peer observation into the culture of a department through the discussions that this may stimulate.

2. BACKGROUND

As part of its strategic planning, Chemical Engineering and Applied Chemistry decided to pilot in 2016/17 a peer observation initiative called ‘teaching triads’. Teaching triads involve three colleagues who attend one or more of each other’s lectures and then provide feedback. This provides each participant with feedback from two different perspectives. Teaching is a very personal undertaking and we all develop our own views and biases as to what good teaching looks like. The triad structure partially avoids this pitfall; it had been introduced to our faculty by Prof. Suzanne Kresta from the University of Alberta. A primary motivator for this initiative was to encourage exchange of best practices and promote more discussion about teaching.

As a first step, relevant literature was reviewed [1-10] so as to identify best practices and construct a recommended process to for peer observation and feedback.

3. RECOMMENDED PROCEDURE

Through the review of literature, a four-step process was identified: initial discussion, observing a class, providing feedback to your colleagues with self-reflection, and reporting back to the group (see pull-out box on page 2 for a simplified outline of the proposed process). Colleagues were encouraged to request any contextual information (e.g. course outline, learning outcomes etc.) that might help understand the goals of the class attended. They were also reminded that we can all have bad days in class and that having a colleague present may create pressure that does not bring out the best in us.

Any feedback exchanged was expected to remain confidential within the triad, respecting the wishes of the participants. The intent of the initiative was to encourage formative feedback rather than to develop a tool for summative evaluation (e.g. in relation to annual “progress through the ranks” or promotion). However, participants were encouraged to discuss and
Simplified Teaching Triad Procedure

1) Initial discussion:
   - Contact a colleague to see if they are interested in creating a teaching triad.
   - Discuss with your colleagues what aspects of their teaching you would like feedback on and vice versa. Choose only a few rather than try to cover a lot, based on observing a single lecture.
   - Set up some times to visit each other’s classes. You don’t need to attend the same lecture but can if this works.
   - Set a time in advance to meet so as to provide feedback, ideally soon after your class visit.

2) Peer Observation:
   - Arrive on time or early to class. The instructor can briefly introduce you and explain why you are present.
   - Try to focus on the students as much as on the instructor. We can be partially blinded positively or negatively by confirmation bias as to how our students are actually responding to our teaching.
   - Do not ask questions or influence the flow of the class.
   - Review and compile your notes soon after your visit.

3) Meet to provide feedback:
   - Prepare a summary (5 min) of your observation notes based on the guiding questions. Focus more on the areas your colleague indicated interested in.
   - Consider how you would respond to the feedback you are providing. A secondary goal is to increase our capacity to observe and provide useful feedback on teaching.
   - Try to provide feedback with a positive tone; focus on your observations rather than on corrective actions.
   - As a group discuss what you learnt from observing and the feedback. Suggest what you might do differently based on what you have learnt. If asked, offer suggestions to other colleagues on what they might do differently.
   - Provide feedback to your colleagues on the utility of the feedback you received, so as to help them provide better feedback.
   - Reflect individually after the meeting on what you learnt through the observation and feedback, and what additional actions you can take so as to benefit from it.

4) Reporting back:
   - As appropriate, report back to other colleagues (e.g. at a Department meeting) and share any key learning or ideas that emerged to improve teaching.
   - Report any suggestions to improve the teaching triad process, or any thoughts on the overall experience to help evaluate its utility and effectiveness.

The guiding questions were consolidated and synthesised from a range of resources [5-10].

The questions were mostly intended to prime thinking before visiting a class rather than be used as a template to guide observation during a visit. It was hoped that these questions might also help guide any discussion before the visit. Colleagues could reflect on these questions and select a few so as to help guide a colleague visiting their class as to what they might provide focus on.

**Guiding Questions**

**Organisation:**
- Was the instructor well organised and prepared?
- Did the class have a logical flow of ideas, with an engaging introduction and clear summary of the takeaway learning at the end?
Were the desired learning outcomes clear? Was the desired level of learning clear?

Were useful connections made between the topics covered, and other content within or beyond the course?

Did the instructor start on time, and end on time at a logical place? Did they allow time for questions at the end?

Presentation:

Was their voice loud and clear? Did the students all appear to be able to easily hear?

Were any blackboard notes visible and legible? Did any PowerPoint slides have appropriate levels of detail?

Was body language (hands, eyes, movement) consistent with the visual and oral information?

Was the delivery at an appropriate pace? Was sufficient time allowed to absorb key concepts?

How did they use the classroom space? Did they focus more on some parts of the room?

Was the quantity and detail of notes appropriate? Were students spending more time writing or listening/thinking?

Knowledge:

Did they use relevant examples and illustrations to facilitate understanding?

Did they appear knowledgeable on the given topic? What helped their knowledge come across?

Was the content selected appropriate to the level being taught and the needs of the students?

Was the material selected accessible yet intellectually stimulating to most of the class? Did it encourage students to develop their skills? reinforce knowledge? challenge them to move beyond their existing levels of understanding?

What was the muddiest point in the class for you? for the students?

Rapport:

How would you describe the interaction or relationship of the instructor and students? Did the instructor treat the students with respect and courtesy?

How would you describe the class atmosphere? Were the students comfortable asking questions? Did the instructor listen carefully to the questions and respond constructively so as to enhance learning?

How would you describe the rapport of the instructor with the content? The rapport of the students with the content? The rapport of the instructor with the students?

Were the students engaged? Over what portion of the duration of the class? What portion of the students were engaged most of the time? What parts of the lecture drew the greatest or least engagement? What actions did the instructor use to try to hold the student attention?

How did the instructor try to motivate learning? Did they indicate the relevance of the topics?

What value did they communicate about the related knowledge?

How was student interaction solicited and how did they respond? How much active student involvement was there and at what level (e.g. Q&A between student-instructor, student-student, whole class discussion)?

How did the instructor develop an understanding of whether the students were achieving the desired learning? (e.g. watch body language for signals? ask if clarification was needed, ask probing questions?)

Pedagogy:

What type of instructional approach was being used? (e.g. content delivery with Q&A)

Were any active learning techniques evident (e.g. think pair share, clicker questions, peer instruction, debate)?

To what extent did the instructional approach student vs instructor centric?

Did the chosen instructional activities (e.g. explanation of theory, derivation, sample problem, illustration etc.) well support the learning outcomes?
5. DISCUSSION

An extensive body of literature was found describing the benefits of peer-instructor observation and formative feedback. This literature also identified a number of best practices. Despite this body of evidence, peer-instructor observation still seems to be the exception rather than the norm. Thus, reluctance or barriers may exist that may go beyond the usually issues of limited time and energy.

Despite such reluctance, three triads were created in 2016/17 involving nine faculty which was certainly an encouraging start. Colleagues who participated generally felt that it was a useful process and that they benefited both from doing the observations and the feedback that they received on their teaching. Some commented on the benefits of seeing the instructional process from the perspective of a student, and the interest in being reacquainted with the technical material their colleagues presented. Others enjoyed experiencing the contrasting atmospheres and learning activities in their colleague’s classrooms.

While only limited interest has been shown so far in the details of the proposed process and framework for feedback, this should increase over time. There was increased interest on how to observe and what to look for, once colleagues had actually gone through the process of attending a colleague’s lecture. Participating in this process presumably raised questions that promoted awareness and interest. Hopefully this interest will grow as more colleagues become engaged in this teaching triad process. More importantly, increased participation in this teaching triad process will hopefully increase interest in collegial discussion of teaching and learning, and with this motivation to pursue a path of continuous improvement of teaching.

6. REFERENCES

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