

The ToolBox

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A Teaching and Learning Resource for the Faculty of Indiana Wesleyan University



Three Ironies of Teaching



Teaching is often filled with confusing paradoxical experiences. The circumstances that surround these ironies, and our responses to them, can greatly contribute to our overall feelings and perspectives on the profession, our students, and our levels of success. As a starting point for our conversation in this issue of *The ToolBox*, let's consider three of the great ironies that are frequently experienced in teaching: 1) Knowledge vs. Pedagogy, 2) Valleys vs. Mountaintops, and 3) Public vs. Private.

Knowledge vs. Pedagogy

There is a distinct difference between *having knowledge* (i.e., information, facts, data) and the ability to *effectively transmit that knowledge to others* through effective pedagogy. As faculty members, just knowing is not enough. Certainly it is always incumbent upon us to be masters of the cutting edge knowledge and skills in our academic disciplines. At the same time, however, it is equally important that we explore and experiment with varied instructional techniques

that will allow our students to share in our knowledge, and make it their own, based upon the creative and effective ways that we teach. One more time, just knowing is not enough.

Valleys vs. Mountaintops

Consider the vast range of feelings that so often emerge while teaching. Regardless of how many years that you have been part of the teaching profession, there are moments that range from a) "This is the most awesome career possible and I am so fortunate to have these opportunities to be in the lives of college students" to z) "I have no business being in the classroom and simply cannot ever teach again!" This enormous span of emotions is no accident. Rather it demonstrates the degree to which teaching becomes such an integral part of who we are as people. Good teachers have strong feelings about what they are doing. For better or worse, there are always days of great exhilaration and others of utter despair as we reflect on our effectiveness and the responses of our students.

Public vs. Private

We stand in front of a classroom before the gazing eyes and listening ears of our students —perhaps hundreds of them every year. Our knowledge and teaching skills are on public display for all to see and hear. As Parker Palmer describes in the book *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (1999), the people in the audience (i.e., the inhabitants of the classroom) seldom include our colleagues. As each academic year begins, we head off to our classrooms and close the door behind us. What happens from that point on is not widely known. The only way that we know (or think we know) who are the "best professors on campus" comes through an informal network of anecdotes and second-hand comments. The teaching that we do, although "public" in many respects, is often a lonely, solitary experience that we don't often discuss with our colleagues.

An Approach to Addressing These Conflicts

Is there an answer to these dilemmas that plague members of the college teaching profession? Can we find a way to improve our abilities to teach effectively, to moderate the peaks and valleys of this emotional rollercoaster that we ride each week, and take the risk of inviting our colleagues to critique our work? Part of the answer to these questions can be found in the collegial experience of "peer observation." On page 2 you will find an invitation to consider the possibilities of peer observation as a means to begin resolving the three ironies of teaching. Consider how this process might be of help to you in building relationships with colleagues and improving the quality of the teaching and learning experiences that you provide for your students.

Opening the Doors to Peer Observation

The Role of Peer Observation

A growing number of colleges and universities are employing the process of peer observation as a faculty development tool. Despite an increasing level of interest in the process, there are many common concerns expressed by faculty as to the role that the peer observation process might play in decisions regarding rank promotion, tenure, and employment. Part of this hesitancy is also related to a lack of knowledge and understanding about how the process works and what it can do to assist in the development of improved teaching skills. Peel (2005) suggests that peer observation of teaching can serve as a reflective device, as a means of developing collegial support, and as a way of improving the overall quality of teaching. It is also proposed that peer observation can serve as a means to alleviate the tensions and challenges presented by the "three ironies of teaching." In this context, we will provide a *brief* overview of the basics of peer observation as a way of helping the reader consider if this tool would be a helpful component of professional growth.

The Process of Peer Observation

To understand the process of peer observation, it is critical to delineate who will do the observation, what the observer will be choosing as a focus, the purpose of the observation in the larger context of university policies, and how this process and the results, will be shared, documented, and used.

Who?

One of the first questions that needs to be asked is related to the identity and qualifications of the peer observer. We all, of course, would be most comfortable with an observer who is known to us and with whom we have a relationship. At the same time, however, if the observation is intended to result in improved approaches to teaching, there is value in having an observer who knows and practices high quality approaches to classroom instruction. As a participant in the peer observation process it is important for you to be comfortable with your observer *and* believe that they can provide useful and effective feedback. Readers are encouraged to begin thinking about colleagues who could effectively meet both of these criteria. It may even be advantageous to consider forming a small group of 3-4 colleagues in which all members of the group observe one another.

What?

It is important for the observer and the faculty member to have a mutual understanding as to the variables that will be included in the classroom observation. It is recommended that participants avail themselves of one of the many structured observation checklists that are available commercially or on the Internet. It may also be likely, if the peer observation is part of a rank improvement/tenure decision, that the college or university might recommend an observational format that specifies what is to be included, or serve as a focus, for the observation process.

Why?

A successful peer observation process should result in feedback that will improve the quality of teaching and learning in the classroom. This assumption, however, is based upon the belief that the observer is poised and ready to provide feedback on positive attributes of the classroom as well as some areas that may need to be improved (slightly or even dramatically). This assumption goes back to the tension between expertise and relationships. Do you want an observer who will only tell you nice things about yourself? Or, do you want an observer who will go to the next level and make specific, understandable, concrete recommendations on how you might improve the teaching/ learning process in your classroom?

How?

The professional literature (e.g., Cosh, 1998) generally suggests a three-step approach to the process of peer observation: 1) A pre-observation conference designed to gain an understanding of the focus and direction of the class/lesson to be observed (e.g., review of syllabus, identify critical issues that might be a focus of the observation), 2) The observation itself that could include one or multiple visits to the classroom, and 3) A post-observation conference to discuss the results and discuss possible approaches to remediation of identified certain techniques or processes. The faculty member and the observer should agree on how the observation will take place (e.g., announced, unannounced) and how the results will be communicated (e.g., written report, face-to-face meeting, or both). Making these agreements in advance should serve to make the process more efficient and useful.

Cosh, J. (1998). Peer observation in higher education: A reflective approach. *Innovations in Education & Training International*, 35(2), 171-176.

Peel, D. (2005). Peer observation as a transformatory tool? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(4), 489-504.

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