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Faculty Peer Coaching: Collaborative Partnerships for Instructional Development

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Teaching in higher education can be a lonely endeavor. Oftentimes, professors find themselves alone trying to work out solutions to emerging issues of student engagement or academic struggles. As colleagues, Kristin and David came together to talk about the ways in which our experiences in leadership, coaching, and instructional design and effective teaching could support our colleagues in their development as instructors. What if we designed an opportunity and invited faculty to participate in a peer coaching community? We could provide the group with professional development about teaching and coaching, as well as space, partners and a learning community for debriefing and ongoing support. Who knew that four years ago, this small idea would turn into a university-wide initiative with 42 continuously engaged faculty participants and a growing waiting list?

In this article, we walk readers through the intentional design of our faculty designed peer-coaching initiative at Sacred Heart University and share emerging findings about the impact of this initiative.

Peer Coaching

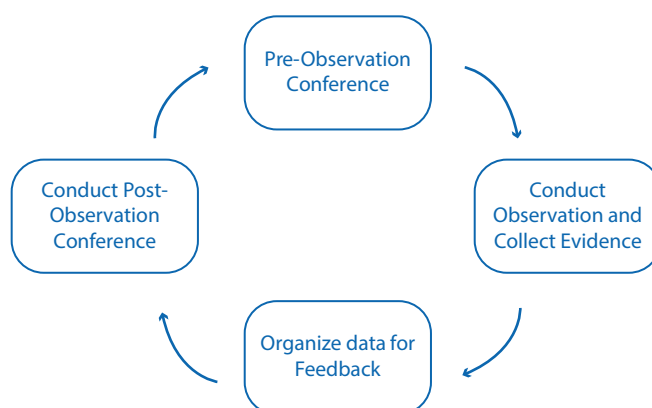
Peer coaching is a method of faculty instructional development, where two colleagues work together to improve their teaching practices. The term coaching was first introduced in the educational literature by Joyce and Showers (1980, 1981) as a tool for teacher collaboration within in-service professional development in PK-12 settings. Their early studies showed that teachers in coaching relationships practiced new skills and strategies more frequently and applied them more fittingly than did their counterparts who worked alone. Further, members of peer-coaching groups demonstrated long-term retention of new strategies and more appropriate use of new teaching methods over time (Baker & Showers, 1984).

Research on peer coaching in higher education, which remains limited, has found that peer coaching leads to improved faculty motivation and collaboration with colleagues, as well as a more reflective approach to pedagogical choices (Brancato, 2003; Huston & Weaver, 2008; Skinner & Welch, 1996). In addition to increasing teaching effectiveness, peer coaching has been

found to improve morale and collegiality (Keig & Waggoner 1994; Menges & Mathis, 1988), as well as colleagues' sense of belonging (Preston, 2020; Rainville, Title, & Desrochers, 2023; Rainville, Title & Desrochers, in press).

Although there is a lack of clarity and distinction in some research between peer coaching and peer *observation, review, or evaluation* of teaching in higher education, there are several distinct differences. Peer review tends to be evaluative and is most often tied to the tenure and promotion process (Amrein-Beardsley & Osborn Popp, 2011; Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Gosling, 2014; Hamersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005; Peel, 2005). In addition, peer review includes one way feedback from observer to instructor, whereas peer coaching is a reciprocal process in which the observer is also learning through continual reflection on one's own teaching in a supportive environment designed to integrate new teaching practices (Kanuka & Sadowski, 2020; Ridge & Lavigne, 2020). Peer coaching takes an intentional approach to support faculty in how to engage with each other as peer coaches. In this model, partners learn the cycle of coaching and scaffolding is provided throughout the process. Figure 1 shows how we have defined the peer coaching cycle, which grew from Goldhammer's (1969) clinical supervision model and later modified for peer coaching by Joyce & Showers (1980, 1981).

Figure 1
Peer Coaching Cycle



One of the central tenets of peer coaching is to model effective practices in adult learning while the faculty members are building their own skills in a safe, collaborative environment. A crucial element in this practice is to continually bring the peer coaches together as a learning cohort during the academic year. We call this group of faculty peer coaches a *Peer Coaching Community of Practice (PCCoP)* (Rainville, Title, & Desrochers, 2023). The PCCoP is a caring group of faculty members, from diverse backgrounds, with diverse areas of content expertise, who share a passion for teaching and learning in higher education, working together to enhance classroom practices to engage all students in learning rich, academically rigorous content. We hold each other accountable, share our celebrations and struggles – in both teaching and coaching- and learn from each other as we open our classrooms and instructional decisions and design to each other.

Design of Our Initiative

The intentional design of the peer coaching initiative, including the learning sessions before we launch peer coaching partnerships, as well as the on-going Peer Coaching Community of Practice (PCCoP), is key to the overall success of the initiative. We created two initial workshops: the first builds a shared foundation by introducing faculty participants to evidenced-based instructional practices, and the second focuses on the peer coaching process. Further, we work together as a group in a PCCoP, coming together to check-in, debrief, and learn together mid-semester and the end of each semester, with a full day of learning and celebrating at the end of the year with all the participants across the cohorts.

Building a Shared Foundation

We launch each peer coaching cohort with a workshop focused on designing evidenced-based instruction. Each faculty participant comes with deep content expertise so that the group has a wide range of knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning. Because of this, creating a shared foundation that we can draw from as individuals, partners, and groups is an essential starting place. We made the design decision to introduce a simplified, three-part instructional design framework based upon Elmore's (2008) instructional core, that places instructor decisions into three categories: *input* (content), *student engagement*, and *student assessment* (Rainville, Title, & Desrochers, 2023). *Input* is focused on how we design and deliver content in our courses. *Student engagement* is how we intentionally plan ways for students to access and engage with that content in increasingly more

complex ways. *Student assessment* helps us look at the ways in which we gather evidence of student knowledge and understanding of the content in both formal and informal ways. The instructional core approach offered us a simple, accessible, foundational starting point for our PCCoP: however, there are many frameworks that designers can draw upon that are for participants who are at varying levels of experience.

Introducing Peer Coaching

The second workshop, which runs before we launch the partnerships focuses on peer coaching. We provide participants with an overview of what peer coaching is and its purpose, and then walk the participants through each stage of the observation cycle. We offer participants the opportunity to watch different parts of the peer coaching cycle using filmed segments from our classroom teaching and post-conferences. We choose to use recordings from our practice as instructors and as facilitators to specifically model the vulnerability and trust that we are both asking for and building. We are also growing as educators and leaders, and so we offer our examples, not because they are strong exemplars but to demonstrate that each of us have strengths and areas for growth in our work as instructors and as peer coaches. After watching a segment of our instruction, and collecting data while observing, participants work together to plan a post-conference session as the observer. We help support each other with language choices and prompts that are encouraging and uses a strengths-based lens, is grounded in specific evidence, and facilitates reflection from the instructor.

Peer Coaching Community of Practice (PCCoP)

From the beginning workshops, through the initiative, we are intentionally working on designing a psychologically safe and brave opportunity and environment for participants to show up and engage in courageous ways (Ali, 2017; Edmondson, 1999). Opening your instructional practices to discussion and possible critique is a vulnerability, especially in higher education where peer review and evaluation is included in the tenure and promotion process. This reality is addressed directly by both the facilitators and the group; evaluation *must* remain separate from peer coaching. The emphasis on peer coaching is the learning that each participant, including the facilitator, is engaged in. As faculty facilitators, we have designed purposeful ways to build trust within the group in fostering a confidential process and experience.

The peer coaching community of practice comes together to debrief and share throughout the academic year. We plan mid- and end-of-the semester sessions to connect, share, reflect and extend our learning. As facilitators, we provide support and guidance for the different parts of the peer coaching process. For example, in each cohort, we have designed part of a session to share different observational tools, model how we have taken observational notes and analyzed them to construct possible feedback and provide an opportunity to practice this skill as a group. In a forthcoming publication, peer coaching partners pointed to the benefits not only of the partnership but also the learning that the community of faculty members provided to them: “We willingly share our teaching strategies and experiences with others to improve our teaching practices and, hopefully, help others improve theirs too. We get a lot of value out of learning from the interchange with our peer-coaching partnerships, but the debriefing sessions broaden these learning opportunities.” (Naftzinger and Vaughn, in press).

Within our PCCoP debriefing sessions, participants consistently share instructional methods and tools that they have integrated in their teaching that have promoted student engagement and learning. Oftentimes, as facilitators, we are noticing and naming what these instructional practices are and confirming for folks that their instructional decisions are rooted in evidenced-based practices. At the request of the participants, we have provided additional professional learning sessions on topics suggested by the faculty. Topics have included designing effective classroom discussions and group work, engaging students in reading outside and inside the classroom, and improving large lectures and student engagement during them.

Emerging Findings Focused on Impact

We have collected data throughout this initiative, engaging in on-going data analysis. Data has included verbal and written responses gathered during debriefing sessions and an end of the year celebration. We have begun to analyze transcripts and documents from recorded debriefing sessions and post-conferences using the grounded theory approach of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). There are distinct findings that have emerged that begin to show the impact of the peer coaching initiative. These include change in instruction, the need for continued growth and development, the value of the peer coaching structure and process on validating positive practices, and a sense of belonging to a community and the institution.

Instructional Design Changes

“I think that sometimes we might get lost in our own teaching silos and rationalize that this is what I’m doing in my class, and it works. But, by talking with other people, you begin shifting your disposition and start thinking, “Maybe what I’m doing isn’t working, so what can I change to make it work better?”

(Jeff, Rhetoric Professor)

Many of the participants have indicated, like Jeff, that the process of peer coaching has led to changes in their thinking and more specifically in their practice. Participants have noted several active learning strategies they have enacted successfully in their classrooms such as Think/Pair Share, an engagement strategy where the instructor pauses a lecture and asks students to process the content individually, then with a partner. A variation of this strategy applied to class discussions involves “rehearsal,” where the instructor gives students time to formulate responses individually or with a partner before being asked to participate in a discussion. Other popular strategies included intentionally asking higher-level thinking questions in class rather than recall questions; using personal examples to illustrate major concepts or theories; allowing discussions to occur in smaller groups rather than always in the large class; using a mix of activities, including physical movement, to break up longer class sessions; using technology tools, such as Kahoot or Perusal; re-designing in-class and out-of- class tasks to focus on task rigor, not simply content rigor; and involving strategies for inclusive teaching. Participants all used different student engagement strategies after just one semester of participation.

Need for Continued Growth

Despite the affirmation, all participants agreed that peer coaching has made them realize they have room for growth as instructors. Learning a few new strategies has made them eager to learn more, especially after they have experienced success. One quote from an original cohort member pushed us to provide additional direct instruction on teaching strategies: “I’ve done all the easy stuff. Please teach me more complex techniques.” Because of this shared sentiment, the facilitators conducted additional workshops on teaching strategies. Some of the most common areas for growth included more engaging lectures; strategies for increasing the cognitive demands of the tasks (rigor); more engagement ideas; greater student engagement in discussions; strategies for offering more choices to students in academic tasks; techniques to draw in reluctant students into class activities.

The goal of this initiative is to develop instructors who are reflective practitioners, who are always striving to improve their craft. It is clear from this evidence that our faculty participants are eager for new learning and professional development opportunities; it is likely one reason they wish to continue in this initiative and why the knowledge from peer coaching is markedly different from traditional professional learning models. To summarize this theme, the statement most cited by the participants was this one: “peer coaching became a venue to think about our teaching.”

Validation

The purpose of the peer observation and feedback process is not to find fault but to identify effective instructional practices already in use and discuss possible improvements. One theme that emerged from the data is that faculty members discovered that some, if not much, of their practice, was effective. This is important learning because many faculty commented that they had little training in pedagogy before taking on the role of professor. It was comforting to hear from a peer that some of what they were doing was “working.” One comment that elicited the most agreement among the faculty was this: “We foster more engagement than we think!” Another statement that many peers affirmed: “I feel affirmed in strengths I did not know I had.”

Connectedness and Belonging

While the initiative’s stated purpose is to improve instructional practice, an unanticipated benefit to participants has been how connected they feel to other colleagues and the university. Representative of this impact, multiple participants agreed with statements such as “learning about other content areas,” “being paired with a completely different content area,” “having a safe space to have honest discussions about teaching without a power dynamic,” and “having a trusted colleague,” and “the process was very collegial” as key benefits of the peer coaching initiative. In an upcoming publication, a cross-college partnership explained the sense of connectedness, belonging, and support that peer coaching provided: “The process exposed faculty to overlapping and complementary perspectives and offered diverse expertise for improving their andragogical practices. Additionally, it had positive social-emotional effects on the group. Peer coaching reduces the isolation and anxiety of junior faculty by providing a unique form of much-needed professional development, navigational capital, and social-emotional support” (Preis, Martignetti, Marmo, Ostrander & Schreffler, forthcoming).

Peer coaching has the potential to be the bridge between faculty members learning about improved instruction and implementing new strategies in their classrooms. Based on decades of research on teaching practices, adult learning and successful coaching, a peer coaching initiative can play an important role in an institution’s cultural shift from one in which instructional practice is largely a private matter to one in which faculty are comfortable making their practice public to trusted colleagues.

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Grading for Learning at the University of Rhode Island

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Grading student work is a fraught topic for critical instructors who reflect on how best to equitably support student success, especially in relation to fostering students' sense of belonging and willingness to take intellectual risks. The sense of frustration experienced by many faculty around grading is not simply caused by logistical complications, but often deeply rooted in a severe misalignment between their educational values and hopes for the students and the grading-focused environment in which they teach. An increasing number of higher education colleagues have been advocating that more attention needs to be paid to grading practices to truly advance inclusive teaching efforts as students in our institutions are too often hyper-focused on the grade they receive at the end of the course rather than appreciating and embracing the learning happening throughout the semester. At the University of Rhode Island, a growing group of instructors have been discussing this

area of critically inclusive teaching practice, and experimenting with grading scheme tweaks and variations over several years. This article summarizes the history of the "[Grading for Learning: Empowering Students with Agency for Growth](#)" [Faculty Learning Community](#) (Santucci & Golas, 2021) at the University of Rhode Island (2019-2022), showcases one faculty member's specific implementation of a Specifications Grading (Nilson & Stanny 2014) approach as an example in practice, and highlights key takeaways from the collective experience of the authors (Anna, Julianna, and Alissa - "we" in this article) as we continue our shared journey of critical reflection about [grading for equitable learning](#) in higher education.¹

¹ We write this article after having co-led a session with one of our colleagues on this topic for the NEFDC Spring 2022 Conference on "Learning Assessment, Evaluation & Grading: