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# Engaging the Power of Peer Observation

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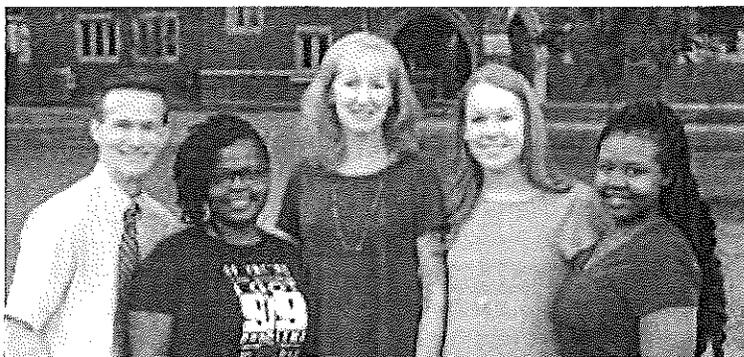
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## Engaging the Power of Peer Observation

*"This experience has been amazing and should be a part of professional development each year," said one participant.*

*What is "this experience" referenced above? It is the simple strategy of creating conversation, community, and reflection among teachers through informal, yet purposeful, peer observation. This is the story of one graduate school class' experience with the power of peer observation.*



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graduate of the University of Virginia and is enrolled in the Curriculum and Instruction Master of Education program at the University of Richmond.

**Kate Cassada** serves as Assistant Professor of Education and Assistant Chair of Graduate Education for Educational Leadership and Policy Studies for the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies. For 14 years, Kate served as a public school classroom teacher, senior teacher, assistant principal and principal.

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**Julie Harris** teaches eighth grade Algebra 1 in Chesterfield County Public Schools, where she is in her fourth year of teaching. Julie is a graduate of Longwood University and recently finished the Curriculum and Instruction master's program at the University of Richmond.

**DaMia Brown-Kidd** is enrolled in the Curriculum and Instruction Master of Education program at the University of Richmond. DaMia is a fourth year elementary school teacher in Richmond Public Schools.

As a college professor, I have taught hundreds of graduate students in instructional leadership and reflective teaching courses. The overwhelmingly consistent report I hear from these active and engaged educators is that they rarely, if ever, have time to see each other teach. Teaching remains an isolated event—protected time for teachers to share their craft through thoughtful peer discussion and observation rarely exists. When time is devoted to these activities, it usually is prescribed by building or division-led professional development initiatives, experiences teachers say do not feel genuine, safe, and focused on true reflection and growth. As Daniels, Pirayoff, and Bessant state, “professional development experiences in K-12 education are often disconnected from what teachers actually want and need in order to authentically improve and/or strengthen their practice” (2013, p. 268).

### From Early Career to Veteran: The Experience We Shared

***A professor’s anxiety (Kate)*** Four teachers in the Central Virginia region came together to explore their own teaching and discover their reflective paths in a graduate level Reflective Teaching Seminar course. This class was led by me, an assistant professor with experience as a K-12 teacher and principal, and consisted of students representing diversity in gender, years of experience, and grade levels taught. The students were Bobby, a high school social studies teacher with 28 years of experience; Tara, a kindergarten/first grade special educator with six years of experience in the classroom; and two teachers with three years of experience each - Julie, a middle school math teacher, and DaMia, a third grade teacher. The schools in which these educators taught ranged from urban to suburban and low income to more affluent. I was anxious about my ability to facilitate meaningful reflection on the graduate students’ own practice. Developing the cohesion and trust to share deepest concerns about their own practice and support each other in instructional growth could have been difficult, but they embraced the challenge.

One of the primary assignments in our seminar is called the *Observation Rubric and Classroom Walkthroughs* activity. Based on the value of the research-based best practices of peer observation and reflection, this assignment asks teachers to identify one area that interests or challenges them regarding their own instructional skill. They create a brief rubric grounded in research and best practices that is used as a peer observation data-gathering tool. In addition, these graduate students video themselves instructing and use the created rubrics to focus their participation in small-group peer-video coaching. Each semester, there are varying levels of anxiety regarding serving as peer observers in their schools and videoing and sharing their own instruction with classmates. Reactions can range from “I’m pretty comfortable with this” to “I have to drop this class!”

**We want you to know how valuable the peer observation experience was to us – and how valuable it could be to you.**

Despite coming from different schools, within three weeks significant bonding was evident. By the middle of the semester, a true sense of trust and respect set the stage for remarkable self-study. At the close of semester, we realized that the experience of peer observation, reflection, and growth was so powerful that the five of us came together to write about it and share a call to action with other educators. We want you to know how valuable the peer observation experience was to us – and how valuable it could be to you. Here is our experience, as told through the lens of my students.

***Renewing a teacher’s soul (Bobby)*** As a 28-year veteran, I felt that I had lost, on some level, the connection with my high school students. I was beginning

to feel as if my main concern was less about student learning and more about maintaining a disciplined classroom. As a result, I became overly focused on keeping students in line and lost sight of their individual needs and personal stories. I knew that some of my colleagues had well-managed classrooms, so I was quite eager to conduct a few informal peer drop-ins to see how they maintained these expectations to keep their classrooms running smoothly. With this in mind, I experienced my first epiphany. As Kate noted in class, "You can pick a fight with anyone about anything." As I saw how other colleagues managed their rooms, without fights, I noticed that they were so relaxed. For example, one colleague spent time conversing with a student about a blocked website while another chatted with a student about a sudden discovery on her laptop. A third teacher's students seemed very comfortable with beginning-of-class routines that still allowed for personal interactions.

Students beamed with delight to interact with their teachers and classmates in ways that were at once both flexible and rehearsed. In what may have been seen by others as off-task moments, I re-learned that connecting with students is an essential component to an effectively managed classroom. I realized I needed to stop being so firm with my expectations. Since abandoning my obsession with structuring every moment in my classroom, I have had a dramatically different feeling while teaching – especially with a talkative class that is actually very interested in asking questions constantly. Because I have relaxed, their numerous questions during direct instruction are now much more enriching. Student questioning tends to continue throughout the lesson, they may ask for an opinion from me or from each other, or share personal connections to the content. Such moments used to bother me, but now I see them as a way to personally connect with my students. This has transformed the room, and me as a teacher. By inviting more student contributions, I have learned about manga (a style of Japanese comics), about how to conceal a broken nose using makeup, or

about bad Mussolini historical puns. In doing so, I rediscovered the many great personal connections I thought I had lost. My more talkative class, which caused me anxiety, is the one that I now cannot wait to see. Other quieter classes are now on my radar as their silence is no longer “golden!”

**Through visiting peer classrooms and talking about our practices, I have refreshed myself and have a more engaged and connected classroom as a result.**

This assignment taught me that reflection about best practices must not only involve reading and discussing, but also seeing these practices in action. I am thrilled to have taken away so many ideas and to have applied them to my classroom without fear of losing some illusion of control that I was clinging to. Through visiting peer classrooms and talking about our practices, I have refreshed myself and have a more engaged and connected classroom as a result.

***Mirror mirror - a reflection of oneself (DaMia)*** As a third-year teacher, my initial reaction to the *Observation Rubric and Classroom Walkthroughs* assignment was filled with doubt. I asked myself, “Who is going to let me come in their room and openly observe their instruction?” That was followed by, “How in the world am I going to find time to fit this activity into my already overflowing schedule?” I thought the peer observation process would be hard, time consuming, and definitely something outside of my comfort zone. I did not think that I would enjoy it at all. While some of my initial thoughts and concerns were very accurate, others would be challenged as soon as I began.

I chose to build my peer observation rubric on consistency in the classroom. I felt that my classroom management lacked consistency regarding my expectations for students. My biggest insight from this assignment came from when I was able to video myself teaching and analyze with others how

**Overall, the assignment brought a sense of hope and comfort in knowing that I might not have everything right as of now, but I don't have it all wrong.**

I managed my classroom. Although I was able to see that I managed the class better than I thought, I was still able to identify areas in which I wasn't consistent and immediately begin to brainstorm solutions. It was nice to hear feedback from colleagues to confirm my approaches. Overall, the assignment brought a sense of hope and comfort in knowing that I might not have everything right as of now, but I don't have it all wrong.

***Wow! The things we can learn from each other. (Tara)*** For this assignment, I observed three veteran teachers and one who was in her second year. Mathematics and reading are the areas on which I chose to focus during my observations because I wanted to learn new strategies for teaching them. I appreciated that every observation was genuine, meaning I saw each teacher's typical, authentic practice. I learned something new from all of the teachers; however, the veteran teachers taught me ways I could increase engagement in my own classroom. For example, one teacher used a version of the Twister game for math instruction. The students had math problems on a card and the teacher put numbers in the circles on the mat. When the students found the answer to

the problem, they put a body part on the mat. I thought this was an interactive and fun-filled way to learn.

At the conclusion of the observations, it surprised me when the teachers came to me asking for feedback, especially the veteran teachers. This assignment helped to further create a feeling of mutual respect and explore a method of professional learning from which we can continue to learn and grow together.

***Is what I am doing effective or should I be doing what everyone else is doing?***

**(Julie)** As a third year teacher, I often find myself isolated in my own classroom having no idea what is going on throughout the school. Although I collaborate with other Algebra teachers regularly, I still do not have a sense of what their classes look like. Does their instruction look similar to mine? Are my practices as effective as they could be, or are there effective strategies we could be sharing?

I find it easy to walk into a classroom of a teacher I have a relationship with; however, I wanted to step out of my comfort zone with this *Observation Rubric and Classroom*

*Walkthroughs*

assignment so I sought

teachers I was less

familiar with. To say

I was nervous about

walking into these

classrooms is a complete understatement! However, once each class began I quickly realized what I could gain from experiences such as this. For example, I witnessed a different style of warm up activities that I could incorporate into my teaching, collaborative activities that engaged students, and various new transition cues—there was so much to see and take away.

**To say I was nervous about walking into these classrooms is a complete understatement!**

One struggle in my own classroom is ensuring that students are engaged and participating. I am not a fan of calling on students, so often times they volunteer to answer. I have always felt this has been a successful questioning strategy for me. However, within the last year I began to wonder if it really is working, or if I have the same confident students answering and participating while others sit back and observe. This was the foundation of my rubric and my peer observations. How do other people ensure students are participating equally in their classrooms?

I think we can all relate to that feeling when you are "in the zone" teaching in front of the classroom. With so many moving parts, it is hard to really know if all students understand or know the answer to a question, or even if all students are truly engaged. When I walked into my colleague's seventh-grade English class the students were discussing a book that they had been reading as a class. The teacher was asking lots of questions. I saw that this teacher was not calling on students, but the majority of the class was fully engaged and responding. If they were not answering, they were looking in their books trying to find the answer. This gave me assurance to know that what I am doing is okay. Questioning doesn't have to be heavily structured to ensure students are learning. Through this observation I was given affirmation that I don't need popsicle sticks or tally marks next to names to ensure my students are participating and learning.

Colleagues can build collaborative relationships with each other by having open conversations that give and receive feedback, especially if they also visit each other's classrooms. We can talk to our peers all day about what is going on in our classrooms but peer observation creates greater opportunities to gain new ideas, giving positive and constructive feedback to better both teachers' instruction.

### **There is Always an Opportunity to Grow**

When conversing about our experiences, we came to the conclusion that each

of us reached similar takeaways, despite variety in the number of years we have been teaching and the grade levels we teach. Our reflective conversations were cohesive in knowing that peer observation is eye-opening, thought provoking, and can be a true learning experience for all educators. As our experiences unfolded, we realized:

- The most powerful peer collaboration is driven by teachers who want to learn with and from others.
- Having other teachers observe us creates a culture of accepting and giving feedback.
- Teachers need to reflect on their own practice. Peer observation helps us to do this.
- As teachers we feel self-imposed pressure - we often don't know if what we are doing is right or wrong.
- Interacting with colleagues can give teachers confirmation and validation. Teachers can see that what they are doing is not wrong, although they can do things better.
- Self-reflection and self-realization can lead to giving yourself permission to change. We were influenced by the power of seeing others teach.
- Seeing colleagues in action helps teachers to reevaluate and get unstuck, helping teachers realize, "I can be that person, too."
- Observing trusted friends can help teachers realize that they, themselves, also are good at their craft.
- Stepping outside of your comfort zone and interacting with peers has value in forming a community among teachers.

## PEER OBSERVATION

- Teachers can work with others for 30 years and never see someone else teach. Transformation can be found in the peer observation experience.
- Teachers may be shocked by how welcoming and open their peers can be. This gave us comfort going into classes. We saw REAL teaching going on.
- Teachers genuinely care to know peers' thoughts and receive feedback. Peer feedback can provide sorely needed validation and recognition (and has the power to lift spirits when revisited after a challenging day).
- There is value in establishing relationships early in the year. If a student issue or professional misunderstanding arises, it should not be the first and only time you have talked to that colleague.
- By observing our peers, teachers are constantly reminded that education is always changing. Other classrooms offer a view of different teaching and learning styles.
- Educators can't even predict what this culture of collaboration can offer teachers - what it might do for learning and motivation. We know how powerful it was for us.

### Grounded in Literature

Beginning this collaborative work, we knew that reflecting on practice, exploring research-based best practice to create personalized rubrics, building community and a culture of trust, and peer observations matter - but in recognizing the power of our experience and group learning, we see how deeply our experience is grounded in and affirmed by the literature of best instructional practices.

"Professional educators continually try to learn...They have internalized the idea that all good teaching can improve; they seek out other outstanding teachers and learn from, as well as teach, their colleagues" (Danielson, 2007,

p. 176). Creating a collaborative environment that pairs peer observation with supportive, reflective discussion regarding practice can “support teachers as they work toward intentionally improving their pedagogical practices” (Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2013, p. 268). Simply put, “observation and feedback are active ingredients of effective coaching” (Connor, 2017, p. 78). As Nolan and Hoover (2011) note, effective professional learning opportunities for teachers “can take many forms including enrollment in graduate courses...peer coaching, action research and collegial development groups” (p. 74). By actively participating in our graduate program *Reflective Teaching Seminar*, we have merged the ideas of seeking outstanding colleagues, engaging in purposeful professional development, and learning with and from each other through peer observation and reflection to improve our practice.

The peer observation assignment is grounded in Danielson’s assertion that “time is well spent when peers conduct self-assessments and then discuss areas of perceived weakness and strength with each other” (2007, p. 176). As Danielson worked with teachers to explore her Framework for Teaching, she recognized that “educators have (or make) little opportunity to discuss good teaching” in daily practice, but when they have the opportunity to collaborate and discuss with each other, quality conversation emerges. Danielson noticed that the “application of various criteria in different contexts” all represented good teaching. As they watched video of instruction, Danielson witnessed teachers participating in side conversations and reflecting on their own teaching. Teachers studied each other’s practice and “saw a teacher’s action that they could adopt or adapt to their own setting.” Participants reported being “changed” by the experience of viewing and discussing instruction in a “concrete and research-based” setting (p. viii).

Through our self-analysis, rubric creation, peer observations, and reflection activities, we found that our experience and conclusions strongly parallel

Danielson's. As teachers across elementary, middle, and high school settings, we found striking similarities in what we learned from and saw in the classrooms of our professional peers and each other. We engaged in powerful conversations, we built a culture of community, we found commonalities of good teaching across all grade levels, we learned and borrowed from each other, and we are renewed and changed as teachers.

### **A Call to Action:**

#### **Advice for Engaging Peers in Observation and Collaboration**

The peer observation experience was very powerful for us as teachers who are eager to learn. Our common realizations came to us as a group representing all stages of a teacher's career. Individually, we each found the importance of incorporating peer observations into teacher-led, informal professional development. We strongly agree with the concept that professional development activities should "serve the function of helping the teacher grow personally, renewing the teacher's enthusiasm or helping the teacher become a better colleague and better member of the school community" (Nolan & Hoover, 2011, p. 74). We can and should be powerful resources for each other.

We encourage others to consider ways to engage in the power of peer collaboration and peer observation. On what areas are you focusing to improve your instruction? What worries you? Are you feeling stale? Are you questioning your skill? We are sending out a call to action. Set aside your preconceptions and your self-doubt. Assume others, like you, want to grow in their craft. Offer trust and approach a skillful peer and ask to step into his or her classroom - start the conversation. We are confident that you both will walk away with new insights and affirmations, and with the motivation to improve your practice. Take the risk!

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