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The 360° Feedback Model for Library Instructors: Observing, Teaching, Reflecting, Adapting

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In a model that has developed over the past few years, instruction librarians at the University of Vermont sought to create better opportunities to talk with one another about teaching, observe each other's classes, provide constructive feedback, and engage in reflective practice. In order to achieve these goals, a small group of us began to work as a team to learn from each other and our students.

Our group recognized that by working in a small community of practice, we could break down instructional barriers and could create a valuable learning experience for ourselves, as well as a replicable model for our colleagues. The model that grew out of this experience is grounded in examining our teaching and work in the classroom from multiple directions: peer observation, self-reflection, and student evaluations.

The specific goals of the project were to improve teaching among cohort members by providing a venue for discussing teaching among colleagues, creating a safe space for using unfamiliar teaching techniques in the classroom, developing a method for engaging in reciprocal peer-observation, and engaging in post-classroom self-reflection of our teaching practices. An underlying goal of the project was to demystify teaching observations as they had previously existed at our institution. In the past, observations had been closely associated with evaluation and with the reappointment and promotion process, rather than being a normal and valuable part of our teaching experience.

Setting context with a common lesson plan

We implemented the 360° Feedback Model while teaching a series of integrated one-shot class sessions to support students enrolled in an introductory writing and information literacy course. The class, ENGS 001: Written Expression, shares common readings and a common assignment sequence across all sections of the course. The three participating librarians taught, in total, 17 sections of ENGS 001 over two-and-a-half weeks, and each section was also observed by a peer from our cohort. We were aware that teaching and observing this many sessions would demand most of our time over the two-week period, but we felt that this intensive environment would provide us with more opportunities for observation and to make adjustments to our teaching in a truly iterative manner.

After developing learning outcomes for the class, we collectively decided upon

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teaching methods and classroom activities that would simultaneously help the students meet the learning outcomes and challenge us as teachers. Our goal was to build the session around student-identified needs in an effort to move away from a model that included a great deal of demonstration time in favor of a model that emphasized student participation. This resulted in the use of teaching methods that were unfamiliar to some members of the group.

Teaching methods and activities used in the lesson included: free-writing, a think-pair-share activity, group brainstorming and discussion facilitated by the librarian, and a mini-lecture that addressed ongoing research concerns identified by the students. The new lesson plan emphasized direct parallels between the iterative nature of writing and research processes by comparing their research revisions to writing revision they had already done in their course.

By being mindful of the aims of our project, we were able to successfully leverage a common curriculum in order to de-emphasize a focus on instructional design in favor of optimizing a focus on becoming better instructional practitioners. Yet, collaboratively designing a shared lesson was in itself a challenging task. Group members were asked to teach in new ways, be flexible, and adopt classroom practices with which some of us were unfamiliar. This also furthered our development as classroom practitioners and required us to leave our comfort zones in front of the class.

Having a class outline in common allowed us to become comfortable with the format of the session and pay greater attention to how we, as instructors, conducted the session and engaged with students. Likewise, the common curriculum permitted observers to come to class sessions knowing what to expect from certain activities or transitions. However, we encouraged each other to be ourselves and take ownership of the class, even though we had a common lesson. This common base ultimately gave us the opportunity to provide detailed feedback to one another as classroom practitioners and managers.

Data Point One: Peer-observation process and instrument

As we developed the lesson plan and classroom activities we simultaneously created the observation instrument. This provided the opportunity to create an instrument that reflected our teaching situation and the points upon which we collectively wanted feedback. We focused on observing basic best practices in the classroom with an emphasis on engaging and interacting with students. The observation form was divided into four major sections, each of which was further broken down into observable best practices. The four sections were: Organization of the Session; Presentation Style; Clarity of Presentation, and Interaction; as well open space for comments and questions about what worked best and areas for improvement.

Data Point Two: Self-reflection

Making time to reflect on one's teaching can be difficult when faced with the demands of a busy teaching schedule. However, for the duration of this project we committed to taking notes on our personal thoughts and reflections about each class session. While these notes were for personal use only and not shared within the cohort, our notes were extremely helpful to each of us individually, and we now better value the practice of post-session reflection.

Data Point Three: Student evaluations

Students completed online evaluations before leaving class and answered questions about the instructor's preparedness, ability to engage students, approachability, clarity of presentation, communication of session goals, what went best, and what could be improved. Viewed alone, these evaluations do not provide a very full glimpse into a teaching moment, but when triangulated with self-reflection and peer-observation

they provided useful information for identifying overall trends and for making changes in our teaching practice.

Making adjustments and improving our teaching practices

Our small group of instructors agreed to prepare observation documents and complete self-reflections within 24 hours of teaching a class session. With our narrowed scope and commitment to quickly turning around feedback, we ensured that an instructor received feedback that was immediately actionable. Quickly turning around feedback was crucial for the success of the project. Had feedback languished either unsubmitted or unreviewed, it would have been less helpful. By submitting feedback quickly, our assessment cycle was nimble and we were able to make necessary adjustments before the next class session. We also met as a cohort to debrief midway through the week and at the end of the project.

The 360° Feedback Model proved particularly effective because it encouraged instructors to make connections between the three feedback points and make changes based upon this data. Placed within the context of a community of practice, the connections between feedback points became extremely powerful. An instructor may notice different things about a session than an observer notices or, perhaps, an observer's feedback may validate an instructor's perception. An observer might notice an element of an instructor's teaching style that, upon reflection, is the root cause of students viewing their classroom experience in a certain way.

One example of a change in teaching practice that was made based upon peer observations came when a peer observer noticed another instructor's tendency to, after asking students open-ended questions, quickly suggest answers rather than wait for answers to come from students. Looking at student feedback from these sessions, students felt that these open question portions of class were unhelpful and awkward. In subsequent sessions, the instructor allowed more time for student responses to open-ended questions. Student feedback from later sessions indicated that the activity seemed more engaging and useful. In this case, pairing observations with student feedback proved especially valuable.

In another instance, an instructor's self-reflection noted the need for better articulation of the session's goals, and the issue was also noted in student feedback. In this case, the instructor began writing and referring to a class outline on the whiteboard. This practice was confirmed as valuable by observers and later adopted as practice in all class sessions. In our experience it was not a single data point or feedback method that was important; rather, it was the interplay between methods and the instructor's consideration of all three sets of feedback that made the 360° Feedback Model particularly valuable.

Overall impression of the experience

Looking back at this project, each instructor felt that it was well worth the time. We all appreciated the community of practice approach and the trust we developed through shared goals and reciprocal observation. Our group meetings became opportunities to reflect on our teaching, our process, and the project as a whole. We found that, in addition to honing our own teaching, we were also able to become better observers and were, in turn, able to more effectively aid other participating instructors. The community of practice approach enabled us to develop a common curriculum, set expectations for feedback, and create a culture of trust, reflection, and revision among the participating instructors.

Our commitment to submitting and reviewing feedback within a 24-hour time period meant that adjustments could be made quickly in the classroom and receive subsequent rounds of feedback. This also added to our community of practice by making the teach/assess/revise cycle more

explicit, and the project as a whole more pragmatic.

Our small group of instructors left the 360° Feedback Model project feeling that the experience was rejuvenating and increased our capacity as teachers. Although instructors were at times required to teach outside of our comfort zones, the process of collecting data from three data points, and immediately adapting in the classroom, ultimately built confidence that pedagogical change was both possible and, in fact, exciting. All instructors felt that they would be more likely to seek opportunities for pedagogical and professional development in the future.

Subsequent use of the model

Since the original iteration, the 360° Feedback Model has been used multiple times at our institution by small teaching cohorts. Each group has tweaked the process to its particular needs and timeframe, but the major elements of peer observation, student feedback, and self-reflection have remained constant. One cohort developed a peer observation instrument that asked observers to take notes on what the instructor and the students were doing at any given point throughout a lesson in order to ascertain how we and our students were engaging with each other and the lesson.

Conclusion: Bigger than the sum of its parts

The 360° Feedback Model leverages three modes of assessment in order to create something much more than simply three sets of instructional assessment data. In many cases, the process itself was as important as the feedback data. Comparing three sets of feedback often yielded insights more important than anything written in one feedback data set. Likewise, repeating observations allowed multiple chances for checking back in with colleagues as they implemented change in their classrooms. Repeating the instruction/observation process with the project's common curriculum made it very easy for observers to learn from colleagues and apply what was learned into his or her own classroom. Observing, teaching, reflecting, and adapting became a natural cycle by the end of the project, a cycle in which each instructor saw value and applicability to their own teaching practice. ✍

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