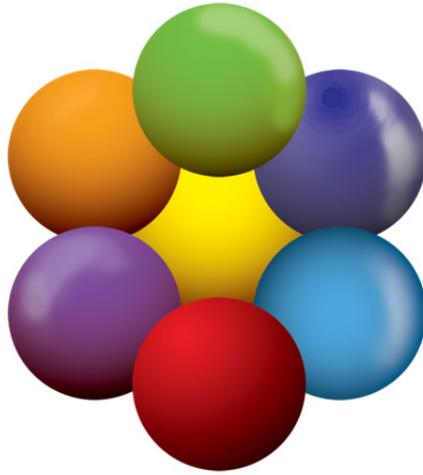


Just ASK's

**Peer Observation
Possibilities**

Paula Rutherford



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Peer Observation Possibilities

(Excerpted and updated from an earlier issue of
Mentoring in the 21st Century)

Paula Rutherford

It was in the 1980s that peer observations first become a topic of conversation among the staff developers with whom I worked. We quickly embraced the idea because we believed that Judith Warren Little, now Dean of the Graduate School of Education at the University of California Berkeley, was right on the mark with her research findings presented at AERA in 1982. She found that student achievement could be directly linked to collegial collaboration when it included frequent concrete talk about teaching, use of a common vocabulary and concept system, asking for and providing one another assistance, and frequent observation of one another in our practice. Embracing the idea was one thing; implementation was another story. Despite the best counsel of Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers (see Figure 1 below), teachers with whom we worked in the 80s and 90s tended to complete the rounds of peer observations required as a part of course work, and then they retreated back into the privacy of their classrooms. This occurred even though almost all the teachers who completed those required peer observations wrote glowingly about how much they learned from the experience. The reason for not continuing was almost always the same. Time! That is, there was no time to do the observation, participate in planning or reflective conferences, prepare the lesson plans to leave for the substitute, or to deal with the fall-out from having a substitute in the classroom. Perhaps we managed to make the process too complex.

Over twenty years later peer observation is coming into its own. One of the primary reasons is the increase in the number of induction and mentoring programs that require, or at least recommend, peer observations as a format for mentoring interactions. Another reason for the wide spread use of this professional development approach is that many colleges and universities include classroom visitations in their teacher preparation programs and require pre-service teachers to both observe and be observed with more focus and frequency. A third reason is that we are re-defining peer observation to better match the realities of the work life of teachers. Finally, the Gen Xers and Millennials, who have grown up receiving information and instant feedback through technology, want and expect instant feedback at work. Two or three observations a year culminating in a formal appraisal in the spring is not their idea of instant feedback. In fact, most young teachers are more than eager to not only be observed but to be given the opportunity to observe other teachers in their practice.



There are many options for engaging in peer observation in addition to the traditional and important format of mentor observing the protégée and providing growth producing feedback. To get the observation process started, it is highly recommended that the mentor first invite the novice teacher to observe in the mentor's classroom. Such observations provide an opportunity for the mentor to model a collaborative open-door policy. They also give the novice teacher a chance to observe teaching and learning with a critical eye and ask pointed questions about what went into the instructional decision-making process. This also provides the novice teacher an opportunity to explicitly shop for strategies and approaches to use in his/her own classroom. If the novice teacher can schedule such observations without having to make substitute plans, so much the better! Later, when the mentor is scheduled to observe in the novice teacher's classroom any anxiety is minimized because the collaborative relationship is already established.

If such "peer poaching" or observing to gather ideas to use in one's own classroom is the norm in a school, new teachers readily pick up on the process. Dianna Lindsay, former principal of New Trier High School, Winnetka, Illinois; Worthington-Kilbourne High School, Worthington, Ohio; Ridgefield High School, Ridgefield, Connecticut; and former assistant superintendent, Williamsburg-James City County Public Schools, Virginia; implemented a Peer Poaching Pass program designed to promote classroom observations by all teachers. She provided each staff member with three peer poaching passes. (The Peer Poaching Pass is included in the tools document.) Upon leaving a classroom they had visited for the purpose of "poaching" teaching and learning strategies, teachers left their passes on the observed teacher's desk. The teacher who was observed signed the pass and put it in a fish bowl in the front office. Once a month Dianna drew a pass out of the fish bowl to identify winners who were applauded for their collaborative practice and public teaching with time to talk and plan or materials they could use in their instructional programs.

If it seems impossible to provide release time for teachers to get into one another's classrooms, the use of technology can fill the void. Having mentors and protégées, or all staff members, watch videotaped episodes of teaching and learning together can provide a powerful alternative to actual classroom visitations. If staff members are not quite ready to videotape themselves for self or peer analysis, there are many clips available on The Teaching Channel, Edutopia, and YouTube. These clips run from three to twenty minutes in length, and those on The Teaching Channel can be searched for by content area and grade level.

Watching and analyzing such clips of teaching and learning episodes can lead to a strong desire by mentor and protégée to observe together in actual classrooms in their own school or at other school sites. These peer observations can be extended and focused observations of expert teachers or a series of short visits in multiple classrooms across the school. When a particular area of interest or need



for growth is identified in the protégée's practice, a twenty to twenty-five minute walk through multiple classrooms observing how different teachers handle that situation provides rich data for dialogue about repertoire and decision making.

In any case, novice teachers who have spent a few months in their own classrooms have much to gain from observing other teachers now. While they may have, in the past, spent weeks engaged in a student teaching experience, at that time, they did not necessarily know what to notice. Now that they have their own classrooms they have a much more clearly defined notion of what to study when they observe other teachers engaged in their work. In many districts, a significant number of new teachers are in alternative certification programs and may have done little or no student teaching. For them, the need is even more crucial.

It is our responsibility as mentors to provide novice teachers multiple opportunities and multiple formats for observing others in the teaching and learning process. See **Chapter VII: Peer Observation Possibilities** in [***The 21st Century Mentor's Handbook***](#) for a comprehensive look at the possibilities.

Possibilities discussed include:

- New Teacher Observes Mentor
- Mentor Arranges Demonstration Teaching by Expert Teacher
- New Teacher Shadows Teachers or Students
- New Teacher and Mentor Observe Together
- Co-Teaching by Mentor and New Teacher
- Mentor Observes New Teacher
- Videotaping and Analysis of Mentor Teaching
- Videotaping and Analysis of New Teacher Teaching
- Viewing and Analyzing Video Clips of Classroom Episodes
- Observations Beyond the Classroom
- Learning Walks/Walk-Throughs Together

See **Tools for Peer Observations and Data-Driven Discussions** on pages 303-318 in [***The 21st Century Mentor's Handbook***](#). Among the many tools there, you will find:

- Observation Data Gathering and Analysis
- New Teacher Classroom Observation Log
- Data Log for Peer Observations and Learning Walks
- Peer Observation Reflections
- Notes for Data-Driven Discussions of Teaching and Learning: Focus on Teacher Behavior
- Notes for Data-Driven Discussions of Teaching and Learning: Focus on Student Behavior
- Mentor Observation Log
- Peer Poaching Pass



Figure 1
Bruce Joyce and Beverly Showers
Impact of Professional Development on Classroom Practice

Impact Training Components	Understanding Knowledge and Skills	Actually Learn Skills	Actually Apply Skills in Classroom
Presentation of Theory	85%	15%	10-15%
Modeling	85%	18%	10-15%
Practice and Low- Risk Feedback	85%	80%	10-15%
Coaching Feedback/Peer Visits	85%	90%	80-90%

This legendary research clearly indicates the necessity of collaboration in the form of coaching and feedback, collaborative planning, peer observations, lesson study, and learning walks. Best practice in 21st century professional development does not negate the power of attending conferences and workshops; it however, is clear, that such attendance is not enough. Public teaching, holding one another accountable, and making data-driven decisions must also be part of the equation.

Joyce, Bruce and Beverly Showers. "The Evolution of Peer Coaching." *Educational Leadership*, March 1996, pages 12-16.

_____. *Student Achievement Through Staff Development*.
 Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2002.

Little, Judith Warren. "Norms of Collegiality and Experimentation: Workplace Conditions of School Success." *American Educational Research Journal* 19:3: 325-340, 1982.