

# focus

on university teaching and learning

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## Peer Cooperation

Peer Cooperation for teaching improvement is a process whereby individual faculty members seek to increase their teaching effectiveness through the support and advice of colleagues. Whilst the enhancement of one's teaching is an on-going, essentially personal affair, there may be times when faculty members feel that they need a fresh perspective on their teaching and that peer help and advice may assist them in their quest for ways to revitalize their teaching. The Office of Instructional Development and Technology has recently initiated a Peer Cooperation programme to assist in this structured reflection on university teaching. We hope that this group will be the nucleus of a much larger and more active Peer Cooperation programme during the 1993 - 94 academic year.

The dozen faculty members of the Peer Cooperation group are all volunteers who sought to gain some experience with the peer cooperation process both by having their teaching observed and by being an observer of teaching. The Peer Cooperation process is undertaken on a voluntary basis by individual faculty and the academic administration is neither involved in the observation plan nor is it a party to the results.

This issue of *Focus* contains the reactions of Dalhousie faculty who have already participated in the programme. If you would like to become a member of the Peer Cooperation group or are interested in inviting a colleague to observe your teaching, please contact the OI.D.T.

Chris Corkett  
Faculty Associate, OI.D.T.  
on leave from the Department of Biology

## The Typical Peer Cooperation Process

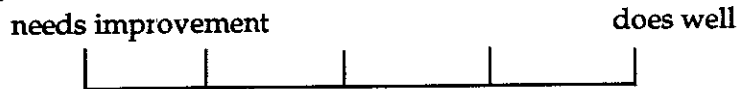
The professor who is being observed should be as comfortable as possible, initiating the process and choosing the aspects of teaching to be observed. The process takes place around the middle of the term.

This is the typical peer cooperation process:

- You and the observer meet to discuss the aspects of your teaching that are to be observed. The observer and you will not be from the same faculty. You may ask the observer to comment on items which are new additions to the class, things you are fairly confident about, or items about which you would like reassurance or suggestions. The checklist you are most likely to use is the "Made-To-Order Form For Instructional Observation (Peer Version)" (Weimer, Parrett & Kerns, 1988). This form contains specific items for observation assembled under seven categories:

Organization, Presentation, Rapport, Credibility and Control, Content, Interaction, and Active Learning.

- In choosing the items that you want your colleague to observe, remember to be realistic about the number, given the length of the class. Explain to your colleague why you want these items observed, and what precisely you want to find out about them.
- Once the items to be observed are agreed upon, you and the observer will generally next meet in class. You will introduce the observer, explain his or her presence, and then go on to teach the class as usual. During the class, your observer will rate your performance on these items on a scale:



- After class the observer meets with a group of five or six randomly selected students to get their feedback on the course.
- The observer then writes a report and sends it to you. The report, of course, is confidential. It makes no mention of your name or the specific course observed.

## Reflections on the Peer Cooperation Process

*A* welter of images as I am being observed: centipede contemplating how to walk.... a log with a teacher on one end and a student on the other.... maybe I'm a welterweight? Thank God he's coming to my Acmeism lesson and not to Socialist Realism.... Have I called on everyone? Will the subtle symbolism of writing a poem laboriously on the board instead of projecting it instantaneously from an acetate overhead go over everybody's head?.... Which way has *my* head been pointing?.... and for how long?....

And on the observer end: Nature herself conniving to postpone our session twice with overwhelming snowstorms; then influenza, business trips, and final exams conspire to delay our follow-up talk. Total admiration for the virtuoso samba from bank to bank of audiovisual equipment, students discussing animatedly and apparently rationally a subject matter I find barely comprehensible, a subject matter they communicate about during the week outside of class time using electronic networking.

And then with the sudden clarity of a Zen slap I realize that I have been thinking almost exclusively about myself during the entire time I have been supposed to be thinking about my colleague! I realize that I will never be a good observer, let alone an advisor on how to improve teaching effectiveness, because for me teaching is a mode of being rather than a method of action. I would be constantly harping on centering the heart when what may be needed is practical advice on centering the slide projector. But the realization, though humbling, is welcome, and I hope to avail myself of the programme as a client once it is fully in operation!

John A. Barnstead  
Department of Russian

*I* used peer cooperation in my two-hour case-based tutorials. The process has made me focus on my teaching in three ways:

1. I had to clarify the issues that were not working well;
2. I examined whether I was fostering teaching and learning between the students;
3. I realized that my method of evaluation (which I have since changed) interfered with student learning.

Kenneth E. Scott  
Community Health and Epidemiology

## A Pair Contemplate the Co-op Way



Chris Corkett

When I entered Dick Evans's Criminal Justice class, it was with some trepidation – all I knew about the subject was what I read in the newspapers. I found, however, I was in for an interesting time, partly because of the novelty of the discipline but also because I was in the middle of a Socratic session with 60 students in a lecture room – quite a challenge for any teacher. I shortly found my unfamiliarity with the substance of the dialogue actually helped me concentrate on the teaching. Were female students passed over? Did a few students dominate all the questions? Was the teacher able to respond effectively to the questions? Keep the flow going? All the time I had to keep sufficient notes to be able to fill in my evaluation form. Did I address all the questions on the form? Yes, perhaps the blackboard writing could have been clearer . . . .

Jennifer Khor (the class student representative) helped me pick student names at random, and the student interview group arranged to meet the following week. This we did in one of the small interview rooms in the Weldon Law Building and I carefully recorded examples of students' comments for my report. So the text was expensive and not much used – that sounded familiar!

Back I go to write my brief report. I wonder how useful Dick will find this. One thing I know for certain: the students will certainly appreciate that he was concerned enough to ask for views on his teaching. As one law student said: "The instructor has gone out of his way to ask for criticism and comments – please enclose a note of thanks."



Dick Evans

When I entered Chris Corkett's tutorial group in his second year biology course on Marine Diversity, I knew that I was entering a world far removed from a typical law school classroom. This involved not only solving the maze of the Life Sciences Building at 8:45 a.m. on a Friday but also adjusting to a discipline which I had left behind in high school over twenty-five years ago. However, after a brief pre-class meeting with Chris, it was immediately evident that the items on which he sought feedback – chosen from an excellent list of attributes provided by the Office of Instructional Development – were matters of concern in all teaching situations, no matter what the subject matter or the size of the class.

I kept my own notes on these matters and then engaged the small number of students in discussion for the last ten minutes of the scheduled class time. They provided some very concrete feedback through me to Chris – mostly in relation to his classroom presentation skills, e.g. how to write on the blackboard and talk audibly at the same time, but also some general organizational matters concerning the larger meetings in this course. As the course coordinator, Chris, I believe, felt it was very useful to get this kind of feedback.

I found it very refreshing to have this interaction with a colleague and with students from a sector of the University seemingly far removed from my daily world. I have no doubt that the co-op way proved very useful to all concerned – indirectly for the students in each class who obviously appreciated the effort and directly for both Chris and myself.

## More Reflections on the Peer Cooperation Process

On being observed . . . I was presenting a continuing education course at the end of the week, preparing for a week out of the school post knee surgery: did I need one more event in my life this week? Well, the process in a two-hour class went swimmingly. I valued the opportunity to reflect on the areas in which I wanted and needed feedback. I also felt good about the possibility of honing those skills. The report was well worth the minimal extra effort of being observed.

On observing . . . For several years I've been interested in problem-/case-based teaching and learning. I observed a three-hour tutorial of nine students, having seen a videotape of the previous week's class which introduced the case. It was exciting and I gleaned great strategies for my teaching. The entire process is painless. I highly recommend it!

Glenda Butt  
School of Dental Hygiene

Having an experienced teacher observe my teaching taught me something my students never mentioned in their evaluations: taking lecture notes can inhibit understanding. As simple a thing as announcing a day in advance the topic and page numbers in the text book allows the students to relax and listen, secure in the knowledge that the essentials are there in print. Conversely, observing a colleague in a field very remote from mine allowed me to understand new ways to foster enthusiasm among students.

Chris Helleiner  
Department of Biochemistry

### Peer Cooperation: Selected Readings

available at the OI DT Resource Centre

Millis, Barbara J. "Colleagues Helping Colleagues: A Peer Observation Program Model." Journal of Staff, Program & Organizational Development. Vol.7, No. 1. Spring 1989.

Millis, Barbara J. Using Peer Classroom Observations to Enhance a Teaching Portfolio. Presented at the Sixteenth Annual Conference of the Professional and Organizational Development (POD) Network. Morgantown. 1991.

Roed, Bente. Issues Highlighted Through Peer Consultations from Fall 1987 to Fall 1990 at the University of Alberta. Presented at the Eleventh Annual Conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, Dalhousie University, Halifax. 1991.

Tiberius, Richard and Katherine Janzen. Faculty Helping Faculty: A Peer Consulting Procedure Based on Small Group Interaction. Presented at the Fifteenth Annual Conference of the POD Network. Lake Tahoe. 1990.

Weimer, Maryellen. Improving College Teaching. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1990.

Weimer, Maryellen, Joan L. Parrett, and Mary-Margaret Kerns. How Am I Teaching? Forms and Activities for Acquiring Instructional Input. Madison, WI: Magna Publications. 1988.

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## Service Learning At Dalhousie

The mission statement of most universities includes a general commitment to service. Dalhousie's mission statement makes some very direct, and indirect, references to service and its benefits. The interpretation of "service" as it appears in the mission statement may vary from person to person, but what will be explained here is the power and potential of the notion of combining service and learning in an intentional way, so that students, faculty, and staff operating with a service ethic will be seen as an integral part of the university's culture.

*Service Learning* is the term used to intentionally link the act of service with learning. On the one hand the learning goals of a student or professor may drive the creation of a project which is designed to benefit someone or something else. On the other hand meeting human needs or the needs of the planet may provide the impetus and venue for genuine academic learning. Thus, the notion could be expressed as service through learning and/or learning through service. However expressed, it is beneficial to both the provider(s) and recipient(s) of the service.

The problem with the term *service* is that it tends to conjure up different meanings and is often prejudged as to its immediate merits. In the field of *service learning* the terms volunteerism and community service are avoided, not because they are wrong, but because they tend to limit the scope of the service activities. The service experience may indeed involve a paid position or function. Similarly, some services are directed toward things and not to human needs as is often implied with community service. It is the ethic with which the activity is performed that determines its position on a *service learning* continuum. In addition, the term *service learning* implies that the connection between service and learning is intentional rather than serendipitous.

There are already numerous examples of service on the Dalhousie campus. In fact, in a recent survey conducted by the President's Task Force on Service Learning, many departments and programs indicated that they provided service learning activities. Some were voluntary but most were mandatory. However, upon further analysis it became evident that such programs as co-op, internships, clinical experiences, etc. were often falsely included in the category of *service learning*. A student who is sent into an agency for the purpose of completing an internship or to gain professional experience is probably more likely to be a consumer of the experience rather than of a contributor to the mission of the organization. This is not to negate the value of these experiences, but rather to suggest that a little reframing and change of focus would make the learning experience more valid because a valuable service would be provided in a real situation.

The potential for service learning projects is unlimited. To provide every student with a service learning experience prior to graduation is a realistic goal, limited only by the imagination of the students and professors. A couple of years ago students in the President's Leadership Class were given the task of creating a *service learning* project for Dalhousie University. These projects were presented at an "invention convention" where all the inventions were for the benefit of someone or something.

else. One project worth sharing was called the Dalhousie Emergency Response Team (DERT). Each team would comprise a faculty person, graduate student, and several undergraduate students ready to respond to an emergency. For example, should there be an oil spill in the Halifax Harbour, there would be a need for a speedy and appropriate response. While there is already such a group of people on call in the metro area, there is often a shortage of trained personnel. Also, the budgets for these groups limit the access and development of the state-of-the-art equipment and strategies. On the Dalhousie campus there are physicists, chemists, engineers, biologists, environmental scientists, etc. These include the faculty as well as the graduate students. Collectively there may be a series of research projects directed toward the treatment of oil spills. In addition, the undergraduate students in these fields could be trained by the professionals to work in these times of emergency and may be on call when needed. Out of this service (and preparation for the service), all sorts of data may be collected and much of the students' learning will be placed in a reality context. In summary this would be a prime example of the "humane application of knowledge."

It must be remembered that not all disciplines or all faculty and students have to be involved in everything. The notion of force fitting academic pursuits into a *service learning* context must be avoided. However, obvious connections and potentials to enrich learning at the same time as benefitting someone or something else should be celebrated.

The kind of change in the culture of the university which embraces the notion of *service learning* and the development of the service ethic does not occur overnight. Such a change must be sequential and incremental, and each professor and student must be a willing participant. On the other hand, change does require a little nudging and some compelling demonstrations. To this end it is suggested that the Office of Instructional Development and Technology include a series of in-service workshops on *service learning* so that members of the Dalhousie community may be better able to judge its worth and hopefully create some meaningful experiences of their own. Already the Student Volunteer Bureau, which was created by members of the President's Leadership Class, has a number of resources which would assist a person if they were eager to create some *service learning* experiences.

Service and service learning are not new concepts; however, the universities have been slow to recognize the mutual benefits of such activities. For too long the knowledge and expertise of the university has been confined to the "ivory tower." In this day and age of fiscal restraint and low public opinion, it may be a most appropriate strategy to demonstrate that university, government and community are mutually dependent and can, in fact, serve each other.

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