Positive Effects of Peer Coaching: A Literature Review

Frederick Black

Abstract

The life of an academic historian often seems rather solitary, especially to those viewing the field from the outside. Certainly, historical research tends to lean toward individual effort, often involving long periods of time spent in archives. The stereotypical view of dark spaces, with miles of shelving, and little human contact can prove shockingly accurate in many cases. The art of teaching however, does not necessarily have to entail the same sense of individual effort. Obviously professors or instructors will engage with their students, both inside and outside the classroom, in the course of teaching a semester long course. Engagement with peers though, often gets overlooked by many academic historians. Peer coaching is an effective way to interact with fellow faculty members; a good peer coaching practice increases the proficiency for both the observed teacher and the observer, increases socialization of teaching techniques and practices, and also increases the collegiality within a group of academics.

Introduction

Within the body of educational literature, peer coaching remains relatively under represented. Many of the references to peer coaching appear in the context of evaluating teachers’ ability to do their job, usually in reference to either bestowing awards or considering
faculty for academic promotions. Simply stated, most colleges and universities do not usually make peer coaching a routine part of their operating processes.

Many academics seem to have a negative impression of the concept of a colleague sitting in their classroom. This concern likely stems from the fact that the average academic historian works from a belief in the independence of each teacher to present the class material in the manner of their choice, with little oversight, or perceived interference, from colleagues or supervisors within their department or college. Reservation to embrace peer coaching may also stem from the competition for tenure appointments and other academic promotions.

In our context at West Point, Army officers have plenty of familiarity with oversight from a boss, based on their time in the operational Army, but we make that a friendlier prospect within the History Department. Our junior officers also do not have promotion considerations at stake as a reason to avoid or shun peer coaching opportunities. Most importantly, most of our faculty seem to welcome the opportunities for other instructors to visit their classroom or for them to visit other classrooms. The process of seeking improvement comes naturally to most of our instructors; peer coaching offers a low-cost opportunity to do so.

**Literature and Analysis**

Two books offered particular insight into the concept of peer coaching, although in slightly different ways. *Collaborative Peer Coaching that Improves Instruction; the 2 + 2 Performance Appraisal Method*, by Dwight W. Allen and Alyce C. LeBlanc addresses peer
coaching directly, but in the context of evaluating teacher performance.¹ *Faculty Success through Mentoring: A Guide for Mentors, Mentees, and Leaders*, written by a group of authors led by Carol J. Bland, looks at peer coaching as one part of their mentoring approach.² Both styles work well when studied together, as the reader comes away with two unique ways to consider the value of peer coaching in their own situation.

Allen and LeBlanc wrote this book to advance a formula to improve teaching skills. They posit that “The premise of the 2 + 2 program is simply this: No lesson is so perfect that there is no room for improvement or variation, and no lesson is so poor that that there is nothing good to say about it.”³ This truism may seem obvious for new teachers, but it also has resonance for experienced teachers. Their plan entails teachers visiting each other’s classrooms and developing two compliments and two suggestions based on each visit. They suggest that these visits should occur on a “routine, frequent basis.”⁴ Their method attempts to remove some of the common excuses for not embarking on a peer coaching program: not having enough time, the program is too cumbersome, or other similar issues.

As the scope of their book goes well beyond just peer coaching, that specific topic does not play a prominent role in *Faculty Success through Mentoring*. Instead, the reader will find it discussed in snippets across various chapters of the book. A small but important distinction also comes up in reading this book that merits mention here. The authors’ focus on mentoring means that their discussions take on a slightly different notion than that of peer coaching. Mentorship,

---

⁴ Ibid.
at least in the military context that most of our junior faculty at West Point understand, by necessity implies a longer term relationship. Peer coaching relationships can exist on a much more short-term basis, without any need or desire for deeper commitment of time or emotional attachment that mentorship often implies. The authors of *Faculty Success through Mentoring* seem to have taken a somewhat hybrid approach on this spectrum of the difference between coaching and mentoring.\(^5\) A positive aspect of this book is that the authors devoted an entire chapter to the specific case of mentoring new faculty members. Unfortunately, the portion of that chapter devoted to teaching pales in comparison to the other demands on a new faculty member’s time at a civilian institution, such as research, publishing, and service to the university. Furthermore, the tips they cover on teaching tend to focus more on the design of the course than on the delivery of the course. They do mention classroom observation and feedback as one area where a mentor may potentially assist the new faculty member, but again these mentions are very brief in nature.\(^6\) New teachers may have even more reluctance than their slightly more experienced counterparts about having a mentor view their classes. While understandable, new teachers should remember that every teacher started out at that same spot on their first day of their first course.

Too often academics tend to restrict their view to only their own discipline, or perhaps closely related disciplines, in the attempt to improve teaching skills. In reality though, many of the key skills and attributes necessary for effective teaching transcend specialties. The process of talking with faculty members from across the Academy during our Master Teacher Program sessions has reinforced this truth. In that spirit, the medical field offers some insight into the

---

\(^5\) Bland, Carol J. et al., *Faculty Success through Mentoring*, 6.

\(^6\) Ibid., 53.
value of peer coaching as a method of improving teaching. In 2009, Peter J. McLeod and Yvonne Steinert wrote an article in *Medical Teacher* detailing a then-recent study at the University of Adelaide in Australia focused on what the researchers called “an innovative colleague development programme which differs significantly from the teacher-learner model.” In this study, the number of classroom observations varied from one to six among the forty-two participating teaching faculty. Twelve faculty had reciprocal relationships such that they observed each other teaching, whereas the remainder observed a different colleague than the person who observed them. The experiment concluded with an anonymous written survey from the researchers designed to gauge the participants’ feedback of the program’s impact. They followed the survey with focus group discussions. The researchers reported these noteworthy outcomes: “increased participant confidence in teaching, participant appreciation of exposure to new education ideas, and an improved sense of institutional support and collegiality.” The results from this somewhat short term program seem to confirm the value of instituting similar programs as a routine manner of doing business.

On the negative side, McLeod and Steinert did point out some problems with the study. About half of the original participants in the study dropped out before completion. The authors speculate that such a dropout rate may reflect an absence of “supervision and intermittent oversight of progress by the program directors” during the course of the study. They highlight that this study lasted eight weeks, where the usual standard in the medical education field is for one or two day intervention style events. Regardless of the reason for the nearly 50% dropout rate, participants’ dedication to continue through defined periods of time (for example one block

---

8 Ibid., 1044.
9 Ibid.
of a course, one semester, or one academic year) seems critical to the success of the program. Peer coaching programs will likely never achieve their fullest potential in institutions or departments where the faculty do not feel a commitment to any larger entity, due either to a lack of institutional motivation or a lack of any incentive to value the worth of improving colleagues’ skills at the same time as one’s own.

Continuing the trend of finding innovative teaching techniques from unique sources, Dale J. Vidmar comes at teaching from his perspective as a librarian. In his article “Reflective Peer Coaching: Crafting Collaborative Self-Assessment in Teaching,” Vidmar starts by declaring that “librarians are teachers,” and then gives multiple examples to support that supposition. In the remainder of the article he discusses another interesting model for peer coaching. In this type of a program, the colleagues conduct two ten-minute conversations, one before the class and the other following the class. He states that these short engagements build “self-awareness and self-assessment of the personal craft of teaching.” His plan emphasizes the value of the personal contact both before and after the class, as opposed to the more traditional method of only filling out a form either during or after the observed teaching session.

Vidmar devotes major sections of his article to discussing reflection, its relation to teaching, and some of the ways that teachers can use reflection to improve their craft. In his mind, “Reflection is fundamental to assessment, decision-making, and a deeper understanding of the teaching practice. The act of reflection is primarily concerned with developing insights and discovering solutions to difficulties – or what might be described more correctly as learning

---

11 Ibid.
opportunities.”12 The emphasis on conversation between colleagues over completing a form seemed particularly insightful. It seems so obvious, yet many of the programs or processes focused on peer coaching come back to some kind of deliverable product. Perhaps that stems more from the believed value of these programs for other reasons, such as evaluations, than it does from the perceived utility to improve teaching.

Some of the sections of Vidmar’s fourteen page journal article do get a bit technical in nature, such as analyzing the distinctions between summative evaluations versus formative assessment.13 These sections will likely prove less appealing to those whose talents lie more in the humanities fields than the STEM fields, but these portions do serve to strengthen the author’s advocacy for reflective peer coaching. Overall, this article provides a very solid contribution to the body of literature on this topic. It makes for excellent reading in any program devoted to preparing teachers for their classroom role, or improving existing teachers’ skillsets.

Therese Huston and Carol Weaver take a different view of peer coaching, based mainly on focusing on the needs of experienced faculty members, in their article “Peer Coaching: Professional Development for Experienced Faculty.” They acknowledge the existing body of literature on this topic that addresses the needs of new or junior faculty, and that these works typically advocate for more senior teachers to serve as mentors of sorts in the peer coaching endeavor. Their approach though, laid out in the form of six discrete recommendations, “examines peer coaching as a professional development opportunity for experienced faculty that meets many of their immediate needs and offers a variety of long term benefits to their

12 Ibid., 138.
13 Ibid., 137.
This reference to the long-term benefits to the institution stands out as an important point in their article. In almost all cases, if a department, college, or university does not derive any benefit from any given program that requires a resource investment, in the form of time, money, or other capital, why would they do it? Too many academics seem to misunderstand the value of peer coaching programs to the larger audiences who stand to benefit, beyond the obvious short-term benefits to the individual teachers and their respective students in the current term. Their students in future terms will also benefit, as will the students of the teachers serving as observers and coaches. Ideas derived from peer coaching may also influence faculty research over the longer term.

Using a project they launched at Seattle University during the 2005-2006 school year as their model, the authors outlined a three-year plan for an effective peer coaching program. After outlining the ways to set up the program, and the potential benefits for all involved parties, the authors offer recommendations in the form of six broad guidelines. They acknowledge that other articles have made similar sets of recommendations; they go on to point out though that this set is tailored to address the concerns of senior faculty partnerships. Their list is as follows:

1. **Recommendation 1: Goal-Setting**
2. **Recommendation 2: Voluntary Participation**
3. **Recommendation 3: Confidentiality**
4. **Recommendation 4: Assessment**
5. **Recommendation 5: Formative Evaluation**

---

15 Ibid., 14.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 15.
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 16.
21 Ibid., 17.
Without delving into the details of each of these recommendations in this review, the article provides a paragraph or two of description below each of them to explain how that aspect makes the peer coaching experience better for both parties in the relationship.

This article has perhaps less relevance to West Point in terms of preparing new faculty, particularly our junior military officers, for classroom teaching duties. It does have significant potential though for our more senior faculty, military or civilian. As faculty members have remained at West Point for well over a decade, and in many cases approaching two decades, a possibility exists that teaching techniques may become dated or stale. Reality also necessitates that senior officers and civilians spend more time on academy level committee work, leadership or administrative requirements, and pursuing outside resources for their departments. As a result, they have less discretionary time to devote to teaching. A re-grounding experience of the sort described by Huston and Weaver may help reinvigorate those colleagues’ teaching practices.

In “Reshaping the Profession One Teacher at a Time: Collaborative Mentoring of Entry-Year Teachers,” Donald A. Williams and Connie L. Bowman offer their suggestions for how to best bring teachers into the profession. This piece appears as one chapter of a much larger volume, Research on Effective Models for Teacher Education, edited by Dr. John McIntyre and David M. Byrd. Williams and Bowman start with an overview of the relatively recent history of attention focused on mentoring programs, tracing the phenomenon to the early 1980s when schools began to establish programs to address this need. They go on to trace the development of mentoring programs to the current era.

---

Williams and Bowman reach very similar conclusions as found in other recent literature on the topic. They “contend that mentoring should be (a) grounded in a vision of good teaching, (b) separated from evaluation, (c) guided by assessment and critical examination of teaching, (d) collaboratively developed and implanted by university and local school personnel, and (e) focused on the needs of individual inductees.” In concert with many other authors, they emphasized the potential for mentoring programs and relationships to serve “as a career-long professional development tool.” One important distinction in their work is that they do not get in to specific detail about the peer observation portion of the teacher mentorship process. They focus more on the macro level as it applies to veteran teachers mentoring first year teachers, of which coaching of the new instructor’s actual classroom teaching is but one small part.

Implications

Within the Military History Program of the History Department at West Point, we strive to make peer coaching a routine part of our faculty development model. Because more than half of our faculty members come from the Army, after a two year stint in graduate school obtaining a master’s degree, they do not generally have a large amount of teaching experience prior to arriving to the department. We mitigate this inexperience in a number of ways. First, we conduct a workshop each summer designed to help introduce the new instructors to our teaching methods. Newly arrived faculty members watch sample classes presented by several different veteran instructors, receive tips and techniques for preparing their own classes, and then have multiple opportunities to practice teach lessons for the course they will teach during the fall

---

23 Ibid., 177.
24 Ibid., 185.
semester. After each of the practice lessons, veteran instructors, military or civilian, lead a
discussion aimed at helping the new instructors become more comfortable and more effective in
the classroom. Also during the workshop, we spend several hours discussing the various
administrative processes that we use within the department; the peer coaching process is one
such system. By the end of the first summer, the new instructors have seen peer coaching in
practice, and they understand how the principles of peer coaching will carry over to the academic
year.

During the academic year, we continue our peer coaching practices. Our program does
not have as rigid of a feedback structure as Allen and LeBlanc’s 2 + 2; instead we opt for leaving
it up to both faculty members to discuss the class after the visit in a more free flowing nature.
Our program director asks each instructor to make five classroom visits to a colleague. The
visits do not have to occur only within our program; faculty can visit any other class at the
Academy. In fact many times, the course scheduling makes it quite difficult to see classes only
within our program because so many of us teach at the same times. These visits can last
anywhere from ten minutes to the entire class hour. We use a simple tracking chart (shown in
Appendix 1) to record how many visits each instructor has made, and also how many visitors
each instructor has had watch their class.

One interesting experience that I had this past semester occurred when a junior rotating
instructor came to talk to me about challenges he faced with one particular section that I had
observed for about fifteen minutes of one lesson. The group did not seem to respond well to his
questions and appeared largely unprepared for class. He commented that this was his worst
section of his four. After a little more discussion I offered to observe him again, but this time I
would watch an entire lesson in another of his sections, and then watch the same lesson in the
problem section. After doing so, we found some potential reasons for the difference in class performance as well as some possibilities for how he could address these issues.

    Peer coaching has proven benefits for teachers at levels of experience and ability. Whether in a formally established program within a department or school, or in more informal relationships, the obvious benefits clearly outweigh the costs such as investments of time, feelings of vulnerability of having someone else watch you teach, or even the potential that such observations could inadvertently influence an evaluation process. West Point has an amazing array of tools available to our teaching faculty, many of them resourced externally, and many whose existence most faculty may not even realize. Peer coaching is a tool that departments can set up internally at department level, or even at course or program levels, depending on the identified needs. The chances of an instructor deriving no benefit at all from such a process of peer coaching remains incredibly close to zero; there is little to risk and even less to lose.


McLeod, Peter J. and Steinert, Yvonne “Peer Coaching as an Approach to Faculty Development.” *Medical Teacher* 31 (December 2009): 1043-1044.


## Appendix 1: Military History Peer Coaching Log for AY 16-1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Visit 1</th>
<th>Visit 2</th>
<th>Visit 3</th>
<th>Visit 4</th>
<th>Visit 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visitor Name</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Visitor Name</td>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Visitor Name</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPT ASHLEW</td>
<td>Silver</td>
<td>8/21</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJ BAKER</td>
<td>Brands</td>
<td>9/11</td>
<td>Lavery</td>
<td>10/26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTC BLACK</td>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>8/21</td>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>9/26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJ BRIGGS</td>
<td>Kuebler</td>
<td>8/21</td>
<td>Lavery</td>
<td>9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJ DOSS</td>
<td>HOPE</td>
<td>9/11</td>
<td>GRISWOLD</td>
<td>9/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROF FLEER</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJ GREGOIO</td>
<td>Rogers</td>
<td>8/1</td>
<td>Kuebler</td>
<td>9/26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPT HOPE</td>
<td>Kuebler</td>
<td>8/26</td>
<td>Lavery</td>
<td>9/12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROF KESLINS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPT L'EAY</td>
<td>DOSS</td>
<td>8/15</td>
<td>Kuebler</td>
<td>9/26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJ MOORE</td>
<td>Rogers</td>
<td>8/26</td>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>8/24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTC MURPHY</td>
<td>Rogers</td>
<td>8/31</td>
<td>Kuebler</td>
<td>9/17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJ RIDDLE</td>
<td>ROBERTS</td>
<td>8/25</td>
<td>Brands</td>
<td>9/25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROF ROGERS</td>
<td>Brands</td>
<td>9/11</td>
<td>Hattinger</td>
<td>11/30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPT ROYDON</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPT SAKNAD</td>
<td>DOSS</td>
<td>8/17</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8/26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAJ SILVER</td>
<td>Brands</td>
<td>8/26</td>
<td>Ross</td>
<td>9/22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LTC BRY</td>
<td>Rogers</td>
<td>8/24</td>
<td>Kuebler</td>
<td>9/27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPT SMITH</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>8/24</td>
<td>Kuebler</td>
<td>9/27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROF STAPLETON</td>
<td>Lavery</td>
<td>8/28</td>
<td>Kuebler</td>
<td>10/15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROF VIARA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROF WAGGONER</td>
<td>ROYDON</td>
<td>11/13</td>
<td>Hattinger</td>
<td>12/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PROF WATSON</td>
<td>ROYDON</td>
<td>8/26</td>
<td>Hattinger</td>
<td>12/2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>