



Teaching Ourselves to Teach

College and university faculty members should work with mentors, coaches and colleagues to continually reflect on their own practice of teaching, write Kenneth Sharpe and Elizabeth Bolton.

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By [Kenneth Sharpe and Elizabeth Bolton](#)

The need to “educate for judgment” is as urgent for those of us who teach at universities and professional schools today as it was for Aristotle. Twenty-five years ago, three expert professors at Harvard Business School reminded and guided their colleagues in the professions to do exactly that. C. Roland Christensen, David Garvin and Ann Sweet, the editors of [*Education for Judgment*](#), rightly noticed that the way we professors teach our students often discourages them from learning how to exercise independent judgment in their scholarship, in their professions, in their lives. The first step in turning this around is for teachers themselves to learn how to reflect on their own practices so that they can encourage their students to exercise judgment, too.

Obvious? Perhaps. But Richard Elmore’s observation in the foreword to the book is not that far off the mark today, noting that “teaching is seldom taken as a subject for serious intellectual discourse in universities.” In fact, most of our students, if they knew, would find this amazing, even troubling: we college teachers have never been taught how to teach, and we generally work in isolation on improving our practice.

If we were lucky, we were teaching assistants in graduate school, placed in charge of smaller discussion sections for the lecture classes given by the famous professors. If we were really lucky, the senior professor gave us some guidance on our pedagogy.

Yet most of us started as college teachers woefully inexperienced and unprepared. Some colleges and universities have recognized that lack of preparation in recent years and have created centers for teaching excellence, offering lectures, workshops and maybe the chance to have your class videotaped. But *Education for Judgment* signaled a still-missing ingredient needed for learning how to practice our craft wisely: structured ways that those of us who are experts as well as novices can reflect on our ongoing teaching practices.

Outside of academe, this approach is not rocket science. Firefighters routinely do post-incident reviews in the same ways that athletes review videos of the game they just played. Novice public school teachers practice teaching with trained teachers. That’s also how interns and residents learn doctoring. Continuing mentoring and coaching are essential for even expert musicians, singers and athletes.

But when professors start teaching, they are largely isolated in their own classrooms. Worse, with the criteria for tenure traditionally being “publish or perish,” collegial reflection about improving our teaching expertise is not encouraged. Indeed, young faculty members who show a serious concern about their teaching are often warned about “misplaced priorities.”

Many professors would like to improve their expertise in leading discussion classes and lectures so as to foster understanding, deep engagement with the material, curiosity and wonderment, and a passion for lifelong learning. They want especially to foster students’ capacities to exercise the judgment they need to apply their learning to their lives and work. But college and university teachers -- any teachers -- can only develop the judgment that expertise requires the way any expert develops such judgment: by working with mentors, coaches and colleagues to continually reflect on their own practice of teaching.

There is already some coaching of faculty going on. Some colleges and universities (including Swarthmore) assign senior faculty members to mentor young faculty, bring in outside teaching coaches on a paid basis or hold workshops that instruct teachers how to be sensitive to diversity or to teach more effectively. Yet we and some of our colleagues at Swarthmore wanted to go further: to teach faculty to be peer coaches for each other, to combine one-on-one coaching with group reflection, to privilege ongoing observation and coaching over onetime or short-term encounters, and to create a continuous process that could renew and improve the wider culture of pedagogy at the college.

The Faculty Teaching Seminar

Thus, several of us recently set out to identify ways to do just that. We asked ourselves, could we design a structure to foster such learning through reflective practice? Could we figure out a way to learn how to mentor and coach each other -- and then do it at a low cost and in ways that would create a culture of learning about pedagogy across the college?

We decided to make ourselves mutual apprentices -- peer coaches -- observing each other’s classes, reflecting together and practicing again. Instead of the presumption that “teachers teach and students learn,” we flipped the paradigm to “teachers as learners.” What could we learn about the kind of reflective learning we wanted to encourage in students by putting ourselves in the position of learners?

We convinced the college to offer some free food and a token honorarium, and 12 of us (out of 20 applicants) signed up for the ride. The Faculty Teaching Seminar, supported in part by a development grant from the John F. Templeton Foundation and an operating grant from the Aydelotte Foundation, combined peer coaching and observation with tri-weekly faculty seminars.

We faculty members were divided into six pairs, each of which observed classes of our peer coach for the whole academic year -- a minimum of 10 coaching encounters, although many people did more. Every three weeks, the 12 of us would meet for three hours to discuss what we were observing and learning. Among the things we focused on were:

Creating a safe, supportive environment. Almost every faculty member who joined the seminar expressed fears about having another faculty member in their class on a regular basis. Many heads nodded when a senior faculty member laughingly admitted: “As someone afflicted by the impostor syndrome, I had some reservations that I might be found out -- that I wasn’t living up to Swarthmore standards.”

This fear was a central obstacle that had to be overcome. The only way you learn good judgment is from experience, Will Rogers famously said, and most of that experience is the exercise of bad judgment. If trial and error is a necessary condition for such learning, then that meant taking on a demon that plagues collegial relations at most colleges and universities: the continued high-stakes evaluation for promotion and tenure.

We intentionally aimed to create a supportive community of practice. In recruiting the participants, we avoided (with one exception) having people from the same department. We also avoided pairing junior and senior faculty members. We explicitly talked about how to break the culture of evaluation. We worked to keep our discussions confidential.

In two humorous but poignant sessions that senior faculty members first led, we used storytelling to share our worst learning experience as students and our worst teaching experience. "Once those disasters had been publicly aired," said one faculty member, "we had little to fear from exposure -- and we could all see that moments of failure are an inevitable part of the pedagogical landscape."

Learning how to coach each other. Being a good teacher does not make someone a good coach of other teachers any more than being a good athlete or musician makes someone a good athletic or musical coach. With the exception of one faculty participant -- the women's softball coach who provided us with valuable guidance -- few others had much practice coaching, and none had practice coaching other teachers. We recognized that "the coaches themselves must be coached" (with a grateful nod to Marx's *Third Thesis on Feuerbach*).

We developed a preliminary script to scaffold the pre- and post-conversations each coach had with their peer. We performed a live coaching session with each other in the first seminar to model it and get reactions. Before: What are you aiming at in this course, in this class? What obstacles and challenges will you face? Is there anything you want me to pay attention to? After: What did you think worked well and not so well? I noticed you did such and such -- what made you decide to do that?

Then we tried our hands at observing and coaching. We reported back at subsequent seminars on what worked and what fizzled. Actually learning how to see and listen to what was happening in the classroom was a crucial skill that the participants gained and found important. "Once I learned how to listen actively, I was able to observe the flow of the lecture and identify key moments. The skill of coaching started to focus on, 'What does he find important, and how can I help him reflect on those issues?'"

Combining reflective practice with skills building. We didn't need a faculty seminar to know the importance of skills like good listening. Indeed, many of us thought of ourselves as good listeners -- that is, until we did a listening-skills training exercise. We broke into groups of three. Each of us took a turn at being a speaker, a listener, an observer. The listener had to summarize the speaker's core ideas and feelings. The speaker let the listener know whether he or she had been understood, and if not, they had to try again. The observer then commented on what was happening. We all had to try again: listening was harder than we thought. We all needed more practice and reflection.

We did readings about the traits, skills and techniques of good teachers and coaches. But the central pedagogy was moving in a circle from theory to practice to coaching and mentoring each other -- then re-evaluating the theory or technique and then practicing again. We improved our skills by practicing, observing and questioning each other: When did you ask and when did you tell? What were you thinking when you interrupted that energized conversation? How did you choose whom to call upon today, and why did you allow so and so to talk for so long? That was an interesting learning puzzle you set up in class -- what were you aiming at, and how did you think it up? Let's discuss some of the tough choices you made when you were grading the last set of papers. What were you balancing?

The synergy between the peer coaching and group seminar discussions became clearer throughout the year. The coaching was vital for improving our teaching. What we observed gave us the grist for an educated dialogue in the seminar on how we learn and teach. And the seminar discussions and exercises fed back into improving our peer coaching and teaching.

Fostering an academic culture that encourages learning about learning should certainly include approaches less labor intensive than our seminar-peer coaching model. Lectures or workshops about teaching methods as well as insider tips can be helpful. But creating a culture that encourages us to continually reflect on and

improve our pedagogy -- turning a college into a learning organization -- requires that faculty as well as students find ways to learn from the trial and error of experience. That demands creating a safe, supportive environment where we can observe our teaching practices and learn the skills of reflection, analysis, coaching and mentoring.

We in American higher education can't just hire brilliant Ph.D.s and expect them to be brilliant teachers. The Faculty Teaching Seminar at Swarthmore is only one approach to help teachers learn the judgment they need to educate their students for judgment. Colleges and universities committed to quality teaching need to explore other ways to institutionalize such reflective practice if the teaching at the heart of a liberal arts education is to be nourished.

Bio

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