

## Fly on the Wall

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*This paper describes the implementation of a peer observation program at the University of Victoria called the Lecture Club. The observers are not interactive during the class – they are the proverbial flies on the wall. The paper identifies the program as self-developmental, discussing the attributes of this learning-to-teach and peer-sharing methodology. The paper concludes with ideas for further development of this program.*

### Introduction

Peer observations have proven to be a powerful tool in helping one to learn new techniques and ideas about teaching (McKeachie, 1999). Its value stems from the fact that it is not expert-based, but relies on the engagement of the observer to translate and apply the demonstrated skills to the teaching environment of the observer. Peer observation, still considered a relatively new practice (Shortland, 2004), has taken many forms since its inception. It began as a management-driven, evaluation model, followed by a more developmental model, which then morphed into the reciprocal/reflective, peer-review model (Gosling, 2002). An example of a peer-review model<sup>1</sup> is *Teaching Squares*, a program that we have used in the past, where instructors agree to observe and be observed

by members of a three or four person group (Berry, 2008). This article describes the implementation of an alternative peer observation program called the Lecture Club (Sommer & Sommer, 2006), which is identified here as a self-developmental model.

Cosh (1998) suggests a self-developmental approach, asking for a model that is active, reflective, benefits the observer, and eliminates all judgment. Lortie (as cited in Cosh, 1998) recognizes that the greatest influence of what constitutes good teaching primarily comes from one's own experiences of being taught, as opposed to training and absorption of theories of education. The argument continues whereby the benefit of collegiality and exposure to different teaching styles in different disciplines

<sup>1</sup> See Bell (2005) for a comprehensive guide to the *Teaching Squares* form of peer observation.

promotes “an intra-personal process, which encourages awareness, experiment, and the sharing and dissemination of good practice” (p. 173). Donnelly (2007) concurs by noting that those who participated in a peer observation exercise at the author’s institution were able to learn how to be more effective teachers by watching the teaching of others. Cosh (1999) states that teachers should initiate their own development of teaching methodologies, and explains two ways that a self-developmental model could be implemented, both of which are very similar to the Lecture Club. Through the Lecture Club, we have been able to engage in a self-developmental model that encourages features highlighted by Cosh (1998, 1999).

We will first describe what comprises the Lecture Club, followed by an elaboration of the self-developmental model, concluding with outcomes, other forms of this model, and future development.

## What is the Lecture Club?

The basis of the Lecture Club is to take a group of observers to a series of classes delivered by volunteer instructors, teaching in their regular classroom environment. As Cosh (1999) points out, “we have a highly valuable and free resource in our midst, which requires little administration: other teachers” (p. 25). The observers do not interact within the class. Some time after the class visit, the observers meet to discuss what they saw. Initially, we expected that this relatively passive method of developing one’s teaching would appeal specifically to new instructors, but in fact, we have found seasoned professors, experienced senior instructors, and new instructors indicating interest. The first Lecture Club in the summer of 2007 attracted six graduate students, while the spring 2008 Club had four graduate students and two faculty members. As opposed to a course in teaching, it is a relatively low assignment of time for the busy academic, and yet when taken in a cross-discipline environment offered by a central teaching unit, can broaden the techniques that are commonly used within the observer’s culture.

Although the Lecture Club has been described before (Sommer & Sommer, 2006), we have found

several issues that have raised the value of using this as a tool for the educational developer. The role of the facilitator is key to the success of the working group. Naturally, the first role of the facilitator is to advertise. At the same time, a broad selection of volunteer instructors is recruited. Quite deliberately, we have chosen to keep a variety of disciplines represented in both the participants and instructors. The participants are required to agree to a code of confidentiality, keeping specific observations within the classroom or the discussion group. This is usually discussed in the first meeting and then emailed simultaneously to the participants.

The first meeting is also an ideal time to answer questions about the procedure and to offer an outline of the proposed schedule. More importantly, it is an opportunity to have a practice observation. Typically, we show a recorded class in progress for about 10 minutes, and then have a short discussion session. The purpose of this is to remind participants of two important aspects of observing in this context: they must focus entirely on method and not on content since this model is about improving their teaching and the subsequent impact on student learning; and we demonstrate the variety of ways in which observations can be collected under an equally large variety of biases. Cosh (1998) supports this approach to observation, highlighting the necessity for an “open mind and questioning attitude, and to provide an environment in which we can reassess our own teaching in the light of the teaching of others” (p. 173). This stresses that no single method is correct and that a full discussion brings all voices to the table. The success of this type of discussion is entirely the responsibility of the facilitator, who must provoke discussion, yet ensure that everyone’s opinion is heard.

After the initial meeting, we email what is expected of all the participants:

- attend as many observations and discussions as possible;
- write reflections of the Lecture Club at the end of term (Cosh, 1999 emphasizes the importance of this for the self-developmental model);
- respect participants as collegial professionals; and

- honour the invitation that has been extended to our program to attend someone's class.

We also send an email to each of the instructors defining their role and thanking them for allowing the group to attend their class.

An ideal schedule has been found to have one observation about once every two weeks, followed by a discussion (of about one hour) held two or three days later at a mutually convenient time. It is unlikely that the participants' own timetables will allow them to attend all scheduled observations but we do encourage them to attend as many as possible. On occasion, we have encouraged a potential absentee to pro-actively catch an earlier class by the same instructor, so that the participant can still contribute to a meaningful discussion<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, such a two-pronged approach to the observation can, during discussion, refute or augment comments pertaining to the repeated practice of an instructor. However, we maintain that it is more useful to have most observers attend the same class.

The volunteer instructors have not been selected for any special qualities. Diversity of topic has been a major criterion, and this naturally brings some inevitable diversity in teaching style. We have not found a class that does not generate enough discussion material for the group. In our experience, availability and willingness have strongly influenced the schedule.

During the discussion, one person will take notes and display them on a screen for all to see. Often, the recorder is not the facilitator, as the latter may well need to concentrate on the matter in hand viz maintaining an appropriate focus to the discussion. After the meeting, the notes are tidied and sent electronically to all those present. These may be used by the participants at the end of term when constructing a personal reflective piece on their involvement in the Lecture Club. We have encouraged peer reviewing of such articles, since all, or part, may end

up in a dossier or similar document.

Some instructors expect, or wish, for some direct feedback from the observers, but we have not yet done this. Where feedback has been requested, private observations have been arranged with an educational developer. A general summary from the individual reflective articles has been written and circulated to the instructors as a group (Secanell, 2007). Naturally, these are not sufficiently specific to allow identification by another reader.

As in all of our workshops and programs, we have found it useful to acknowledge participation with an informal certificate issued by the Centre. This serves to act as a reminder to participants to include the record of such activity in their teaching portfolios. Where possible, we present these certificates in a social setting, preferably through the hands of a senior administrator. This helps to raise the profile of the program and to inform Deans and Directors so that they can encourage others to consider these avenues of professional development. In the pilot program during the summer of 2007, we issued five certificates, and for the spring 2008 session, we issued four certificates. Usually failure to write the reflective piece, often due to non-attendance at the majority of the visits, resulted in non-completion of the Lecture Club requirements.

## The Self-Developmental Model

The Lecture Club is demonstrative of the self-developmental model of peer observation. As explained previously, Cosh (1998) suggests that the self-developmental model should provide the opportunity for active engagement by the observer, who must be non-judgmental and encourage self-reflection about one's own teaching. Cosh (1999) underscores the notion that one cannot 'develop' the teaching of another, only influence.

It is therefore possible to identify certain char-

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<sup>2</sup> An observer who unexpectedly misses the class may be able to catch a subsequent class prior to discussion time; we recognize that it is almost impossible to expect all observers to be able to attend all sessions. This should be considered when the facilitator is scheduling the total number of observations for the term.

acteristics of peer apprenticeship within this self-developmental model. It can enhance and inform the participants' own teaching methods and open possibilities of different methods and ideas (this includes observing teaching performance, context of the class, student interaction, technology used, method of questioning, group work situations, etc.). This leads to an enhanced and broadened perspective on teaching, which is evident through personal development and the reflective writing document. All that is necessary is that participants bring to the process an open mind, an ability to experiment, and a willingness to expand their disciplinary boundaries. The only risk is if a participant lacks the capability to be self-aware and -critical and therefore will benefit less from such a program.

## Outcomes, Other Forms, and Further Development

A significant strength of the Lecture Club is in its breadth across disciplines. Participants often commented on how the experience was invaluable for opening their minds to alternative ways of presenting their material. Other comments have included confirmation of their own teaching methods, camaraderie felt by sharing methodologies with colleagues, and gratitude to the teachers who opened their classrooms to them.

Due to the Lecture Club's success, and to the value recognized in focusing the interest of a particular group, we have run a spin-off program called Lab Gab for concentrating on the special needs of teaching in a laboratory or tutorial. In the version that we have run (summer 2008), the group of observers (three academic and two sessional staff) met with the laboratory course coordinator for about 30–45 minutes before the class started and then observed a class in progress (or part thereof) with the regular instructor, who was typically not the course coordinator. The purpose of the first meeting was to gain insight into the details of the course structure and to determine the rationale behind the program. This was particularly pertinent in our institution as there is no standardization, even within a single department. We chose to use the term 'lab' very loosely, and included

courses that involved any form of workshop, studio, or tutorial, as well as the traditional science and engineering labs. Other than this special focus, Lab Gab followed the Lecture Club format very closely.

To enrich the Lecture Club further, we offer the following suggestions: 1) expand discussion about the act of observing prior to the first lecture visit. As Cosh (1999) notes, most teachers have not observed or been observed by their peers before, thereby lacking knowledge about their role as a learner/observer in this situation. This would alleviate any false assumptions of the objective of the observation; 2) ensure that all observers are aware of the realm of peer observation and its history. This would allow participants to situate differences with this model, especially if any had been involved in some form of peer observation in the past, structured or not; 3) include literature about lecturing, teaching methodologies, and peer observation before the Lecture Club commences, for those who are interested in supplementing their experience; 4) the possibility of running different streams of Lecture Clubs could also be implemented. In one particular session, the disparity in experience amongst participants brought this idea forward. Even though each participant is to take what they can from the lecture visit for their own self-development, it is evident in the post-visit discussion that a wide range of teaching experience creates a similar breadth in the reflections of an observation. The suggestion has been put forward to run one session for TAs, graduate students, new instructors, and another session for faculty; and 5) a yearly post-Lecture Club meeting would add insight to how the program affected participants. Since our Lecture Club has only run one full year, we have not had a chance to solicit information from past participants regarding the impact of the program. This is something that must be developed.

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## Biographies

Dave Berry is a past Associate Director of the Learning & Teaching Centre at the University of Victoria, British Columbia. He continues to indulge in his passion for learning in the undergraduate chemistry labs and works alongside graduate students who are relatively new to teaching.

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