Improving Student Learning through Teacher Collaboration

Kimberly A. Johnson, PhD
Director, Adult Basic Education Teaching and Learning Advancement System (ATLAS)
and Assistant Professor
School of Education, Hamline University
1536 Hewitt Avenue, MS A-1790
St. Paul, Minnesota 55104
email: Kjohnson60@hamline.edu
phone: 651-523-2646
fax: 651-523-3083

Abstract

This paper presents a structure for peer mentoring, a model of teacher collaboration that is non-evaluative, reciprocal, and focused on learners and learning. It will begin by exploring components of effective professional development, articulating the power of teacher collaboration, and defining peer mentoring. The processes and key components of a peer mentoring project will be highlighted by sharing the experience of peer mentoring projects in adult education in Minnesota.

Word count: 69
Improving Student Learning through Teacher Collaboration

Effective professional development

Teachers throughout their careers benefit from professional development opportunities to learn new research and theorizing and to explore implications for their practice and their students. Exposure to new research and instructional strategies is not enough, however. Meaningful professional development should also include opportunities to question and reflect on understandings of effective teaching and learning with the goal of changing practice to positively impact student learning. It is not change for change’s sake.

With improved student learning as the goal, it is important for professional development coordinators to remember that practitioners should focus on what happens at the classroom level (Harris, 2000) and that teachers are motivated to make changes when they can see student improvements as a result of particular instructional practices (Guskey, 2002). Additionally, research has demonstrated that teachers are more likely to learn and change when professional development takes place over a period of time (as opposed to a single workshop, for example); includes active, hands-on learning; is relevant for the participants; and provides opportunities for teachers to work together (Desimone, 2009; Smith & Gillespie, 2007; Wei, Darling-Hammond & Adamson, 2010).

Collaboration through peer mentoring

If asked to define the word “mentor,” most people might describe the relationship of a master with an apprentice: someone with expertise who shares knowledge and guidance to a novice. As in other fields, this type of mentoring relationship is important in education; it need not be evaluative (Sherman, et al., 2000) and can be mutually beneficial. Newer teachers can
learn from the guidance of an experienced career teacher, and the mentor teacher can benefit and learn by seeing the classroom in new ways and through critical reflection on practice (see, for example, Johnson, 2003). Even so, this master-apprentice model includes a power difference between participants that will inform and impact interactions.

But in this paper, I would like to focus on the power of peer mentors – colleagues who offer support and guidance to another in a relationship of equals, a relationship that is collaborative, non-evaluative, reciprocal, and focused on learners. Peer mentoring can be a powerful way for teachers, at any stage of their careers, to learn from and with one another. Showers and Joyce (1996) assert that it is not in offering advice to one another as teachers that learning happens, but that “teachers learn from one another while planning instruction, developing support materials, watching one another work with students and thinking together about the impact of their behavior on their students' learning” (p. 16). In other words, teachers learn together and from one another through collaboration focused on learners and learning.

In the educational literature, this collaborative peer relationship may be referred to as mentoring or coaching (sometimes used interchangeably), peer coaching (Swafford, 1998; Hutson & Weaver, 2008) or even reciprocal peer coaching (Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen & Bolhus, 2007). I still prefer the term peer mentor because I feel it best: 1) captures the work of “peers” as equals, and 2) simultaneously acknowledges the expertise and experience that each partner brings to the relationship as “mentors.” In our work in Minnesota, we define peer mentoring as a partnership that provides opportunities for teachers as equals to reflect on their teaching and on learner outcomes in a non-evaluative manner and within a shared context and purpose.
There are a growing number of examples in the literature of the value of such peer collaborations. For example, Liu (2006) presented models of English language teacher collaboration between Native-English-Speaking Teachers (NEST) and Nonnative-English-Speaking Teachers (NNEST) in an EFL context, and described the impact of teacher collaborations at a university in China. Teachers worked together to reflect, learn, and teach through peer observations, interactions of teachers with learners as they observed classes, and professional conversations between NEST and NNEST teachers before and after observations. The key thread through the successful examples presented was the focus on working for “mutual benefit” (p. 5) and the possibility of teachers to learn from each other.

Peer mentoring is gaining value in many adult teaching contexts, including in post-secondary education. Huston & Weaver (2007) developed a peer coaching program at a university in the United States for experienced faculty. Although not specifically about English language teaching, the impact of integrating peer coaching into professional development for mid-career faculty highlights the value of this process for experienced teachers. Faculty participants received training beforehand and reported learning a “great deal” in a process that allowed for opportunities to link scholarship and the explorations of complex teaching and learning issues within the context of a specific class or subject. Huston and Weaver argue that peer coaching allows faculty to “shine a critical light” on teaching and assumptions in a non-evaluative and confidential way (p. 13).

Interest in peer mentoring is growing in United States community and adult ESL programs in various states and national initiatives. For example, Ohio has been working to integrate peer coaching across the state (Reynolds, 2007) and the U.S. Department of State has
produced videos that model a peer observation process for English language teachers (Office of English Language Programs, n.d.). The video, available online, presents the basic three-step process for friendly, “formative” observations: the pre-observation meeting, the observation itself, and the post-observation debrief. What is critically missing from many peer mentoring projects in the literature, in my view, is a structure and protocol for self-assessment that guides teachers to identify areas for improvement, and a focus during the observation on watching the learning more than the teaching.

Effective peer mentoring

Peer mentoring is not passive, and its purpose is not to provide a venue for colleagues to evaluate and critique the teaching of others. It is a mutual learning opportunity that builds on principles of self-directed learning and inquiry into teaching. First, we know that teachers themselves are adult learners and benefit from practicing self-directed learning that includes the chance to inquire and ask questions about their own teaching, assess and critically reflect on their own strengths and weaknesses, then experience and construct meaning from experiences within a particular context. Finally, teachers set goals and strategies and plans to achieve those goals (Richards & Farrell, 2005).

Peer mentoring is one form of professional inquiry. Similar to action research, peer mentoring works from the following assumptions about how teachers learn and grow as professionals. Teachers:

1. work best on issues or teaching challenges they have identified for themselves;
2. become more effective when encouraged to examine and assess their own work and then consider ways of working differently;
3. help each other by working collaboratively;
4. in collaboration with colleagues, are assisted in their professional development.

(adapted from Madison Metropolitan School District, n.d.)

There is great potential for teacher change and impact on learning in the collaborative work of peer mentors. A process of self-assessment and critical thinking about teaching, reflection on ideas about teaching and learning, and professional conversations with supportive colleagues enables teachers to gain insights into their own beliefs and the decisions they make in the classroom, as well as the impact those choices have on learning (Danielson, 2009). For teachers to make positive changes in their instructional practices that positively impact the outcomes of their learners, teachers “need to participate in a professional learning community that is focused on becoming responsive to students, because such a community gives teachers opportunities to process new information while helping them keep their eyes on the goal” (Timperley, 2008, p. 19). With student learning as the goal, peer mentoring can lead to changes in teacher practices and ultimately to improved student outcomes (Joyce & Showers, 2003; Zwart, et.al, 2007, p. 166).

Peer mentoring in Minnesota

ATLAS – the Adult Basic Education Teaching and Learning Advancement System – is a center housed at Hamline University and focused on the professional development of adult basic education and adult ESL instructors across Minnesota. Our ATLAS peer mentoring project, originally developed by Parrish (2004), consists of the three-step observation process, and includes critical components that we’ve learned make peer mentoring most effective: voluntary participation, training for the process, structure for self-assessment of teaching, a
cycle of communication and observation, focus on learners and learning, and administrative support.

We have offered peer mentoring as a standalone professional development activity, and have also integrated peer mentoring into other professional development initiatives focused on math instruction or academic readiness, with great success. For example, in our year-long professional development project for teachers of math, the Minnesota Numeracy Initiative (MNI), teachers work with partners while completing online courses, and participate in a cycle of peer observations mid-way through the year (evaluation of the MNI peer experience can be found in Waldron, 2011). Whether standalone or within another project, the basic process of peer mentoring includes the following six steps:

1. Preparation and training
2. Teacher self-assessment and goal-setting
3. Pre-observation discussions and observation tasks
4. Observations
5. Post-observation discussion, reflection, and next steps (which includes repetition of steps 3-5)
6. Final reflection

**Step 1: Preparation and Training**

In general, projects have been most successful when partners come into the process interested in working together, but this is not universally true. We have also seen teachers who may not know each other initially develop a good peer relationship if they share an interest in a particular content or group of learners, are provided guidance and training on the process and
Improving Student Learning through Teacher Collaboration

expectations, and are given opportunities to grow comfortable with one another. For any partnership to work, however, there must be shared goals of enhanced student outcomes through teacher learning and changed instructional practices.

Whether partners self-select or not, training and team-building is critical. Like all adult learners, teachers need a clear understanding of the purpose, expectations and processes for peer mentoring; teachers benefit from training and practice with the skills required to be successful. These skills include practice with professional conversations and observations, because even non-evaluative experiences are not necessarily benign and without risk. It can be difficult to open up your classroom and your teaching to someone else for review or to open yourself to critical, thoughtful reflection. To prepare for the work as peer mentors, remove some of the intimidation of the process, and encourage healthy risk-taking (so necessary for change to happen), it is critical for peer mentors to participate in training on using a structured protocol for observation and discussion, and to accept the value of the peer mentor in the classroom to be that additional set of trained eyes to observe the learners.

In addition, no matter how comfortable partners may be with each other, it is useful to integrate team-building activities on communication styles and non-judgmental listening, and provide opportunities for partners to talk about how they feel about being observed, or what they hope to gain from the experience. An intensely collaborative process like peer mentoring may expose our beliefs and instructional practices to someone else, require that we try something that may be slightly uncomfortable, or admit our own limitations and teaching challenges. Participants must respect and appreciate each others’ differences, and cannot be
successful “without the involved individuals’ autonomous and devoted attitudes” (Liu, 2006, p. 5).

**Step 2: Teacher self-assessment and goal setting**

A distinguishing characteristic of our peer mentoring projects in Minnesota is the use of a tool provided to teachers for initial self-reflection and assessment. We’ve found that inquiring into teaching and identifying classroom issues to explore may not be easy. For example, I remember an observation in a university Intensive English Program and the moment my supervisor asked me to identify something specific that I wanted her to watch for during the observation. There were no obvious problems in the class and I wasn’t struggling with anything in particular, so I simply suggested that she watch my pacing, largely because I could not think of anything else. I did not have a way to help me determine what I wanted to explore or what might be beneficial for my teaching.

Parrish (2004) first outlined a process using a checklist of learner-centered teaching practices as a way to guide and assist teachers to identify an area for exploration. Use of such a tool gives teachers a rubric and destination (*what am I aiming for*?), as well as a chance to identify and affirm what they are doing well in addition to some insight on what they may not be doing so well. Such a self-assessment provides a platform for exploration and reflection for teachers, whatever their level of experience. A sample from the self assessment for learner-centered teaching practices below illustrates what this self-assessment includes: explicit principles of what should happen in instruction and a place for teachers to indicate what they currently do in the classroom that aligns with each principle:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner-Centered Instruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principles of learner-centered teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. The content of instruction is relevant to the students’ needs and interests and draws on their experiences and knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Learners have active roles in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Learners make choices about content and direction of activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teachers use authentic language in their interactions with learners, and classroom interactions and tasks are authentic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After completing the self-assessment, teachers are asked to reflect on their responses, identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and select a particular principle that they would like to explore more fully in their teaching (see the Appendix for the complete self-assessment). One participant noted this about the value of using a self-assessment tool as a starting point for the peer mentoring process:

*The self-assessment tool was helpful because it forced me to really evaluate not only what I teach, but how and also why I teach the way I do. It helped me to break out of my comfort zone, and start thinking outside the box. It made me realize that I have areas that I really am happy with the results, but also areas that I need to tweak and change.*
Once teachers have thought about their classroom and selected an area for exploration, the peers meet together for the pre-observation discussion.

**Step 3: Pre-observation discussions and observation tasks**

This step begins the cycle of communication, peer observation, and reflection that is the heart of peer mentoring. Teachers meet to share and discuss their self-assessments, working through a short process to narrow the area of exploration and identify specific tasks for the observing peer:

1. Teachers identify the principle of teaching to explore.
2. Teachers set a specific goal for teaching connected to that principle.
3. Partners brainstorm specific teaching strategies to achieve that goal and how to integrate those into teaching. This should then be written as a question.
4. Partners identify an observation task to collect information related to the goal and question.

Pre-observation task example (from Parrish, 2004):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle of learner-centered teaching</th>
<th>Some students are so quiet; would like to have students take more active roles in the classroom. (principle #2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goal</td>
<td>Implement strategies to promote more equal participation by more reticent students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching strategies to explore/Key question</td>
<td>It may be helpful to teach the language of turn-taking (phrases like: <em>Do you have something to add?</em> or <em>What do you think?</em>) and set some guidelines for participation (for example, everyone must add one idea during brainstorming).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Question: What happens when I use turn-taking prompts and concrete rules for participation?

| Observation task          | Partner sits with a table of students and tally participation during a group activity, recording who contributed and how frequently. |

With a narrowed focus, teachers are ready to observe learners and learning for their partners. The training should include practice with this very structured process of narrowing from goal to question to observation task and can be challenging for teachers, but it is very helpful to prepare for the observations. Peer observations like these are dramatically different from the evaluative checklist of teaching practices that many teachers may have experienced from supervisors, so this process should not be overlooked.

**Step 4: Observation**

Keep the focus on learners and learning! Unlike many observations, the purpose of observations as peer mentors is not to judge teacher performance and give feedback on what the teacher is or is not doing well. Rather, the peer mentor is there to observe the students’ reactions, engagement with activities and strategies, and evidence of learning. One teacher had this to say:

*I wanted to know if another teacher observed the same things I thought were happening in class. In other words, did what I think was going on actually happen as far as student involvement, participation, interest, questions, etc.?*
During the observation, the observing peer uses the agreed upon observation task to collect evidence and insights for the teacher. Peers may observe for varying lengths of time, but most observations last between 30-60 minutes. Observing teachers should take notes, and can participate in the classroom activities or not, as determined by the partners. Either way, the focus of the observation should be on learners and connected to the teacher-defined goals from the pre-observation meeting.

In general, teachers have loved the experience of peer observations. Observing others can be hugely beneficial to both the observed teacher and the one observing. If the process is voluntary with clear guidelines and expectations, then “the real educational power of peer observation is found in the sheer luxury of watching someone else teach for a time and discussing the teaching afterwards...the experience can be very rich indeed” (Bailey, Curtis, Nunan, 2001, p. 167).

**Step 5: Post-observation discussion, reflection, and next steps**

Soon after the observation, teachers meet to talk together about what was observed, what it means for learning and teaching, and what might be natural next steps. The observing peer begins by sharing student reactions to activities or moments of struggle or learning based on the notes taken during the observation. The discussion should revolve around relevant topics related to the goal of the observed teacher. For example, in the earlier example of a teacher looking for ways to encourage more students to participate, the discussion could be framed by questions such as: *What students participated during the group discussion? What was the nature of those contributions? Did they use the language of turn-taking as instructed?*
What else, if anything, could or should the teacher try? Questions like these open up a dialogue between the teachers and provide a springboard for exploration and reflection.

If the teacher feels that her goal was not met, then the two can brainstorm strategies and additional ideas to meet goals. This leads back into a second cycle when the peer once again observes the colleague. Ideally, teachers observe each other through a cycle of 3-4 observations, with teachers incorporating ideas and feedback from their peer observer and working together to refine and incorporate new ideas to meet their goals. Even a cycle of two observations can have an impact.

**Step 6: Final reflection**

At the end of the observation and reflection cycle, it is important for each teacher to revisit their initial self-assessments. By taking the time to complete the self-assessment again at the end of the cycle, teachers can chart their own growth and affirm what goals have been met and/or what else they would like to explore in their teaching. Following a process of observing and being observed, this final meeting can be a powerful reminder of the value of collaborative work and a reinvigorating affirmation of what is going well and what has had a positive impact on learners and learning.

Reactions to the peer mentoring cycle have been overwhelmingly positive. Teachers have commented on the value of observing, reflecting, and collaborating with a partner:

- *I appreciated another set of eyes [in the classroom]. She could see the problem from a different lens. She also could see my students from a different perspective and offer other ways she would present the problem.*
The most valuable part was actually visiting each others' classes which provided common experiences to discuss and compare. I enjoyed the post observation feedback which was constructive, affirming, and helpful.

Observing other teachers as they teach has been one of my favorite things to do because I get insights on what ideas work and how to present those ideas. What I found useful this time was the pre-planning and post-reflection activities. The method helps focus on both partners as observers and observed. The time to convene right after observation happened helps get ideas for improving the following lesson as well as future teaching of that particular lesson.

Additional considerations

Beyond the commitment of the teacher participants and the training to prepare them for the process, there are outside factors critical to the success for peer mentoring projects, such as the importance of administrative supports (Swafford, 1998). It has been our experience that administrators must value this process and be willing to provide support, primarily in the form of encouragement and time.

Time is vital: time for teachers to engage in meaningful self-assessment and reflection, time to meet for professional conversations, and time to visit and observe a partner's classroom. Substitute teachers may be needed to enable those observations. Finally, all of this must happen in an environment of mutual respect and trust that supports non-evaluation and confidentiality. Many times teachers have only experienced high-stakes observations by supervisors. For peer mentoring to be effective, participants must know that they can comfortably make mistakes or be willing to make changes and take risks in their classrooms.
Conclusion

How can peer mentoring lead to increased student outcomes? It is notoriously difficult to connect specific professional development activities for teachers to increases in student gains. What peer mentoring offers is the opportunity for teachers to share their expertise in a mutually supportive partnership that focuses on learners and learning. Teachers share with each other what evidence they see of increased student engagement and learning and support one another to make changes to impact learning.

As a professional development activity, peer mentoring incorporates all of the pieces that make professional development effective: it takes place over a period of time, and is relevant, experiential and collaborative. The peer mentoring process as described in this paper has been used effectively in multiple contexts with different purposes: general learner-center teaching in the ESL classroom, effective numeracy instruction in math teaching, or high-quality ESL teaching by volunteer teachers in community programs. In each case, the self-assessment was modified to fit the context and purpose, there were variations in the length or number of peer observations or the additional activities that encouraged the work and support as peers. Yet, in every evolution, and in any peer mentoring activity, the heart of the process remains the same: collaborative inquiry into classroom practices and a focus on learners and learning, guided by the power of teachers working together.

Word Count: 3,799
REFERENCES


http://literacy.kent.edu/coaching/information/Research/randd-engaged-joyce.pdf

http://www.tesol.org/docs/tesol-resource-center/3df03dfb-6075-4fd6-8c83-e0babab74d0a_SYM_2006_JunLiu.pdf?sfvrsn=0

Madison Metropolitan School District (n.d.) *What is action research?* Retrieved from
https://staffdevweb.madison.k12.wi.us/node/233


http://www.calpro-online.org/pubs/Mentoring%20Guide.pdf


Downloaded September 25, 2012 from


http://www.atlasabe.org/_literature_110912/MNI_Evaluation_Report-FY11


Appendix

*Mentoring Project Self-Assessment (Parrish, 2004)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles of learner-centered teaching</th>
<th>Examples of things I believe correspond to each principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The content of instruction is relevant to the students’ needs and interests and draws on their experiences and knowledge.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Learners have active roles in the classroom.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Learners make choices about content and direction of activities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teachers use authentic language in their interactions with learners, and classroom interactions and tasks are authentic.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Assignments and activities promote critical thinking skills.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Learners are consistently held to high expectations.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Learners acquire strategies that help them learn inside and outside of the classroom without the help of a teacher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Teachers constantly assess teaching and learning in relation to learners’ needs, and adapt instruction accordingly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Activities and interactions appeal to a variety of learning styles and unique learning needs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Improving Student Learning through Teacher Collaboration

Mentoring Project Self-Assessment

Assignment

Before you begin observations with a colleague, your peer-mentor, write a complete reflection of learner-centered instruction in your classroom. Start with the Learner-Centered Instruction Checklist. For each item, write examples of the ways you incorporate the principles into your teaching. Be specific: describe classroom practices, activities, assignments, and instruction that you believe promote a learner-centered class. Next write a short reflection of what you see as your strengths and your areas for growth.

You will write a similar reflection at the end of your peer-mentoring experience.

Reflection: What are your strengths regarding learner-centered instruction? As you reflect on your answers, what are a couple of areas you would like to concentrate on with your peer-mentor?

My strengths:

Areas I’d like to explore more deeply: