

Peer Assistance Works

By learning from one another, teachers can improve communication and foster professional growth.

We are forever in pursuit of connections. When these connections happen between people, we feel less isolated. For the past two years, teachers in the English department at Brattleboro Union High School in Brattleboro, Vermont, have been making connections by defining and shaping their own peer assistance program. This grass roots effort has succeeded for three reasons: (1) it is voluntary; (2) it has received administrative support; and (3) it has been allowed to evolve slowly and naturally.

Beginnings

Traditionally, in the English department we spend the last meeting or two of the year focusing on goals for the approaching school year. Three years ago in one of those meetings, we started to talk about formal evaluation and assistance—and the differences between the two. This was an important distinction for us. It didn't take us long to realize that we really wanted to talk about professional support: assistance, guidance, and insight from our peers. We were not interested in evaluative exchanges that could affect whether or not we kept our jobs, yet we knew these exchanges might influence whether or not we *wanted* to keep our jobs. What we wanted was

professional growth in a nonthreatening atmosphere.

In September 1986, following our initial discussions, a department member suggested that each of us try to observe, and be observed by, one colleague, by the end of October. This was a realistic goal: flexible enough to work, yet visible enough to encourage us to try. At this point, we were also

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able to hire a substitute teacher to cover noninstructional duties while we observed other teachers.

What began to evolve, even this early in the process, was a three-stage approach: a preconference, the observation, and a postconference. For some teachers, the preconference was a couple of minutes together in the hallway. Others discussed the lesson in depth, for 20-30 minutes. We allowed ourselves the license to define these stages as we thought best. Some teachers chose to summarize their observations in writing. Others chose to discuss what was observed. A few did both. Later we were delighted when our department head adopted this three-step model in his formal evaluative observations.

The Second Year

One year later, to provide more time for peer assistance, our department hired a full-time paraprofessional, releasing us from such noninstructional tasks as lunch duty, study hall, and corridor duty.

During the second year, new definitions of peer assistance began to surface. One teacher taught another to use a word processing program. Another asked a colleague to observe just the first 10 minutes of a series of



When Cynthia Payne (third from right) and Ingrid Chrisco (the author of this article) collaborated in teaching, they discovered they could become helping professionals to each other, just as they had long been to their students.

classes in order to get feedback on a new vocabulary program. A 7th grade teacher and a 12th grade teacher cooperatively taught a novel to their respective classes. The 7th and 12th graders were reading the same novel and writing back and forth to one another in response journals. The teachers were assisting each other in teaching; the students, in learning. A few teachers engaged in a longitudinal study: they observed the same class several times throughout the year and reported on its development. The more we explored our needs, and the more of our own resources we contributed, the more potential for peer assistance we discovered.

At the end of the second year, we decided to record in print what the program had meant to us. Several teachers in the department organized this effort. Our publication, the "blue book," included teachers' impressions and personal histories as well as a history of the program—"everything you've always wanted to know about peer assistance but didn't know whom to ask."

Why It Has Worked

Brattleboro's program has worked, in part, because those who participate truly want to. Although we didn't articulate this willingness at first, intuitively we knew it. To some degree, all 16 members of our department have participated.

A second reason for the program's success is administrative support. We were encouraged to explore the differences between peer assistance and formal evaluation. Equally important, we were given time to participate in the program. Many department meetings were devoted to the topic, and a substitute teacher was hired to enable us to visit each other's classrooms.

Our administrators' support was crucial to ensure that the time spent in a peer assistance relationship was not *time added* to what we were already doing, but rather *time that added* to the quality of what we were doing.

The third reason the program has been successful is the way we chose to spend our time together. We didn't adopt an established model. We allowed the shape of our program to evolve slowly and naturally, in harmony with what we ourselves saw that we needed and wanted to do.

Benefits

Peer assistance has had at least three major benefits for us. They relate to communication, rehearsal, and awareness.

First, the program has helped us reestablish communication among the members of our department. According to Robert Kramsky, a teacher, "the greatest strength of the peer assistance project has been to initiate and encourage dialogue between professionals about teaching, about education. I think the program has made us all aware of our peers as resources, as a great wealth of experience and information to be shared."

A second way peer assistance has helped us has been with rehearsal. In the preconference, teachers talk about teaching style, methods, content, and the role the observer is to play. By talking about what will happen in the lesson, the teacher has an opportunity to run through the lesson—a kind of dress rehearsal. This procedure clarifies for both teacher and observer what is intended and why it is important. The more we examine what we are teaching and why we are teaching it, the better we will perform.

The third way the peer assistance program has helped us is with aware-

ness. We have been able to bring what we do instinctively to the conscious level. Our professional instincts are usually strong and accurate, yet many of us teach without being consciously aware of the strategies and techniques we employ. That doesn't mean that we don't stop to assess what we are doing—we do, but it can be a lonely monologue. When we grapple with a problem or situation and work it through with others, we don't feel alone, and we arrive at a better understanding.

Zeke Hecker, one of the teachers, supports this: "Peer assistance and observation have made me a better teacher because they have made me a more conscious teacher, more aware of what I'm actually doing, more aware of what others are doing, more aware of alternatives. . . . I believe the effect is cumulative. The more you observe and the more you are observed, the more conscious you become of your technique, and the better you get at it."

A Different Kind of Accountability

Our peer assistance program has made us aware of a different kind of professional accountability—not the accountability measured in a formal evaluation by an administrator, but the kind that recognizes our responsibility for helping each other grow and improve. We can help each other challenge our own limits, and we can challenge the isolation that imposes artificial limits. We are recognizing that school can be much more than a place where we shut our classroom doors and teach as we please. The English teachers in Brattleboro are making connections that are leading to what Carl Rogers calls "unconditional positive regard" for one another. In essence, we are expanding our roles: we are becoming helping professionals for each other, just as we are for our students. □

Author's note: As a testimony to the strength and validity of this program, the Windham Southeast Supervisory Union has adopted this approach as a valuable form of professional development and support. As a result, more than 100 teachers districtwide are now participating in peer assistance.

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