



CLTT Pocket Guide I

Peer Coaching

■ Centre for Learning, Teaching and Technology



PEER COACHING

Li Wai Shing, Lam Tak Shing and Yu Wai Ming

*Department of Curriculum and Instruction,
The Hong Kong Institute of Education*

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Edited by Gordon Joughin

Editorial panel: Peter Bodycott, Rita Chan

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CLTT POCKET GUIDES

CLTT Pocket Guides provide short overviews of key ideas and practices in particular aspects of teaching and learning in higher education. They are intended for use by colleagues who are seeking to extend their repertoire of teaching practices based on sound principles and concrete experience. The ultimate aim of the guides is to improve the quality of students' learning.

Each guide is compact, focused, and practical. Developed by practitioners, the guides provide easy access to proven ideas and helpful suggestions, while also raising issues for critical thought and discussion amongst colleagues.

Gordon Joughin
Series Editor

FOREWORD

Teaching in higher education is usually a somewhat private business. Sometimes we teach in teams, but usually we work on our own, with few opportunities to see how our colleagues teach and even fewer opportunities to receive feedback from colleagues about our own teaching. Recent years have seen moves to change this. Peer observation of teaching has become an important practice in many overseas universities, while in the United States the American Association for Higher Education has sponsored a major program to develop peer review of teaching. In both cases, the focus is on improving teaching through providing feedback in a supportive yet critical peer relationship.

This *Pocket Guide to Peer Coaching* is an important move in this direction. It provides a wealth of ideas, checklists and pro formas for colleagues seeking to help each other develop their teaching practices through mutual observation, discussion and encouragement. However, while it focuses on practical advice, it is more than a set of recipes. On the one hand, it has grown out of the rich practical experience of three colleagues who have



worked closely with each other. On the other hand, it draws on important literature in this field, noting some of the key ideas that have become accepted as best practice. This Pocket Guide is therefore both a reliable and a practical guide for improving the quality of our teaching and of our students' learning.

Phil Moore

Acting Vice President (Quality Assurance and Educational Services), Hong Kong Institute of Education

PREFACE

Teaching in higher education is complex work which requires the highest standards of professional and moral practice. The key to maintaining and enhancing the quality of teaching is one of the most compelling issues in teachers' ongoing professional development. For us, the best response to this issue is for teachers to pursue career-long professional learning rather than merely to adapt themselves to externally driven standards or requirements. Meaningful and worthwhile continuing professional development can take multiple forms and is never a journey that will end easily within one's professional life span. Peer coaching is one of these forms.

This guide to peer coaching offers both theory and practical ideas for interested professionals. It grows out of our own engagement in peer coaching and what we have experienced in our learning to teach through systematic and reflective observation by critical friends, along with our reading of some of the abundant literature in this area. We have learned that teaching is about relationship and journeying together with like-minded colleagues who share an aspiration to ever improve on their



practice. We have also learned that learning to teach needs to be embedded in personal experience and systematic questioning of our own teaching. Confucius once said, “When I walk along with two others, they may serve me as my teachers. I will select their good qualities and follow them, their bad qualities and avoid them”. This is the path of peer coaching.

Writing a book can be a solitary process, but not in this case. We shared the joy of this work from the very beginning when we embarked on a project of peer coaching up to the time when we sat down to pen these practical hints for interested parties wanting to share their experiences and insights gained in their professional activities with their colleagues. The joy was doubled when we worked with Dr. Gordon Joughin, our editor, who helped us by putting our words into more readable shape. Finally, we want to thank our colleagues, Dr. Peter Bodycott and Dr. Rita Chan, for their helpful comments on the draft manuscript.

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1. INTRODUCTION

At any level of education, a teacher's growth is continuous and teaching effectiveness must be sustained by a lifetime of learning. Peer coaching is one promising means of providing opportunities for lifelong learning for lecturers as they engage in a process in which they enhance their existing teaching skills and perfect new skills with the assistance of fellow lecturers.

Peer coaching can take many forms. This guide does not deal with all of the models of peer coaching and related practices. Rather, it is a practical introduction to peer coaching in general. Peer coaching concentrates on classroom practices and skills and the discussion, observation and feedback that can help lecturers develop these practices and skills. This approach therefore has much in common with 'peer observation of teaching' – the term commonly used in higher education in the U.K. – in that it focuses on observable skills and practices. (See, for example, the extensive *Escalate* web site, 2004.) We prefer the term 'coaching' since it implies the active striving for improvement. 'Peer review of teaching' is another similar term. It typically

includes a teacher's plans or intentions and sometimes the outcomes of learning in terms of students' work, as well as observable classroom behaviour. (See, for example, Hutchings, 1995). For some, 'peer review' has connotations of judgement, reminiscent of peer review of research where the reviewer adopts a critical, evaluative and judgemental approach to the work being reviewed.

'Peer coaching', 'peer observation of teaching' and 'peer review' are all forms of peer collaboration to improve the quality of teaching. The success of each of these forms is based on teacher autonomy and commitment and the reflective nature of the collaboration process.

What is peer coaching?

Peer coaching is a rich and complex process. Its most important characteristics include:

- *Peer activity.* Peer coaching is an activity conducted by peers, with peers and for peers, ie. colleagues, fellow lecturers or professionals who regard each other as equals.
- *Coaching activity.* It consists of observing

and giving feedback on specific aspects of instruction, similar to the observations and feedback of coaches in other arenas. But the coaching is non-directive, and the coach is an equal.

- *Purposeful activity.* Peer coaching has a direction and purpose – to improve the teaching of the parties involved.
- *Confidentiality.* Peer coaching is a confidential process, based on trust between the parties involved, though the outcomes of peer coaching may be shared with others voluntarily.

Peer coaching is thus primarily a professional development process in which a teacher is observed and given feedback on a specific aspect of instruction by a colleague with the purpose of enhancing teacher effectiveness and development by improving instruction or the mastery of new skills.

Underlying assumptions

Peer coaching as a means of professional development for lecturers draws on ideas from a variety of sources, leading to the following key assumptions:

- Higher education institutions are places where teachers, as well as students, are continuously learning.
- Peer coaching is an untapped resource for professional development. Conducted on a regular basis, it provides an opportunity for in-house learning for continuous professional growth.
- The cooperation and team work associated with peer coaching strengthens departmental spirit and reinforces a cooperative working culture conducive to professional growth and learning.
- Peer coaching stresses trust and confidentiality among fellow teachers which, in turn, enables teachers to open themselves to critical self-reflection and to suggestions of improvement and change from supportive ‘critical friends’.
- Peer coaching avoids connotations of the superiority of one party over another and thus avoids feedback that is judgemental.
- Peer coaching is *not* a form of performance appraisal.

Why peer coaching?

There are many good reasons for engaging in peer coaching, including the following:

- Teachers learn best by working together in a supportive and encouraging environment – peer coaching provides this. (Fullerton, 2003)
- Peer coaching nurtures a culture of team work and collegiality – troublesome issues of status and power often associated with professional supervision are minimized. (Martin & Double, 1998)
- Peer coaching provides an excellent mechanism for perfecting new teaching skills and strategies learned from seminars, workshops or reading.
- Genuine professional growth and learning comes from within, and through continuous formative feedback, developed in a trusting culture which prizes team work. (Cosh, 1998)
- Peer coaching provides opportunities to expose teachers to different styles of teaching. (Jarzabkowski & Bone, 1998)

“Participants on courses for new lecturers consistently rate feedback from teaching observations as the most valuable aspect of their learning and development of practice.”
(Fullerton, 2003, p. 227)

Some by-products of peer coaching

It must be emphasised that peer coaching is a process in which two or more colleagues work together to perfect existing or new skills. Its principal purpose is to enhance teacher effectiveness and it is meaningless to claim other advantages if this primary function is not accomplished. However in achieving this primary objective, many writers and practitioners have noted that peer coaching can also lead to many valuable by-products. (See, for example, Martin & Double, 1998.) We think the following are particularly useful by-products of peer coaching:

- It helps to establish a collegial structure for managing professional development and learning.
- It is transformative and pedagogically instructive by changing the nature of the department or institution from a place where educators transmit knowledge to students to a place where all people learn.
- It can be a breeding ground for collaborative action research.
- It promotes practical reflection among colleagues.



2. WHO IS INVOLVED?

Peer coaching usually involves two colleagues who observe and are observed by each other. It can also work in a team of three or four where teachers take turns to observe and be observed. If participants are colleagues in the same department, they will share similar backgrounds, interests and concerns. Colleagues from other departments can bring different perspectives, practices and experiences. Participants can include heads of department, other academic administrators and colleagues from central units if they are involved in teaching.

Some characteristics of a good coach

These qualities seem particularly important:

- enjoyment in working with people
- honesty and trustworthiness
- being well organised
- being able to follow agreed procedures
- being a good listener
- being willing to learn and cooperate
- being professional
- being open-minded
- recognising personality differences.

A good coach will make this role a priority and find time for meetings and observations.

“The effectiveness of both formal and informal arrangements for peer observation depend, to a large degree, on the characteristics of the observers.” (Center for Teaching and Learning, University of North Carolina)

The duties of the coach

The duties of the coach are not difficult to define. They include:

- assisting their colleague in planning their mutual coaching process;
- conducting observations in a professional way as agreed by their colleague;
- completing the observation notes or specific forms for observation as required;
- meeting with their colleague after the observation;
- assisting their colleague in reflecting on the particular aspects of teaching in focus by asking appropriate questions;
- avoiding critiquing or making suggestions for improvement unless invited to do so by their colleague.

3. THE PROCESS OF PEER COACHING

Overview

Peer coaching typically involves four phases:

Pre-observation



Observation



Post-observation



Process review

The pre-observation phase

At the pre-observation phase, the objectives are:

- to ensure that a request to observe teaching has been made and understood;
- to develop a mutual understanding of expectations of the peer coaching process; and
- to decide on specific aspects of teaching to be observed.

“If there is to be mutual trust between the lecturer and the observer about the how and the what of observing, then we need to establish clear groundrules.” (Jones, 1993, p. 12)

At the pre-observation phase, participants meet

- to confirm the request has been accepted;
- to decide what to observe during the visit, for example, a specific aspect of instruction or a new skill tried out in the lesson;
- to fix times and the dates for the observation;
- to decide how many lessons to observe and for how long; and
- to agree on the work of the ‘coach’, for example, collecting information by taking notes or using a form.

At this stage, the colleague to be observed should outline the session’s aims, explain how the session fits into the module, and provide copies of the materials students will be using.

Focusing the observation is particularly important since so many aspects of teaching could potentially be observed in a single



session. Several checklists of such aspects are available. (See, for example *Ascalate*, 2004; Chism, 1999; Fullerton, 2003; Nottingham University, 2004).

Some aspects of instruction that could be observed

- wait time
- teacher's movement in class
- the uses of high level questions
- conclusions and summaries
- student engagement in activities
- time on task
- teacher questions and student responses

In the pre-observation meeting it is important that the colleague who is to be observed controls the discussion, though both colleagues must ensure that neither party feels superior or subordinate. The focus of the observation should be specific, so any vague or loose requests should be clarified and sharpened. Finally, whatever is agreed in this meeting should be followed through, and only altered with mutual agreement.

 **The observation plan**

To: The observer
From: The observee
Date: 5 May
Re: Observation of teaching

At the end of the pre-observation conference, the colleague who is to be observed should confirm what has been agreed in a short email or memo. This will help to ensure that colleagues have a common understanding of what will happen, and this documentation will be a useful point of reference for later discussion and review.

The observation phase

The objectives of the observation phase are:

- to observe the teacher in the classroom as agreed by both parties;
- to collect data for the purpose of improving teacher effectiveness by the collaborating colleague; and
- to review the observation notes and prepare for the post-observation meeting.



The observer should:

- be punctual on entry and departure;
- be natural and cause least disturbance in class when the observation takes place;
- be friendly;
- not intervene in the running of the session in any way;
- write descriptive notes, making sure they are clear and easy to read. The notes or records are the property of the teacher being observed and must be returned to him or her; and
- collect data according to the agreed plan.

“The presence of the observer is bound to have an effect on a situation which is usually something of a private affair between the teacher and students.” (Martin & Double, 1998, p. 164)

Some hints for the observer

Do

Be natural during the visit

Follow the agreed plan

Describe what you have observed only

Focus on the observed behaviour of your colleague and students

Don't

Perform the way you are used to doing in your own classes

Make last minute changes or cover things that were not agreed to

Judge what you have observed

Focus on the person being observed

Recording information

The observer will need to take notes during the session to use as a prompt for later discussion. These notes will belong to the colleague being observed and provide a record for future reference. It is therefore important to enter the



session with an agreed plan for note taking. You could, for example,

- take timed samples of teaching behaviour;
- record specific behaviour or performance demonstrated at a specific time interval during the visit;
- record specific behaviour or performance in coded form; or
- write a descriptive record or narrative.

Above all, you should aim for an objective recording of the main events or particular aspect of a lesson.

What makes a good observation?

- Both the specific nature and the device used in the observation must be mutually agreed by the colleagues involved.
- If possible, colleagues should work in pairs to observe and be observed.
- Good observation has a clear focus.
- Participants can think big but must start small in each observation. Have a large overall plan, but each observation should be focused.
- The observer must only observe.

Immediately after the lesson, quickly review it with your colleague in a gentle and friendly way. Let the observee do most of the talking. You may want to quickly review your observation notes and invite your colleague to comment briefly on the session, asking reflective questions to prompt this.

The post-observation conference

The objectives of the post-observation conference are:

- to reflect upon the lesson observed; and
- to seek improvement and feedback for enhancing teacher effectiveness.

In the post-observation conference, the observing teacher:

- takes the role of an active listener;
- lets their colleague be in control of the process;
- raises reflective questions that lead to thorough self-examination of the lesson observed;
- listens to their colleague's comments; and
- analyses the observation data with the teacher, not for the teacher.



The teacher who was observed:

- takes the lead in the discussion;
- listens carefully and non-defensively;
- responds to prompts and questions; and
- actively explores ways of improving.

It is important for the observer to be an effective listener at this point and not to try to impose their interpretation of events. Reflective questions such as: Why do you think that happened? What would you do next time? How did you feel at that point? will be of particular value. (Martin & Double, 1998, p. 164)

Consider using a tape recorder or video camera to provide a detailed record of the discussion.

Feedback

A key aspect of the post-observation conference is the provision (and the receipt) of feedback. (See, for example, Boud, 1997, and Chism, 1999). Giving non-judgemental feedback is particularly important.

**‘Non-judgemental’ versus ‘judgemental’
feedback**

√ ‘I’ve run into this also. Maybe we could work out a solution together’.	✗ ‘I have the solution to your problem’
√ ‘Have you ever considered trying...?’	✗ ‘Why did you do what you did?’
√ ‘Have you seen the research on this concern?’	✗ ‘Go and observe Ms Lam. She does it correctly’.

The observee needs to receive feedback openly and non-defensively. Fullerton (2003) notes that receiving feedback is never easy and suggests that the observee should:

- ♦ clarify the kind of feedback that will be helpful;
- ♦ accept honest, constructive criticism;
- ♦ explore ways to address his or her less effective practices; and
- ♦ ask for ideas or alternative approaches.

The post-observation conference is the most important stage of the peer coaching process. Both parties should be well prepared. The observer in particular should plan carefully so that his or her feedback will be systematic and logical. Some more suggestions for providing quality feedback are provided below.

Helpful feedback is	Unhelpful feedback is
Specific and focused	Vague or generalised
In the form of reflective questions, e.g. "Which should go first, nominate a student or ask a question?"	In the form of directive statements, e.g. should you ask the question first before you nominate a student to answer.
Descriptive, narrative in nature	Personal and judgemental
Focused on items within the control of the teacher	Focused on things which the teacher can hardly control
Clear and simple	Complicated and ambiguous
Focused on teaching performance	Focused on the teacher's personality
Based on evidence collected	Based on personal preference



The post-observation memo

To: The observer
From: The observee
Date: 12 May
Re: Observation of teaching

Following the post-observation conference, the colleague whose teaching has been observed should write a memo summarising the outcomes of the conference and send this to his or her colleague. This will help to consolidate the benefits of the process and provide a basis for ongoing reflection and improvement.

The process review

The purpose of the review process is to review the peer coaching procedures and see how these can be improved. This phase is particularly important if colleagues intend to continue their coaching collaboration.

- The review should be done in an open and professional manner.



- It should initially focus on aspects of the process that have worked well.
- Suggestions for improving the process should be based on concrete observations.
- Suggestions should be specific.
- Some device for reviewing the process could be used to initiate the review. For example, colleagues could exchange emails using agreed headings.
- Raise reflective questions that focus on improvement, for example, “Is there anything we should avoid next time?”

Some questions for the process review

- What has worked particularly well in the process?
- What benefits have been gained from the process?
- Are there any aspects of the process we are not comfortable with?
- Are our discussions based on facts (ie, concrete observations) or feelings?
- Were our ideas clear and specific?
- Does our process require more, or less, structure?

4. DIFFICULTIES IN PEER COACHING

Whether you are beginning to practice peer coaching with a colleague or looking to introduce peer coaching into a department, there are a number of commonly experienced difficulties that you may need to address.

- Peer coaching makes a strong demand on participants' time. Moreover, since peer coaching is a paired activity, special time-tabling arrangements may be required.
- Peer coaching represents extra work. Including peer coaching in a balanced workload may require creative thinking at the individual and the departmental levels.
- Teachers are used to teaching in isolation and not sharing ideas about teaching. Processes such as team teaching and collaborative action research may help to change this norm.
- Teachers are reluctant to allow colleagues into their classroom. This is particularly true if teachers are new to peer observation or team teaching. Much work often needs to be done in a department to change hearts and minds.



- Many teachers are sceptical about the benefits of peer observation. This is not hard to understand when teachers are used to teaching alone. Teachers should be exposed to the relevant literature as well as to peer observation activities so that they experience the benefits themselves. However, this must be done carefully and without provoking feelings of coercion.
- Trust and confidence amongst colleagues cannot be taken for granted. A collegial atmosphere needs to be nurtured in a department. This takes time and effort.

5. EXTENDING PEER COACHING

While peer coaching is a valuable end in itself, it can lead to many other useful activities.

- Peer coaching can be a starting point for the introduction of teaching portfolios as a tool for professional development. Teaching portfolios and peer coaching are complementary. Portfolios enrich teacher effectiveness and provide a basis for critical self-reflection.
- Staff involved in peer coaching develop relationships and skills that allow them to form powerful collaborative task forces for addressing curriculum issues, engaging in action research, and contributing to departmental projects. Such teams will have a history of collegial and collaborative experience and problem-solving in relation to instructional issues.
- A department with competent and experienced peer coaching teams can provide consultants to other departments.
- Peer coaching can provide a good basis for a department to develop into a ‘learning community’.



6. IMPLEMENTING PEER COACHING IN A DEPARTMENT

Peer coaching, and related processes such as peer review of teaching, are often organised as departmental initiatives. (See Chism, 1999; Hutchings, 1995.) A three-phase process of ‘mobilisation’, ‘implementation’ and ‘embedding’ is suggested for implementing peer coaching in a department.

Mobilisation

At the mobilisation phase the department prepares staff for participating in peer coaching. Awareness is created, commitment is built and colleagues prepare for action. The following steps are crucial in mobilising participants:

- Explicitly separate peer coaching from performance appraisal.
- Provide information about peer coaching.
- Develop a vision and a purpose.
- Examine the issue of time.
- Identify sources of support and resources.
- Go slowly and start with staff who are most interested.
- Identify an on-site facilitator.
- Identify and address individual concerns.

- Work on establishing a ‘caring community’ culture in the department.

Implementation

This is the phase in which colleagues are ready for action and want to engage in peer coaching. To facilitate smooth implementation:

- Provide training in peer coaching.
- Provide time for people to experiment.
- Enlist the help of staff developers if needed.
- Provide supporting time-table scheduling (e.g. for peer observation, training, team meetings, and collaborative planning).
- Monitor implementation activities and make adjustments as necessary.
- Hold review and refinement sessions.
- Provide a public forum for celebrations of peer coaching successes.

Embedding peer coaching

Embedding peer coaching is the final phase in which peer coaching becomes a part of the departmental culture and practice and is embodied in the everyday life of the department. At this phase, peer coaching becomes a substantial way of enhancing

collegiality and professional effectiveness. Lecturing staff now see peer coaching activities as meaningful, useful, and worth continuing. To make it sustainable, the following steps are helpful:

- Continue to celebrate success.
- Support teachers as researchers into their own teaching.
- Continue administrative support.
- Provide brush-up sessions on the coaching process to refine skills developed in the initial training sessions.
- Continue to monitor the scheme.
- Allocate rewards.
- Invite teachers to reflect on and write about their peer coaching activities in the school or departmental newsletter or in other publications.

When peer coaching is seen to be accepted by most of the relevant actors, and when the implementation is becoming stable and more of a routine, and when we see that peer coaching continues to develop even without the action or presence of specific individuals, we can be sure that it has been successfully embedded.

Departmental factors supporting peer coaching

- ❑ A democratic and participatory decision-making management system
- ❑ A departmental system which supports colleagues working in pairs or teams
- ❑ A system which clearly separates hierarchical evaluation and supervision from peer coaching
- ❑ A staff development programme which incorporates peer coaching as a regular feature
- ❑ Participation in peer coaching by the head of department and other senior staff
- ❑ Rewards or incentives for engaging in peer coaching

7. SOME TOOLS

Peer coaching is designed to meet the particular needs of the colleagues involved. It is not a process that can be followed by completing checklists, filling out forms, or following prescribed steps. However, most people involved in peer coaching find it useful to use some tools for planning, observing and reflecting.

In the following pages we provide a few examples of such tools, with the suggestion that you modify these to suit your purposes or develop your own. You may find other useful tools on the Internet, at for example, the University of Pittsburgh, and Escalate. The SEDA guide, *Observing Teaching*, includes twenty-three checklists (Brown, Jones & Rawnsley, 1993). See 'Resources' at the end of this guide for details of these publications.

1. Pre-observation conference

Conference date: _____

Colleague observed: _____

Observer: _____

Background for lesson observation:

1. Which module will be observed?
2. What are the main aims of the observation?
(e.g. a particular lesson, teaching innovation, or management strategies?)
3. Focus of observation (as determined by the observee).
4. Methods of observation and information collection.
5. Relevant issues.

Module: _____

Venue: _____

Date and time: _____

Agreed post-observation conference date and time:

Agreed post-observation conference venue:



2. Observation form

Teacher being observed: _____
Observer: _____
Subject taught: _____
Topic taught: _____
Date: _____
Time: _____

Time	Teaching events	Reflective questions, prompts, challenges

3. Reflective questions for the observer

- On the whole, how would you describe the lesson?
- What was the most impressive part of the lesson for you?
- Which aspects do you think are worth retaining? Why?
- Which part do you think needs improving? Why?
- If you were a student, which part do you think you would like the teacher to modify? Why?
- If you were another teacher in the classroom, which part do you think he/she would be most appreciative of? Why?



4. Guiding questions for discussion

- If you were to teach the same lesson again, would you do it in the same way? Why?
- How effective do you think the students' learning was? Why?
- Are there any alternative ways to facilitate learning in this lesson?
- Are there any comments on course materials used for the lesson?
- How did you experience the peer observation?
- How did you feel about the peer observation?
- What expectations do you have of your peer coaching colleague?
- What other views do you have about the meeting?

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