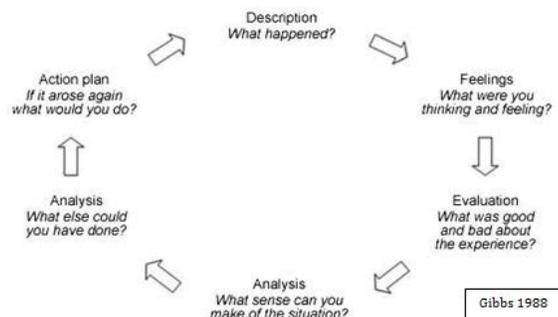


A comparison of Peer Coaching and Evaluation

PEER COACHING	EVALUATION
Give and take; sharing both ways; based on trust	One way learning
Non-threatening (peers) – teachers are acting together as equals	Sometimes threatening (supervisor)
Forward looking: System of continual improvement and growth for all involved – What do we want to happen?	Backward looking: What has happened?
Targets specific areas	Usually a general review
Ongoing	Often just a snapshot
Data: given to the teacher	Data: goes in personnel file
Teacher being observed does the evaluation	Supervisor evaluates
Focus is on what is seen	Focus is often on what is not seen
FORMATIVE	SUMMATIVE

“Rules” for Peer Coaching

1. We are engaging in **exploration**, not **criticism**. We are working together to improve teaching and learning. We are not monitoring each other.
2. An observed lesson is a **shared resource**; both teacher and observer should take away something of value from the discussions.
3. Look for, describe and assess the **practice** and **its results**, not the person’s competence.
4. Talk specifically and concretely (e.g. “You asked Sam 5 questions” rather than “you seem to ask the same people questions”).
5. Remember to comment on strengths. **Important learning comes from building on our strengths.**
6. Agree some pre-observation questions:
 - a) How can I be of help to you?
 - b) As I will be watching a video, can you give me some context for the class and lesson?
 - c) What specifically do you want me to look for?
 - d) Is there a particular student you wish me to watch?
 - e) What are your objectives / expectations for this lesson?
 - f) How long do you want me to observe?
 - g) When can we get together after the lesson?
7. Agree some post-observation lessons:
 - a) How do you feel the lesson went?
 - b) Why do you feel this way?
 - c) How does this compare with what you expected?
 - d) Would you like me to share what I observed?
 - e) Use the reflective cycle



Teachers as Learners (*From Rethinking Schools, 12 (Summer 1998)*)

How Peer Mentoring Can Improve Teaching

By Marc Osten and Eric Gidseg

The separation of a school into clearly defined classrooms creates a culture that reinforces isolation. Teachers tend to teach in ways that they have found successful, with little feedback from others. We generally do what we think is best and silently bear our own feelings of superiority or inferiority.

It doesn't have to be this way. The two of us, along with several other colleagues from our K-3 public school in upstate New York, have embarked on a peer-observation and mentoring process that has radically changed how we teach.

One of the key issues facing the teaching profession is how best to improve the quality of teaching and to provide ways for ongoing professional development. Debate has been particularly strong within the National Education Association over the issue of peer evaluation. While our process did not replace the traditional evaluation process in our school or district, we believe that it nonetheless offers insight into the potentials of peer evaluation.

Following are two separate essays on how the peer observation/mentoring process helped each of us with a specific problem we were having in the classroom. For more on the structure and philosophy of our peer observation and mentoring, see the article ["The Hows and Whys of Peer Mentoring."](#)

When Quiet Children Get Lost

By Marc Osten

The children in my second grade classroom work together in cooperative groups. My goal is to ensure that each student pulls their weight in the group, but in a way that still nurtures the enhanced creativity and energy that can come from working together. One of the struggles in cooperative learning is finding a way to engage quiet students so that they are not overwhelmed by more dominant personalities. It takes time to teach the students the necessary group skills and social skills that are needed for cooperative learning.

Sounds nice in theory. In practice though, last year I found myself succumbing to the growing pressures to make sure the kids scored well on standardized testing. I started cutting time from things that I knew were central to my classroom, but which weren't essential to higher test scores.

On one level, I might have been considered a success. The reading scores in my classroom went up. But the overall social and academic environment suffered.

Even though I had not put as much time into teaching students necessary group skills, I still thrust them into cooperative groups. In essence, without ever

realizing it I set them up for failure. There was more bickering at team tables. Students were less engaged in projects than in the past. Dominant students like Emma and Matt (the names of the children have been changed) often took control of their group, were becoming impatient and bossy. Quieter students like Brian or Marion were uninvolved. My assumption -- that quieter students would be better off in small groups -- was out of synch with reality.

I went to my peer mentoring team for help. I asked that the next time they came to observe my class, they focus on two things: how the groups seemed to work overall, and specifically how my two quiet students, Brian and Marion, seemed to fare. (The three observers came while their own classes were at an activity such as gym or music or lunch. They each came once a week, at different times, for 30-45 minutes.)

After a week of observing my class, the team confirmed my worst fears. They noticed that quieter children like Brian were totally uninvolved. In one instance Brian was seen playing with a pencil in his desk for eight minutes and Marion fell asleep for a minute on her desk. Two of the three observing teachers noted the lack of verbal contact at several groups. All three remarked that most students were focused on their individual work but rarely came together to share ideas or get help. When I asked student teams to put their "heads together" to discuss each person's progress on a task, one observer remarked that the children became very frustrated with Brian's silence.

I was surprised and upset -- and a little embarrassed -- by what my colleagues had seen. As I listened to all the vignettes, I wondered to myself: "Where was I when this was all going on?" I had prided myself on my use of cooperative groups only to find the process in disarray.

Fortunately, our peer process involves not just observation but mentoring. As a result, our "debriefing" session moved from observer reports to suggestions. I started to feel better.

One team member suggested I revisit my cooperative group project plans. Another reminded me to carefully structure cooperative work so kids had individual tasks but also had to collaborate. One teacher advised me to help the quieter children by giving them specific language to use with their groups. Specifically, the teacher suggested I tape an index card to their desk that had sentence starts such as, "I think that...", "My opinion is...", or "I need..."

The various suggestions stimulated a discussion that led to other ideas. One colleague mentioned that the index card idea would also be helpful with more dominant children. Sentence starts for these students might be, "What do you think. ...?" or "Do you have an opinion?" In this way, the more dominant children could help inspire discussion rather than close off conversations. Another idea was to develop specific, nonverbal team roles that would help quieter students

stay involved.

I returned to my classroom invigorated. I led mini-lessons and role plays so students could work with the index cards. I went back to regularly using a routine called "pairs check" in which I give each student time to ask questions and share their progress and knowledge with a teammate. I started to assign one student in each cooperative group as a "checker." This person would make sure every team is involved by confirming that each member has completed their work or has had a chance to share ideas. Finally, I started to watch things more carefully. I decided to do more direct intervention to help individuals, pairs, or teams stuck "in process."

Things improved immediately. During the role plays, students perked up and became more animated. During one role play, Brian asked, "Can I bring this index card to recess and use it on the playground?"

During a study of plants I noticed several positive outcomes. In one experiment, I observed Marion look at the index card taped to her desk and say to her partner, "I think that the seed will sprout in ten days." Months earlier she would have quietly mumbled a few words that her partner might or might not hear. At another table, a heated discussion was taking place about what order in which to share predictions. One student yelled at another, "I want to go first." Brian, meanwhile, had been given the nonverbal team job of "quiet captain." (In this nonverbal role, the student slowly raises, then brings his or her two hands together to show teammates that they need to speak in more respectful and quieter voices.) After the student's complaint, Brian became involved and showed how he was an important member of the team by giving the non-verbal signal for quiet voices and more respect.

Matt, a verbal and often bossy student, was also finding more productive ways to work in groups. During an art project about plants, Matt's team of four students each had a very specific task: Matt was responsible for the roots while the other three students worked on the stem, leaves, and flower parts. Because each student had a very specific topic, it was virtually impossible for Matt to be domineering.

After completing their drawings, I put Matt and Brian together for "pairs check." This gave Brian a chance to gain confidence in his verbal presentation before sharing his drawing with the whole class.

Early in the school year, it had been unimaginable for Brian to stand up in front of the class and present work he completed by himself. On this special day, he sat excitedly and waited patiently for Matt to finish explaining how his sunflower roots draw water from the ground. Brian then got up and in a proud and clear voice made his presentation about a sunflower's stem. It was a breakthrough moment for him.

During the year, the team helped me improve my teaching in other areas beyond cooperative groups. For example, I received specific suggestions on improving my technique with small reading groups. The team also helped me increase my use of open-ended questions and gave specific recommendations about handling a student with discipline problems.

The bottom line was that my students benefited. By becoming a learner, I had become a better teacher.

Marc Osten has taught 2nd and 3rd grade for several years. Previous to working in education, he worked on consumer and environmental protection concerns for national and international organizations.

When Good Intentions Go Awry

By Eric Gidseg

Peer observations often provide insights that are quite painful to hear but which can improve our teaching. I learned this the hard way.

In my class of 21 kindergartners, there was a child whom I felt was unreachable in the context of whole class or group activities. I asked the team to help me out. I use a large group setting, what I call my morning circle, as the primary teaching modality in my classroom. After the large group, the children go to "center" activities which provide an opportunity for practice and exploration. Since this child was apparently getting little from our morning circle, her entire morning was affected. She moved through centers with little understanding or direction. As we sat together on the rug each day to hear stories and discuss current explorations, this little girl (whom I will call Jennifer), often sat on the periphery. She would look down at her hands and generally appeared lost in her own inner world.

Jennifer was a child who carried a lot of emotional baggage, and her home life was troubled and unstable. She was generally unable or unwilling to participate in classroom activities, especially verbal ones. When things became stressful for her, she would "act in," crossing her arms across her chest and making a sour face.

I felt on the verge of giving up with Jennifer. All my attempts to get her to participate had failed. To some extent, I had allowed myself to give less thought to her. Just as she had banished herself from the center of the class, so had I pushed her to the periphery of my awareness.

I knew I needed help. I hoped that my peers had experience with children who were as reticent as Jennifer and could offer concrete suggestions. What I received from my team was quite shocking and caused me to look at my own failures and to re-examine my teaching.

During the observations, my peers noted that although Jennifer was passive and

seemingly inattentive for much of the time, there were several brief moments where Jennifer had tried to make contact. But I had failed to recognize her attempts. For example, at one point I had been reading a book to the class. One peer observer later reported that Jennifer quietly said during the reading, "Guess what, Mr. Gidseg?" But I apparently didn't hear her, or at least didn't respond. I asked myself, "How could I have missed such an event?" Jennifer had made a significant step outwards and I had failed to recognize it. I then asked myself, "How long had she been reaching out only to find herself ignored by me?" The peer observer went on to report that Jennifer approached me later, apparently to ask me something. I did not recognize this and instead I spoke to her. I asked her to be my special helper at our listening center. She crossed her arms and moved angrily away from me. I remembered the incident. At the time, I was mystified by Jennifer's behavior.

At the debriefing, my reaction was visceral. I buried my head in my hands and said, "This is like a knife in my heart." It's still painful for me to watch the tape of my debriefing. My colleagues were tremendously supportive, as always. My teammate who watched me miss opportunities with Jennifer told me that as he watched these events, he knew that they would be painful for me to hear. Another observer expressed that Jennifer was careful not to let even her reaching out become too obvious.

I received many ideas from my peers about how to help Jennifer. These ranged from being sure that she sat in front of me during our morning circle time to privately meeting with Jennifer before or after our circle to be sure that she received enough direction to do productive work for the day.

As I had time to process the feelings, observations, and ideas that were generated from my debriefing, I realized that the significant information that I received was the recognition that Jennifer was, in fact, reaching out. It was now up to me to be attentive to her as much as possible.

I resolved to have her near me as much as possible, to not allow her to become part of the periphery. I created small time frames where she and I could chat, in private, about the work for the day. The changes were remarkable in a short period of time. Not only was I giving more attention to the details of her behavior, I also found more room in my heart for her. The team had helped me to see her in a new light.

There was a lot going on inside of Jennifer and I was determined to reach her. As she became more tuned in to the workings of the class, she began to make friends. She suddenly found herself to be fairly popular. Her self esteem was given quite a boost.

Jennifer's relationship with me also improved. She began talking to me each morning, little bits at first. She spoke about her family and her friends. On one

occasion she brought pictures for me that she made at home. She quickly started to ask questions and enjoyed reading books with me. She had begun to learn. She was able, for the first time, to write her name correctly. Jennifer maintained her reticence towards "performing" in front of the class, but she was no longer afraid to speak.

As a veteran teacher with 20 years of early childhood experience, I was humbled by the effect that the team had on my awareness and teaching. Through their supportive critique, my eyes were opened to some of my own blind spots. And Jennifer was the fortunate recipient of a more enlightened approach from a newly revitalized teacher.

Eric Gidseg has taught kindergarten and first grade for 20 years. For 11 years he taught kindergarten in faculty administered Waldorf schools, where he first discovered the potential of professional development.