

SWAP SESSION NEWSLETTER

No. 8

Swap Session held: 10-22-98

It is essential that faculty identify a way to resolve tension between activities that promote development and innovation in teaching and activities that are used to evaluate performance for personal purposes such as promotion and tenure.

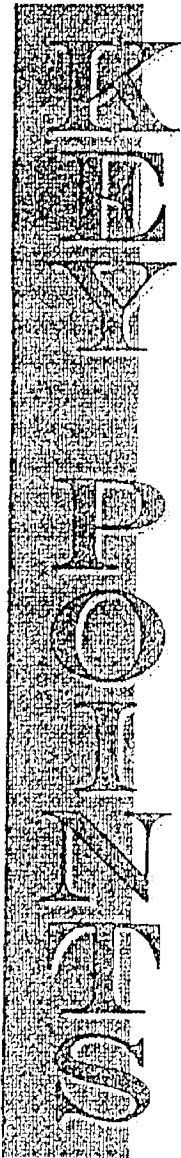
- Ronald Cavanagh via Dan Bernstein

TOPIC: Taking Advantage of Peer Consultation on Teaching

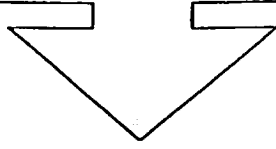
Dr. Bernstein highlighted the following points:

- **PERFORMANCE ART:** When we primarily focus on teacher performance in the classroom setting, we miss a great deal of what makes teaching valuable to our students and institutions.
- **A SUBSTANTIVE FORM OF PEER INTERACTION:** A substantive form of peer interaction serves as a compliment to traditional student voiced feedback as to our performance. It is beneficial to create conditions in which faculty members have time and space to develop themselves as teachers, outside the glare of evaluation. This means giving people both opportunities and materials to help them in this process of development. In this approach, a kind of an umbrella is provided from departmental or other administrative scrutiny so that an educator can engage in collaboration and consultation with colleagues without the need for written documentation of specific details of said collaboration. Dr. Bernstein suggests that a system of alternating periods (every 2-3 years) should be established for working with colleagues to develop teaching and, at the end of each period, evidence of quality of teaching could be brought forth.
- **THE MODEL:** The model presented is not that of a critical analysis of every teacher, every year. It is a model that calls for periodic moments of accountability while allowing for mistakes. The University of Nebraska- Lincoln is currently working on a project to help faculty develop materials over a period of several years which they feel comfortable having reviewed by colleagues in the same discipline at other universities. Peer review of this kind might be sought with a question such as, "Tell me what you think of student performance in this course?" Dr. Bernstein suggested that tools are available for consultation with colleagues and that these should enable us to perform peer review with confidence, even outside of our immediate discipline.
- **PEER REVIEW:** Peer review is often associated with a chairperson who sits in the back of the classroom before a tenure vote. According to the model presented by Dr. Bernstein, it is an opportunity 1) to work with colleagues *of your own choosing*, 2) for periods of time *you* have decided upon, and 3) to work on questions about teaching that *you* have decided upon.

☞ **REMEMBER:** The goal is to develop excellence and to be able to demonstrate it in a meaningful way.



Dr. Bernstein shared the following 3 Types of Peer Interactions put forward by Lee Shulman and Pat Hutchings in association with a project by the American Association for Higher Education and University of Nebraska-Lincoln:



1) Examination of Intellectual Content: Examining the scholarship of course content through peer interaction might involve sharing a syllabus from a course with a colleague, for example. A brief rationale will be provided for each item on the syllabus. The chosen peer consultant will provide feedback frankly and in private.

The primary questions to be asked in this type of interaction are: Is the material up to date? Is the material appropriate to the curriculum? Is the coverage comprehensive? Is it what the course bulletin says it should be? Is the course appropriate for students?

2) Use of class time (“contact time with learners”): The goal at this level is to tell a colleague how you plan to use your time with students, including labs, studios and internships. You will state clear goals for what you want to get out of that time. A colleague will visit during your time with students and will be prepared and in the same position as the learners (i.e., will have done the required readings). Your colleague will write a commentary on how you have accomplished *your own goals*. You decide for yourself whether these goals are abstract or concrete.

This type of interaction serves as a starting point for answering the questions: Am I using all of the tools that are available for best practice? Am I doing what I thought I was doing?

3) Student Performance and Feedback: In this type of interaction, you give a colleague a sample of something you have asked students to do (e.g., a test or an assignment), and a sample of actual student performance and grades you gave. The point of this exchange is to find out what another person in your field thinks about the way students are performing in your class. Dr. Bernstein notes that this type of interaction is different from that used in the past and is attractive because of its *emphasis on student learning*.

Questions asked in this interaction are: Am I asking too much/too little? Am I doing what I said I would in the beginning of the course? How are the students doing? Are they performing at a level the colleague believes is appropriate? Is student performance appropriate to content? Is assessment relevant to class goals as stated? Are students demonstrating competence? Are there adequate opportunities for students to learn from feedback and demonstrate improved performance?

As long as your students demonstrate a deep understanding of the material, it does not matter whether you teach in a currently fashionable way.

Dr. Bernstein asked audience members to break into small discussion groups to consider the following questions:

- 1) Where does student learning enter into a conversation with a peer about teaching?
How important is that to you?
- 2) What can I learn from colleagues who teach courses in my discipline?
- 3) What can I learn from colleagues who teach courses that are similar in size or with similar populations of learners?

One spokesperson from each small group shared the points of discussion:

- ◆ Is there disparity between exam performance and what you think students are learning?
- ◆ How well do students manifest learning in discussions with each other or with the instructor?
- ◆ The importance of clearly identifying for students the class "take-home" message.
- ◆ Very often, we test what we value and students learn to value what we test.
- ◆ Benefit of consulting with a peer from another discipline is that a different view might be helpful.
- ◆ How should disruptive behavior and sleeping in class be handled?
- ◆ We are seeing a different population of students whose needs must be met. This, in turn, produces changing expectations.
- ◆ We have two choices in dealing with changing expectations: lament that students are no longer what they used to be, or meet students as the learners that they are and bring them to a higher level. Asking ourselves to change may be difficult but necessary.
- ◆ We may be more comfortable in peer consultation with a colleague from within our field at first because of the content knowledge and comfort level.
- ◆ When we talk to colleagues about courses, it is usually at a very general level (e.g., about course content).
- ◆ True learning is what is left after content is forgotten.
- ◆ Fear of self-evaluation keeps people from talking.
- ◆ We are resistant to change and we don't want to disrupt what seems to be going well.
- ◆ What we typically talk about is "What was my performance like?"
- ◆ What we cite as measures for what students get out of courses is dubious.
- ◆ Methods of assessing whether information is getting across to students include: distributing cards to students to have them sum up the issues discussed that day in class; have students do a stream-of-consciousness exercise
- ◆ It is important to learn how to write essay questions well
- ◆ Most effective student learning seems to occur when the educator can make a connection with the particular class

Dr. Bernstein addressed some of the main points brought forth by the small group discussion and concluded with the following ideas:

- ✓ Student evaluations alone and peer evaluation alone are inadequate measures
- ✓ Peer collaboration can help you interpret data, such as grades. Peer collaboration can help you figure out from grades, answers to the questions: "Who is learning?" "Why?"
- ✓ The peer consultation should ask, "Is what you got the students to do meaningful, good evidence of understanding?"
- ✓ We need to think critically on the matter of assessment. If we think that handing out cards at the end of class is a good measure, we should give grades based on this.
- ✓ Remember that when you ask students to perform, you set the criterion for what is important in your community.
- ✓ What does a deep understanding of your field mean?
- ✓ The process of consultation is best done in private with peers. You will have enjoyable conversations and may come up with better measurements.
- ✓ You are going to be teaching anyway. Look at it as something to build into what you already have to do.

Recommended Books:

Educative Assessment., by Grant Wiggins.

LB3051.W495
Hale Library

Effective Grading., by Barbara Walvoord.

LB2368.W35 1998
Hale Library

Teaching for Understanding., Martha Stone Wiske, Ed.

LB1026.T383 1998
Hale Library



ANNOUNCEMENTS:

- The University Distinguished Teaching Scholar Chair, Dr. Bryan Schurle, is sponsoring a Workshop on Distance Learning on Tuesday, November 10, from 8:30 AM to 12:00 Noon in the Big 12 Room. The keynote speaker is Dr. Janet Poley. The panel will include Dr. Featherstone.
- Dr. Chuck Bonwell will present a workshop on Wednesday, January 13 on "Active Learning and Learning Styles: Making the Connection."