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PEER TEACHING COMMENTARY

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Peer Teaching Commentary program facilitates growth for teachers

This fall, CTE implemented a program that takes a different approach to a sometimes difficult, oftentimes intimidating task: peer review of teaching. Based on the work of three CTE Faculty Fellows—Dena Register, Andrea Greenhoot, and Susan Williams—the Peer Teaching Commentary program addresses peer review as a collaborative process. It focuses on facilitating growth as teachers, and participants can use materials generated during the program either for personal development or for professional documentation of teaching effectiveness. Both new and experienced faculty members began participating in the program this fall.

One unique facet of the program is that groups of three faculty members meet

to discuss their teaching and observe classes, rather than the traditional pairing of two faculty members. Dena Register noted that this model helps balance the group by avoiding a junior/senior faculty member split, and it promotes substantive discussions about teaching, rather than “you write a nice letter for me, and I’ll write a nice one for you.”

Details about the program can be found on pages 8–9 of this issue of *Teaching Matters*. To read about some of your colleagues’ reactions to the pilot program, see pages 10–11. If you’d like to become part of a teaching triad next semester, contact Dena Register at register@ku.edu by January 18.

CTE NEWS

Three new graduate students assisting at CTE

CTE’s work is being enhanced this fall by three new graduate student employees: Ann Martinez, Sahana Mukherjee, and Mary Beth Woodson.



Ann: Since joining the CTE team this past August, I’ve been working with faculty from various disciplines on a wide range of portfolios—work that I find to be very interesting as it allows me to see the university system from a different perspective. I’m a PhD candidate in English, focusing on medieval and early modern literature, on the verge of starting my dissertation where I will be using an ecocritical framework. I love teaching—and I particularly love teaching my students about heroic and silly knights, complicated monsters, and, of course, Shakespeare. Originally from the desert of Southern California, I had never seen snow until I moved to Kansas.

Sahana: I’m a PhD student in social psychology, focusing on issues of oppression and liberation. This is my second year at KU, and my first year at CTE. Since work-

ing at CTE, I’ve had opportunities to work with faculty from various disciplines on a wide range of portfolios. Not only does this inform my understanding of teaching practices in different disciplines, but it also motivates me to evaluate my teaching style and meet students’ needs and expectations. I moved to the US from India a year and half ago, and have since gotten addicted to buffalo wings, learned to tolerate Midwest winters, but haven’t conquered driving on the right side of the road, yet!



Mary Beth: I’m a doctoral candidate in the film and media studies department, where my interests include memory, the environment, and history in film. I started at CTE in August 2010, and I work with faculty to prepare electronic teaching portfolios, as well as working with other CTE staff on the New GTA Conference.

New Working Groups focus on improving instruction in large classes, supporting adjuncts and lecturers

Next semester, CTE will facilitate two new Working Groups. The first group will focus on ways to improve instruction in large classes. The second group will focus on ways to support adjuncts and lecturers in their instructional roles. Working group members will evaluate best practices at other institutions and suggest ways to adapt these practices for implementation at KU.

Both Working Groups will meet for three semesters, beginning Spring 2011. Five meetings will be held next semester, three next fall, and two in Spring 2012. Each group will develop a website that disseminates their recommendations.

Inaugural Spring Symposium set

The first Spring Symposium on the Scholarship of Diversity has been set for March 14–15, 2011, on the Lawrence campus.

Two prominent national leaders will give keynote presentations on the scholarship/research base in higher education. Several invited KU faculty scholars will facilitate sessions around four themes: struc-

Each Working Group participant will receive a \$100 instructional fund for his or her work this spring, and an additional \$100 instructional fund for work in 2011–12. Funds will be state monies, and they can be used for travel or purchases allowed under state guidelines. Participants in the adjunct/lecturer group must hold one of those positions at the University. Membership in each group is limited to 10, and members must be teaching on the Lawrence campus.

If you'd like to participate in one of these Working Groups, contact Judy Eddy at jeddy@ku.edu by January 20.

ture/access, climate, curriculum, and institutional transformation/reform.

In addition, the committee will solicit presenters for an evening poster session on March 14.

For more information, contact Fred Rodriguez, Interim Associate Vice Provost for Diversity & Equity, at fredrod@ku.edu.

From peer review to commentation and collaboration: An opportunity for reflection and dedicated time

Dena Register, CTE/Music Therapy

There's no learning without reflection and no reflection without dedicated time.—R. Robertson

There never seems to be enough time. Our energies are divided among research agendas, teaching, and service commitments. Who has time to reflect on why today's class discussion had students more engaged than usual, or why the course project for this semester seems to be falling flat? The hope is that if a colleague is coming to sit in on my class in order to complete a peer review, he or she will be there on a day the discussion is lively and intellectual due to well-read student input. While this peer review method is often a function of completing a task in a timely manner, it does not offer critical thought or assessment about the efficacy and alignment of one's teaching to program or disciplinary goals for students.

As a CTE Faculty Fellow, I spent two years engaged in numerous conversations around the topic of peer review. The Fellows explored questions about how peer review works in different departments or units, what role the feedback plays for individuals, what expectations individuals

have about this kind of review, and what potential there might be for this process being a generative one for the faculty members involved. Similarities in stories arose over and over again that a colleague jokingly labeled "the drive by" experience. This "drive by" consists of one colleague dropping into another's course for one class period (or less) and then writing a nice letter about how students were engaged and how the faculty member facilitated discussion or gave a riveting lecture on a particular topic.

In rethinking possibilities for the peer review process, discussions started with the assumptions about the process as it stands now, and a basic definition of how we hoped it would function in context of annual reviews, tenure and promotion. Could we move from "review," implying the potential for punitive consequences, to terms that implied the sharing of informed experiences and practices, reflection on where we are in our development as teachers and how student learning is made visible in our courses? The Fellows did develop a plan, the "Peer Teaching Commentary Program," and it's being piloted

on campus this academic year. Adding “commentary” to the description suggests that this is a cooperative process where peers provide informed feedback for an instructor’s consideration and reflection.

Steps for engaging in the commentary and collaboration process include a brief initial meeting (one to one and half hours), then establishing dedicated time for a group of three faculty members to review one another’s course syllabi, discuss elements of the course that are working well, and generate questions

about the inevitable challenges that arise in teaching. The recommendation to use three faculty members as part of a collaborative group was based on the idea that each faculty member could receive input and feedback from more than one perspective and that there would be a distribution of the workload that removed the two-way, back and forth pressure of only having two people involved in the interaction.

The program would function this way: Three instructors gather to discuss their various courses. Instructor A visits instructor B’s course, instructor B visits instructor C’s course, and C visits A’s course. After the visits, the group convenes again to share observations and experiences followed by a written self-assessment and/or

written peer assessment of what things are going well in the course and what areas are developing. The program allows for a great deal of flexibility in terms of rank, discipline and amount of time devoted to this process.

This fall, several groups of faculty members from various disciplines became engaged in the pilot program,

while others formed groups within their own area. Some groups include

faculty members working toward tenure and promotion, while others are com-

prised of those interested in exploring different areas of teaching.

This proposed revision shifts the focus from an assessment of “good” or “bad” to one that includes self-reflection and informed consultation from peers as an agent for change in the classroom. It allows us to engage in important conversations about what we have to offer in the classroom and how to best make student learning visible. By maximizing our resources and collective wisdom both in and out of the classroom and devoting time to engage in these conversations with our colleagues, we have the potential to find renewed inspiration in our teaching, as well as an expanded network of colleagues with whom to consult.

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Peer collaboration: From product to process

Susan Williams, Chemical & Petroleum Engineering

Why is it that after teaching for 12 years, I still get a knot in my stomach when someone mentions coming to my class for peer review? Maybe it is because I worry that I won’t have my “A” game that day, or the students will act completely different because someone else is in the room, or the new idea that I want to try might not be as successful as I hoped and, thus, my letter won’t be as positive. Whatever the issue may be, the real reason is being reviewed is never exciting or fun.

What if the system changed? What if the focus of peer review was no longer on evaluation, but on the way we become better educators? What if we found a way to engage colleagues in discussions to improve learning that also resulted in material that could be used for evaluation? Wouldn’t shifting the emphasis away from products of peer reviews (i.e., letters in a file) to the process of improving student learning be a better use of faculty time?

The new peer collaboration process that

is being piloted by faculty members across campus provides an occasion for multiple faculty members to come together and discuss teaching. Over the semester, faculty teams share their teaching philosophies with each other by discussing their syllabi, course goals, visions for student learning,

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assessment criteria, and classroom experiences. Through discussions with peers, faculty members have an opportunity to reflect on their teaching and receive in-depth feedback. This feedback, and the time spent reflecting on teaching, will ultimately help us all grow as educators.

The best part about the peer collaboration process is that it is flexible. The faculty team might choose to meet a few times during the semester or more often, depending on the team. The teams can consist of peers within one department or from completely different units on campus. The primary goal is to provide occasions for colleagues to discuss teaching.

The beauty of the new system is that it provides a significant body of evidence

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and rich material that can be used in the evaluation of teaching. When we are evaluating a peer in our collaboration team, we are no longer limited to a simple letter describing a single classroom performance, but we have a much deeper insight into the structure of the course, the learning objectives, and the process that faculty member uses to assess and improve student learning. We can discuss how the faculty member engages in new

teaching activities and what has been learned from the process. By describing a specific peer collaboration experience, we have a much more detailed document describing the teaching of our colleagues.

In addition to the single course snapshot, the process can also be used to show long-term reflections on teaching. By comparing documentation for peer collaboration over the years, the growth and development of a course or teaching method can be clearly shown. This perspective and insight into the processes that faculty member has used to enhance student learning will be a much better tool for evaluating the teaching practices and understanding the teaching philosophy of our colleagues.

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Documenting a trajectory of growth in teaching thus benefits an individual faculty member, as well as his or her department. Participating in the Peer Teaching Commentary program will help faculty members develop materials for reviews.

Some material could be used for promotion and tenure files, or it could be used strictly by the individual when he or she is preparing annual reports. Having the material already prepared provides chairs with a rich resource for reviews, either annual reports or for promotion and tenure.

When I think about the peer collaboration process, I am reminded of how I feel when I come back from a professional society meeting or a seminar at another university. I am always energized and excited about new directions for research because I have had the chance to talk with my peers about new discoveries or experiments. The peer collaboration on teaching process offers me the opportunity to have the same stimulating discussions that I travel outside of Lawrence to experience for research, right at home. And registration is free!

IN FOCUS

CTE Peer Teaching Commentary Program to continue in Spring 2011

The Center for Teaching Excellence Peer Teaching Commentary (PTC) program offers faculty and instructional staff members a way to reflect on their teaching as a process, with support and input from two peers. PTC members meet for about five hours over a semester (more or less, as you choose) and provide feedback to each other on teaching and student learning. Participants can come from the same department or from a related field of study, or teach a similar form of class (e.g., graduate seminar, large undergraduate class).

What will you do in the PTC program?

You and your peers can exchange syllabi for one of your courses, discuss learning goals, observe each other's classes, and review samples of student work. At the end of the semester, triad members can summarize their reflections about what they learned from the interactions. These reflections can document your growth as a teacher. You can use this material for annual reports and/or promotion and tenure files, or simply keep the material for yourself. Essentially, group members determine exactly what will happen in their group.

Why consider becoming part of a triad?

As a PTC participant, you'll:

- Meet with colleagues who are examining a teaching question similar to one you may have.
- Develop insights into your teaching and your students' learning, and perfect your practice.
- Bring collaboration into your teaching by sharing what you're learning with your PTC triad.
- Document your experience, either for yourself or to represent your teaching for reviews.

This program is appropriate for both new and experienced teachers. It provides new faculty members with an opportunity to hone their teaching skills through a time-efficient, no-risk program. It provides experienced faculty members with an opportunity to share some of the things they have learned as teachers and to discover new ideas they can implement in their courses. Wherever you are on this spectrum, you have much to offer.

What will your group do?

When you first join a PTC triad:

- Describe the class you are studying in

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the PTC program and its meeting times/location.

- Describe what you want to get out of the program, where you are in the promotion and tenure timeline, and whether those two points are related.

Getting started:

- Exchange syllabi.
- Identify course goals, rationale behind course design, and your teaching question(s).
- Arrange a meeting to discuss your syllabi and goals.
- Schedule classroom visits: A visits B, B visits C, and C visits A. Consider how many classroom visits each member wants to make.

Class visits:

- Before: Send assignment descriptions and assigned readings/activities to your class visitor.
- During: Use discussion prompts (see page 12) to organize your notes and comments.
- After: Discuss how well observed goals/outcomes matched what the instructor intended.

Wrap-up:

- Give your peer class visitor representative (high, mid, low) examples of student work. Discuss how you evaluate

student performance, and describe overall student performance on the assignment. Identify areas with high levels of understanding and areas where students struggled.

- Schedule a team meeting to reflect on how well your goals were met. Compare levels of student performance across group members' courses—are there common themes?
- If you wish, each visitor may write a brief (one to two-paragraph) memo that integrates visits and discussions. These memos can document your continuous inquiry into learning.

How do you join a PTC triad?

Let CTE know you're interested in being part of a triad. Be ready to specify:

- Three teaching questions you'd like to explore;
- Whether you want to work with colleagues in your general discipline or with colleagues from other disciplines;
- Whether you're focusing on self-reflections on teaching or documentation for reviews.

To join a triad next semester, contact Dena Register at register@ku.edu by January 18, 2011.

GOOD WORK

PTC pilot group members describe program's impact

Ann Martinez, CTE

Teaching collaboration is formally and informally practiced by those in the teaching profession. Whether in casual conversation with fellow educators, or in a more organized setting, suggestions on what works and what doesn't work in class come up time and time again. Sometimes a fresh pair of eyes is needed for a teaching question, or a great teaching strategy must be shared with others; but should such moments be left to chance?

To facilitate more structured collaboration among faculty and instructional staff members, CTE piloted

a Peer Teaching Commentary program in Fall 2010. Led by Dena Register, the pilot included Cheryl Lester, American studies; Andi Witczak, Center for Service Learning; and Mary Banwart, communication studies and coordinator of the leadership studies minor.

One thing that may stand out from those in the triad is that they are from different disciplines—something the participants feel was key to the dynamic of their group. As Lester recalls, "Dan [Bernstein] said he would like to pair me with some

people he thought I would really enjoy working with—and he was right. When we had our first meeting, we went around the room and started talking about who we are, what we do and what we teach. We were so excited about each other as individuals and professionals that we just launched, right then and there. We were so

enthusiastic about what everybody was doing."

Witczak, who feels strongly about discipline diversity in the triad, said, "I think it's important to be in a group with people outside of your discipline. I

know there are arguments either way, but I really like learning how things are done in other disciplines, to see what the best practices are, and to see how I can put them into my classroom. If I were going to do it again, I would make sure it's with people from other disciplines."

Aware of the concerns some may have regarding the diverse disciplines within the teaching triad, Lester voices a likely question: "How can people who aren't in the same fields evaluate each other's teaching?" And she proceeds to answer:

"I really like learning how things are done in other disciplines, to see what the best practices are, and to see how I can put them into my classroom."

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“There is a tremendous amount of what we do that is not discipline specific when it comes to teaching. And in fact, I feel that those are precisely the things we try to make headway on at CTE. It helps us to step back from the particulars, the content, and the discipline specific content, and try to develop pedagogies and think methodically and systematically about how we are organizing our teaching and how we are documenting our efforts.”

Teaching triad participants learn about what the other members are doing, but they are still allowed to focus on their own work. Lester recalls, “Dena [Register] was the glue. She understood what I was doing, and she knew more about what each of us was doing better than any of us necessarily knew.” She adds, “Spaces like CTE or the Hall Center provide opportunities to get away from the business of running a department and focus on those aspects of what we do that we normally don’t have time to talk about. But here we had the time, and we suddenly started feeling like friends. It was very generative and a huge relief.”

Witczak agrees. “A couple things that I think are really important that came out of [the triad]: the trust we had as a group was the most memorable and the most meaningful, and after a while when we came to those meetings we could talk about any-

thing related to our classes in a way that we felt we weren’t being judged.”

The peer teaching triad has many long-lasting benefits, not only applicable for that one course or one project, but for many others in the future. As Lester points out, from the beginning “it was very clear in our plenary meetings that we were all interested not only in innovation but in methodology. We were interested in innovation but also in being able to produce iterable pedagogies and not some one-time spontaneous creation. That’s where I think we really intersected.”

Banwart summed up her experience by saying, “Being in a triad was particularly integral to my success that semester, as with the smaller group we could spend more time focusing on the challenges—and opportunities—we sought feedback on throughout the semester, and were even able to make in-person visits to each other’s classes, as well. The dynamic of the triad allowed for a deeper exploration of pedagogy and methodology than a larger group dynamic can generally offer.”

If you are interested in becoming part of a teaching triad in Spring 2011, contact Dena Register at register@ku.edu.

END NOTE

Twenty questions for PTC interactions

If you participate in a PTC group, what might you discuss? Here are possible questions:

What are your goals for students in the course? How do these interface with department, university, or discipline goals?

What are three critical things you want students to understand by the end of the course?

What developmental level do students need to be at to engage with course material?

Do the stated goals for the course match the needs of students with whom you are working? How is that apparent?

How do you spend your contact time with students? Lecturing, discussing, small groups, one-on-one? How do students respond to the contact time?

What work do students do outside of class?

Which assignment do you think is central to the course and best illustrates student learning? Does the student work on it meet your expectations?

How do you evaluate student work? How do students respond to this evaluation?

How do you use previous student work to measure progress in student outcomes?

What is your greatest challenge teaching this course?

What changes have you made in this course from previous semesters? Why?

Did the changes yield the outcome you wanted? If not, what might you change to bring about the results you want?

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