

THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

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What is a Teaching Consultant? Sheridan Center Teaching Consultants Learn by Helping Others

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Have you ever wondered how colleagues across disciplines manage their classes? Ever wanted to watch students as a bystander and see what teaching goals and strategies help them learn?

The Sheridan Center Teaching Consultants, upon receiving an ITC observation request filled out by Brown and RISD participants in the Sheridan Center's Teaching Seminar, work in pairs watching others teach. We sit in on an hour-long segment of a class, prepare a brief report afterwards, then meet with observees to communicate our response.

When I heard about the chance to meet other graduate TAs and talk shop, I said, "Wow, sign me up!" The Teaching Consultants, all of whom have previously completed the Effective Teaching Seminar requirements, have a wonderful opportunity to meet fellow teachers, help them improve, and gain an understanding of the profession as a whole. We become advocates for reflective teaching, engaged in an ongoing dialogue on how to build on great successes and small failures alike.

I want to particularly address here how the experience of being a Teaching Consultant has been beneficial to my understanding of teaching and learning. I would like to explore why I find the experience so rich and hopefully encourage others to become Sheridan Center consultants too.

I have become a better teacher through the Sheridan Center's Teaching Consultant program by seeing that certain constants apply to teaching irrespective of discipline. In writing observation reports with fellow consultants, similar points always came up: speaking style, presentation structure, reinforcement of course goals and objectives. We found that good teaching could always be defined in relation to specific strategies and techniques.

In addition, we found that the teacher's enthusiasm, energy and concern for the students improved student learning. There was always a human element, a rapport established, that kept students engaged. Sitting in on classes as observers allowed us to gauge student response and understand both what triggered this response and how best to encourage further exchange. We saw how good preparation and effective classroom interaction worked together to foster a positive learning environment.

It was especially nice to speak with the observees afterward and discover how much they felt they had benefited from Sheridan Center seminars and from the ITC process itself. Being forced to think about why they teach a certain way made the TAs all the more confident and sensitive to what they do. When overseeing my own classes, it can be harder to recognize the fact that reflective teaching helps me to continually progress.

Last, but not least, I realized in working as a Sheridan Center Teaching Consultant that I am better preparing myself to be an effective mentor and facilitator in my own future career. In my opinion, Teaching Consultants become articulate spokespeople able to further motivate teachers and students alike. Be it regarding Latin or Geography, Printmaking or Fresco Technique, we see once again that working well together toward a shared goal can happen in any context when a few basic principles are applied

The Sheridan Center is fortunate to have a group of trained teaching consultants, like Aaron Prevots, who assist the Center in providing a variety of consulting services to the Brown teaching community. Teaching Consultants are a group of about 18 graduate students and four senior faculty who function as "critical friends." Their goal is to observe teaching situations and to formulate suggestions based on the specific wishes of the observee. Because they are not experts in the discipline of the observee, their feedback is focussed on the effectiveness of their communication as teachers to intelligent colleagues.

Several other Teaching Consultants responded to a series of questions which elucidate why being a consultant has been beneficial to them. For those unfamiliar with these services, please contact the Center or visit our web site (open 24/7!)

The questions posed were the following:

1. *What is the rationale for Teaching Consultants as "critical friends"?*
2. *Why is observation so important?*
3. *Why does it matter that the consultants be from outside the discipline of the observee?*
4. *What do you gain from watching the reactions of the students?*
5. *Why is videotaping necessary?*
6. *How do you write the Report and handle the meeting with the observee?*
7. *Has being a TC helped you understand better the connection between teaching and research in higher education?*
8. *Do you feel that you have become a better teacher? How do you know that?*

.1. What is the rationale for Teaching Consultants as "critical friends"?

Beth Kellerman, Psychology: It's hard to receive criticism, however necessary, on your teaching performance. It would make it even more difficult (perhaps even excruciating?!) to have a faculty member, or even, your advisor, observe you for the purposes of yielding

constructive criticism. It is far better to have a graduate student, who is your peer, evaluate you. The consultants have been in the same boat, so to speak, as the observees and understand what it's like to teach undergraduates and act as the liaison between the students and the professor. Having a graduate student as the observer is less harmful to the observee's psyche and makes the process more rewarding (and less scary).

2. Why is observation so important ?

Erin Davis, Bio-Med: Observation is VERY important in that we observe not only the instructor but also the class/ students. The students provide invaluable feedback (body language, questions to the instructor and after class in a one-on-one interview with the consultant) on how the instructor teaches which I don't think is valued by other evaluators (outside of the Sheridan Center) of these instructors. By silently observing the class (as though one is a fly on the wall) we are able to evaluate objectively the teaching skills of the instructor, especially since we are from other disciplines. Also because there are two consultants present we can usually notice how *all* the students are reacting to the class (we are looking through a wide-angled lens).

Kellerman: Observation is crucial because no matter how cognizant a person is of his/her performance, there will always be subtle behaviors, nuances to spoken words that a person cannot possibly monitor. If you think you're doing everything right and the students still are failing to understand the point of the lecture/discussion, then an impartial observer can fill in the missing pieces.

Allison Pacelli, Mathematics: I think that our own perception as teachers of how successful a particular lecture/section is can be very inaccurate at times. Objective data gives

us more feedback about how well we are communicating to our students.

3. Why does it matter that the consultants be from outside the discipline of the observee?

Davis: I think it is very important that each observation be done by two consultants , one each from the humanities and sciences and not be from the same department as the instructor. The opposite backgrounds allow each consultant to provide the other with a different interpretation on the instructor. I have always been amazed and intrigued that my ITC partner saw something from a completely different angle in a lecture or, that they noticed something that I hadn't. It is crucial that we not be in the department as the instructor so that we remain impartial. I think that we get a truer performance from the instructor, yes they are nervous, but it is a different kind of nerves when presenting in front of your fellow department members. I also think the instructor listens attentively to our comments in the final meeting because we are so removed from their field; we are only looking at their teaching skills and how to potentially improve them not on the content of the lecture.

Kellerman: The consultant's primary field of research expertise should differ from that of the observee to allow the consultant to focus on the presentation, rather than to get bogged down in the subject matter. It's easier for the consultant to attend to the minutiae of the lecture and the flow of ideas rather than the content itself. On a different note, the

consultant is exposed to a variety of lecture styles in different disciplines and becomes a better observer.

Pacelli: I think that our own perception as teachers of how successful a particular lecture/section is can be very inaccurate at times. Objective data gives us more feedback about how well we are communicating to our students. I think it's important to get feedback from non-experts because it ensures that the criticism is based, not on content, but on pedagogy. I may not be able to understand the content of a lecture or discussion, but by observing the various teaching techniques employed by the teacher, the interactions between teacher and student, and the students' reactions, I can judge fairly well how successful the lecture is. For example, I observed a Spanish course this spring, and I speak absolutely no Spanish. But I could see that the instructor used handouts, slides, group work, and the blackboard in her presentation; she was energetic and enthusiastic, and knew her students well; she made eye contact with all of her students, and solicited feedback from the students. It was a very effective lecture.

4. What do you gain from watching the reactions of the students?

Davis: I gain a lot from watching the reactions of students in the class. All you need is body language. I can honestly say this because I observed 2 Spanish classes without any knowledge of the language. Student body language is enough to tell you, the consultant, how the instructor is "connecting" with/ teaching the students. You don't need to know/ understand the subject, the questions nor the comments to grasp how and if the students have understood the instruction.

Kellerman: By observing the students' body language toward the teacher, I get a sense of whether or not the teacher has developed rapport with the class. If students ask a lot of questions, it can either mean that they missed the entire point of the lecture or that they would like to go into further detail on some issues. I attend to the content of the questions and the ease with which students ask them to assess whether or not the teacher has communicated effectively.

Pacelli: A teacher may think that she is delivering a lecture well, but if the students all have blank looks on their faces, the material is not getting across to the students. So as a consultant it is important to let the observee know how the students reacted, although ideally she will already know from observing the students herself.

5. Why is videotaping necessary?

Davis: Videotaping allows the instructor later to see so much about themselves-vocal pitch and intonation, mannerisms, eye contact with the audience, etc. We also always try at least once to show on the tape the students and how they are reacting to the instructor. It can't hurt to have it done, only help.

Kellerman: Videotaping is a *must*, although, unfortunately, it seems that a number of people are uncomfortable with it. It can be very disconcerting to watch yourself make mistakes, but it's often the most effective way to learn. On a cognitive level, it's important for the observee to read the report and discuss it with the consultant. On more of a visceral level, it's important for the observee to witness first-hand his/her performance

on the tape. Sometimes you just can't believe what someone *says* you've done--you need to see it for yourself.

Pacelli: Videotaping can be an enormous aid in improving one's teaching, because until you see it yourself, you're only guessing at what EXACTLY your students see. Watching a videotape puts you in the student's seat, and thus gives you a new perspective on your teaching style.

6. How do you write the Report and handle the meeting with the observee?

Kellerman: My co-consultant and I pore over the notes we took during the observation session to develop the written report. We take care to be as objective as possible and to note the positive aspects of the performance as well as the specific behaviors and teaching styles which may require some modification. When we meet with the observee, we first get the observee's perception of how the lesson went, if the objectives were met, etc. We then go over the written report together to clarify points and make sure that the observee feels comfortable with the observation process.

7. Has being a consultant helped you understand better the connection between teaching and research in higher education?

Davis: I tend to write the report on a computer soon after the observation with the other consultant thus, the experience is very fresh in both of our minds. We schedule the final meeting with the observee just prior to the lecture for the next week. We always try to meet in a public place, like the Blue Room.

Kellerman: Being a TC has allowed me to step out of my insular research world and back into the classroom. There is a symbiotic relationship between teaching and research; they enrich each other. I can see that to be an effective teacher, one has to have done some research on the material in order to have a good command of it and pass on the knowledge to students in an effective manner. Likewise, to be a good researcher, one has to be able to communicate ideas clearly.

8. Do you feel that you have become a better teacher? How do you know that?

Davis: Being a consultant has helped me understand the importance of teaching in higher ed. I feel that I have become a better teacher by learning from others that I have observed. I have learned things to do and not do in my teaching all based on my being a consultant. Instructors in different departments have some ingenious ways of educating which I would not have learned had I not been observing them for the Sheridan Center.

Kellerman: I feel that I've become a better teacher because I've become a better listener and observer. By observing lectures and viewing students in the classes that I've observed, I've gained a better appreciation for the different learning styles that students have and the various teaching methods that professors and TAs employ to impart knowledge. I try to incorporate this appreciation into my own teaching style. I don't have any objective data on this, but I intuitively feel that I've become a better instructor by being a consultant.