

Teaching Seminar Using the “Master Class” Experience

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In the School of Business, we recently hosted a teaching seminar to foster enhanced student learning. The seminar allowed participants to observe other faculty members in live class settings. Our intention was to spark debate about classroom activities that enhance learning. We called this experience the “Master Class” in teaching. Five faculty members, each with a reputation for teaching excellence, agreed to open one class session to participant instructors. At the end of the week, an informal session was held to debrief the experience and explore insights. Participants were encouraged to make voluntary commitments to try teaching techniques in their own classrooms.

We chose the second week of the winter term for this exercise, because we felt that the participants would be thinking about their own learning environments and teaching objectives for the term at that point, and would be in a position to implement changes in their own developing classes. Thus, the seminar might have some immediate impact on the student learning experience. We also felt that there would be more conflicts later in the term with deadlines for major deliverables, both for the host instructors and the participants. We designated a 30-minute window from an 80-

minute class for observation, both to avoid interfering with a learning environment for the host students and the host instructor, and to make the observation obligation manageable for the participants.

The instructors asked to host these sessions were all teaching award winners, known for their excellence in the classroom and beyond. We ensured that a variety of disciplines were covered, and that classroom times meshed over the course of a week. The sessions were announced via e-mail late in the fall term, with the invitation repeated in the first week of the winter term. Participants were asked to commit to at least three of the five sessions, to provide some cross-section and basis for comparison, but also recognizing that timetables, class and committee obligations would make 100% attendance impossible.

We used the scheduling web site doodle.com to keep track of the registrations for each class; this is an effective scheduling web site with many uses.

This initiative was characterized as a ‘grassroots’ exercise – attendance was not mandated by the Dean’s/Director’s office, and announcements did not emanate from that source, although an enthusiastic endorsement was issued. Essentially, if individuals wished to participate, they were welcome to do so. The participation level was encouraging, with

approximately 14 participants from a pool of over 40 faculty members in the School of Business. Some of these participants were early career faculty and several were faculty members moving into new teaching challenges, so were especially interested in contemplating their teaching styles and philosophies. The participants were enthusiastic and receptive.

The participants’ feedback was very positive. The general consensus was that the “Master Class” presented a valuable opportunity to think about the student learning environment. There was an opportunity to learn from, and discuss ideas with, other faculty members. Participants attended an average of three sessions each, and most indicated that this was an appropriate commitment. To attend more than

three sessions within one week would not fit the busy schedules of most participants. However, a few participants suggested that thirty minutes was not enough time to develop a “feel” for an instructor’s style or approach, a suggestion that one host instructor echoed.

Participants also provided useful suggestions for future workshops, to enhance the student learning experience. For example, two individuals requested a workshop dedicated solely to uses of technology in the classroom. Another participant offered an idea to have a workshop where

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instructors could discuss and share evaluation methods.

The host instructors indicated that having observers in their classrooms has not interrupted their pedagogy, and thus did not detract from the students' learning experience. All said that they were pleased to participate for the benefit of their colleagues and their students. One instructor commented that being observed made her reflect on her own teaching style that fostered her own professional development in the area of student engagement.

Suggestions for future offerings focused on the length of the individual sessions and the time of year in which such a seminar would be most beneficial. Several host instructors felt that holding the event later in the term would allow observation after more rapport was built with their classes, thereby providing a greater opportunity to demonstrate certain techniques that they felt were effective in fostering student learning.

Teaching can be a lonely exercise, even though instructors are surrounded by a wealth of experience and expertise. Many of us are curious about how others conduct their classes, and the activities that are especially effective for student learning. Observing other faculty members, especially those who are recognized for teaching effectiveness, can boost confidence, provide living models, and open communication about teaching and learning approaches. Our experience with this process in the School of Business has been extremely positive, and we hope to make it a regular event.

Insights from the “Master Class”

Instructors and faculty participants identified various aspects of teaching and learning for discussion as a result of the ‘Master Class’ observations:

Student engagement

Students tended to participate actively in the observed classes, whether they were debriefing a solution to a quantitative question, fleshing out a PowerPoint mini-lecture on technical content, or exploring an issue in case analysis. The participants were able to identify various questioning/probing techniques that the host instructors used, acknowledging that, while they were related to personal styles and disciplines, they could be adapted to their own teaching and learning environments.

Establish objectives for students

Participants noted that several instructors provided structure through identifying learning objectives, themes, or take-aways at the beginning and end of class – this solidified student understanding, especially valuable where the material was unstructured.

Confidence

Participants agreed that all the host instructors were ‘comfortable in their own skins’ in class. Students seemed to connect well to confident and comfortable personalities, even early in the term.

Use of technology

An obvious “wow” factor was some of the technology routinely used by the host instructors – everything from the document cameras, simultaneous use of different screens, use of tablet computers to “write” on PowerPoint, and so on. The participants agreed that this active technology helped engage students.

Organization

Students and instructors operate in the classroom setting as part of a group dynamic. Participants were interested in the organization protocols, while acknowledging that these were idiosyncratic and many approaches could work. Participants commented on the use of name cards, the way that class members were assigned to groups, how presentation topics were assigned, plus ways to handle late-comers, cell phones, and assignment submissions. These are the “details” that can enhance or interfere with the character of a course.