

Teaching Takes Episode 1 Course Observations Transcript

Cherie:

Welcome to Teaching Takes.

I am Cherie van Putten, an instructional designer here at Binghamton University's Center for Learning and Teaching.

What does it take to be a great instructor?
Our guests will give you their take.

I have a special guest today to talk about the Center for Learning and Teaching's course observation program in this our inaugural episode.

Steve Lisman is a distinguished teaching professor emeritus of psychology here at Binghamton University, and he is also a fellow here at the Center for Learning and Teaching.

Every time I talk to Steve I learn something new.

Steve:

So I've been at the University since 1973 when I came here as an assistant professor for my first university job.

And over the years I rose through the ranks and I retired in 2014 at which time I began thinking about what did I want to do in retirement. And during my years at the University, I had been on a number of IPCs, meaning Initiating Personnel Committees, for considering promotion and tenure for my colleagues.

On that committee, I wound up frequently being responsible for evaluating the teaching of a particular individual in my department, and I found that I thought it was kind of interesting to watch my colleagues teach and to consider why some seemed better than others and in what ways.

Well, when I retired, by that time a few of my colleagues had asked me on their own initiative to come and watch them teach and a couple of alumni had called me to consult with me and I realized that it was gratifying to be able to help the individuals who had requested my feedback about their teaching and I began realizing that "Gee, I kinda like this." It was fun. It was interesting, and I remember someone telling me once "What retirement is for is to take the opportunity to do things you found fun and interesting."

So I had the idea that well maybe I could do something like this because I realized that outside of those personnel evaluations, there really isn't any opportunity, or much opportunity, to get feedback about your teaching. And I wasn't sure about that, so I was directed by a friend to the Center for Learning and Teaching which I didn't know about at that time.

And when I spoke to the staff, they were very enthusiastic about my idea of starting such a service for the University at large.

Interestingly enough when I began looking online about this, I found that it was pretty commonly available, a service like this, at most four-year teaching colleges where they emphasize teaching, but at a research university, talking about your teaching and expressing a lot of interest in getting better at teaching didn't find as receptive an audience as wanting to, as expressing interest in improving your research.

So, at the Center for Learning and Teaching, I was greeted enthusiastically and asked when I could start, but the problem was I didn't know how to do what I had proposed and I still was involved in some teaching myself.

So I said give me a couple of years to figure out how to do this and to practice with friends and to develop into something I could deliver.

And that's how the whole observation and feedback service began.

Cherie: Great. Now when you speak with a faculty member, how does it get started? What are the steps they go through?

Steve:

A person would contact the Center for Learning and Teaching. They would have received an email in the University Dateline publicizing its availability or they may have been contacted by the Center because each year we reach out to faculty who are here in their first three to five or six years.

That's the group most commonly in contact with me. They schedule an appointment, and I get back to them, arrange to come to their office. I speak to them at that time about what they'd like me to observe and what their issues with their class. Everything from class management to the student engagement.

I go over their syllabus and talk with them about issues that I might have recognized that could be enhanced on their syllabus.

And then I find out when their class is and no matter how long, if it's one hour or three hours, undergraduate lecture or graduate seminar, I try to attend the entire class.

After that, I write up a narrative review that typically is from 3 to 5 single-spaced pages summarizing everything I observed and offering ideas to address their goals in my visit and anything else I see that could be helpful.

I want to add something to what I'm saying. I think it's real important to recognize that simply being observed for one class and even implementing all the suggestions that I make doesn't necessarily constitute what would turn out to be an effective teacher. I mean there's so many aspects of your teaching: some faculty are really good at one-to-one in their office and some are better not at a lecture style but at a seminar.

And more importantly, I think that running a class is really something embedded in a larger context of the whole culture we have here of teaching, research, and service. And when I sit down to talk with somebody about their teaching, I also go over what the department expectations of them are, what their interest is in their teaching, and it's very interesting that it has turned out to often, at least in the way I experience it, to be like a mentoring meeting.

Cherie: Right. It sounds like you're not only helping them teach that particular class but sort of come up with their philosophy about teaching and some of the big picture questions that they might have.

Steve: That's exactly, exactly right. And I quickly found out that what I am talking to them about for many faculty, I'm talking with them about something that they've talked about to no one else in their department which is why it's so important that this is strictly confidential. In contrast to the personnel evaluations, the feedback that I give goes to NO ONE but that faculty.

Cherie: I was just going to ask that.

Steve:

Yeah. Some faculty have taken the feedback and when they have liked it, they have turned it into their department as part of their personnel review and in a couple cases where it hasn't been merely glowing, they've, a couple faculty have taken pains to address my suggestions and to include what they have done with my review and turned that in to their personnel files.

So, that's why I said I see it as part of a larger aspect of something that faculty seem very grateful to be able to talk candidly about.

Cherie: Yeah. I think that's a really great idea that they can go to you and know it's not going anywhere else unless they decide it will.

Steve: Yes

Cherie: Is there any advice that you could give preemptively? So you know you have all these people that come to you and there's probably a lot of things that you see repeated in the

different faculty. Is there sort of a few ideas that you could give us that we could work on right now? And I see that you are heading for a very large paper.

Steve:

Actually what I was looking at are a couple of things that I use to address exactly that question that I know will benefit almost every faculty member.

So, for example, one thing that I think would benefit every faculty member would be to consider whether they are interested in their teaching. I mean, I really do think that most faculty are. And I do think that's why they have chosen to work at a university instead of a research think tank.

But that said, there's hardly anything that faculty are interested in that they don't study up on and learn how to do...except their teaching. It's sort of like well I was taught so I know how to teach, and so the first thing I would advise is that if you are interested in teaching, why not read a couple things that will be extremely helpful to you?

So, I have a little handout. It's a one-page cribsheet that has on it the things that I feel will be really helpful

Cherie: And when we post this podcast, we will post resources at the bottom, so you can email that to me and I can get that out there for them.

Steve: Great. Actually and email is great because I have hyperlinks on there for a lot of these materials.

Cherie: Awesome. And if you want to just maybe give us an idea of what's on there and what they might find useful.

Steve: Well the two things. There are a number of things on there but if I were to look at the list and think "Gee. Do I have time to read all of these things?" Of course, I would say well, maybe not, so if I pick just two things, one would be a wonderful paper called "Twenty-one Teaching Strategies to Promote Student Engagement and Cultivate Classroom Equity."

And one of the most common things I'm asked is how to engage students, how to get them to participate and be interested. This paper is terrific

Cherie: And honestly, I can imagine that as an instructor, if you have engaged students, it's probably a lot easier to teach. It's probably a lot more enjoyable.

Steve:

It's fun, it's enjoyable, and interestingly enough, one of the things you get out of doing a little bit of reading it turns out to be more effective, by that I might students retain information that they're not simply fed by a lecturer standing up in front of them but by material that they have

developed by talking and interacting not only with the teacher but with each other. So, it seems to show up in their grades and their retention.

And so that's one paper, and the other is a book...a wonderful book. Listen to this very clever title...it's called "The Missing Course: Everything They Never Taught You about College Teaching." Because that's the one course you never took.

Cherie: Right. It certainly is.

Steve:

And this fellow, David Gooblar, wrote a terrific book. It's very readable.

So those are two things that would be extremely helpful that I would suggest to faculty to do.

Cherie: That about covers what we wanted to discuss about course observations here at Binghamton University. And what I'll do is have Steve come back and do some more segments on other topics of interest.

Steve: Well that would be good because I know that one of the things people are curious about when I tell them about this activity is they always say to me, "Well, what are the most common requests, what are the reasons people tell you, what are the most common problems they are having. Or what are the most frequent errors, or issues that you see in your observations?"

And I have to say that I have actually started compiling lists of these because I thought it would be useful to maybe create some handouts in this way.

So, sure glad to come back and talk about them.

Cherie: Okay. Great. Thank you. Thank you for coming.

Steve: You are welcome. Thank you for having me.

Cherie:

Thank you for joining us on Teaching Takes.

See you next time.

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