



Bending the Gaze

Transparency, Reciprocity, and Supervisory
Classroom Visits

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At best [the supervisory class visit] can be a sad waste of time, at worst it can permanently injure a young teacher, and the likelihood is something in between—a false impression of the capacity and potentiality of a good prospect. . . . [W]hat do [supervisors] hope to achieve by visiting the classes of our . . . teachers?

—George Harper Mills, “‘The Waste Sad Time’: Some Remarks on Class Visitation”

Nearly fifty years after George Harper Mills’s arguably sound and rather scathing critique in 1965, supervisory class visits nevertheless remain a staple aspect of pedagogical work. Functioning at overlapping turns as evaluative and formative, class visits are often key components of postsecondary teacher preparation programs, and they also function routinely in hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions. Even some peer-classroom visits, proffered as a preferable counterstrategy, are sometimes merely palimpsests for supervisory visits, as the end result remains a class-visit report used for hiring, tenure, and/or promotion decisions. Most—but not all—of my personal experience resonates with Mills: three of the four supervisory visits punctuating the nine years I taught composition and literature before I became a writing program administrator (WPA) yielded little except injury, falsity, and wastefulness. On these occasions, despite my supervisors being generally affable and the visits

being ostensibly formative rather than exclusively evaluative, I felt a near-overwhelming anxiety over the particular moment and an excruciating self-centeredness: How was *I* performing? The first visit, which might be termed “Indoctrination by Fire,” occurred during my first semester teaching composition as a graduate student at a large state university; the teaching-assistant supervisor offered me a choice of two dates, visited, and then assigned me a C+ due to a lack of organization and authority. My second such visit, identifiable as the “Eyes Half Shut” (a.k.a. “Churn and Burn”) variety, occurred during the next semester by the director of first-year writing. He came to class fifteen minutes late, stood at the back of the room for approximately six minutes, waved goodbye, and exited. Our post-visit conversation consisted of him saying that everything looked great. My third supervisory class visit, typified as “I’m Sorry, but This Is Part of My Job,” occurred when I was an adjunct teaching composition at another large state university. The department chair apologized for requesting the visit, arrived on the last day of class, quietly watched the student presentations, then thanked me and said everything looked great. Again, I learned nothing.

Fortunately, the fourth supervisory class visit I experienced challenged the Mills pattern and yielded a more insightful encounter — one that has subsequently reshaped in fundamental ways how I approach supervisory classroom visits as a WPA and has led me to believe that these visits are not merely necessary evils to be endured or resisted but instead can be powerful, vital mechanisms for pedagogical and programmatic growth and reflection. This fourth visit, which I more happily term “Reflective and Reciprocal,” was actually a pair of visits because I had two supervisors who together were conducting my review for a possible contract extension. These occurred during my first year as a full-time faculty member at a midsize private institution. This time, because so much was at stake, I first visited my supervisors’ classes in order to gain insight into their pedagogies and to have a chance to get to know them better. In each case, I met with the professor prior to visiting his class and discussed his relevant course materials. Following my visits, both asked me, “What did you think?” Faced with this question, I suddenly (albeit belatedly) realized that they too were reflecting on their teaching. Subsequently, when each of them visited my class, our post-visit conversations were enhanced immensely by our prior interactions. Instead of talking only about my performance, we discussed issues that traversed our classroom walls, such as how we can best position student writing as central in both our classes and how we both work to encourage more student-to-student interaction.

This experience was a watershed for me, but not only because this fourth set of visits included what many deem to be observation best practices, such as pre- and post-visit meetings, constructive feedback, and a context in which the visits are one of several evaluative measures. Instead, this experience stands out because the supervisory visits were reciprocal, rather than unidirectional, and focused not so much on me as a performer but on how we as colleagues were both grappling with how to teach writing more effectively. Of course, I knew I was being evaluated, and the anxiety was still there, but I also recognized that I was a colleague and that my WPAs were not just master-evaluators but were themselves still learning and asking questions about their own teaching. Moreover, what I have subsequently gleaned is that these supervisory class visits not only were helping foster the WPAs' pedagogies but also were informing their work as administrators and, as such, that they became uniquely valuable for our program's growth.

Becoming aware of the reciprocal, reflective potential for supervisory classroom visits has prompted a set of questions that I have carried with me through my own work as a WPA: What might be the most effective goals for supervisory class visits? In what ways might supervisory visits be a uniquely valuable pedagogical tool? What more might be done to foster reciprocity in supervisory classroom visits? What can supervisors learn through classroom visits, and how might these insights contribute to their work as administrators and teachers? How might supervisors make this learning more explicit? And what might be at stake in repositioning WPA classroom visits as visibly reciprocal learning experiences?

As I pursue these questions in this article, I argue that reflective, reciprocal supervisory class visits are a unique, powerful, and positive mechanism for fostering and generating pedagogic and programmatic growth. While improving supervisory class visits can benefit a number of institutional occasions and contexts—from hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions to teacher-training programs and professional-growth initiatives—I here focus on writing programs because they offer a particularly fertile territory. In quantitative terms, supervisory class visits occur in writing programs with comparative frequency, in large part owing to the often contingent status of writing faculty (e.g., graduate students, part-timers, adjuncts, etc.). More substantially, though, writing programs are an apt disciplinary ground because compositionists have already responded to many of the same problems that are now often restricting the potential of supervisory visits.

Interestingly, much of the literature critiquing supervisory class visits resonates with mid- to late-twentieth-century critiques of earlier writing

pedagogy. Deborah Minter (2002: 61), for instance, identifies the Foucauldian nature that shapes many WPA class visits (including my own “Indoctrination by Fire” experience): “Specific and questionable relationships that are prevalent in the academy (between observing/‘master’ teacher and observed/‘apprentice’ teacher, for example, or teacher as ‘transmitter’ of knowledge and students as receptacles for that knowledge) can get reinscribed via classroom observation.” Similarly, Marion Williams (1989: 85) contends that supervisory class visits “have . . . always presented problems for teachers and trainers, and generally cause considerable stress and upset on the part of the teacher. Implicit in the approach are various other assumptions: that we can actually define what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ teaching behaviour; . . . and that telling teachers what they are doing, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, will in fact lead to better classroom teaching.” The same problems articulated by Minter and Williams might well be those outlined forty years ago with writing instruction, and against which writing faculty have since been operating: challenging “questionable relationships” of power in the classroom and in the academy at large, arguing that student writers should be participants in their education rather than receptacles, and embracing writing through revision as a long-term process rather than evaluating end-product writing as solely “right” and “wrong.” Just as composition and rhetoric scholars have largely rejected the banking method of education and fostered more democratic, participatory teaching methodologies, supervisors might also usefully forge a more innovative, reciprocal, transparent model for supervisory class visits — a model that can borrow from best practices in writing pedagogy and challenge the more dominant, inequitable incarnations currently beleaguering so many departments across the academy.

Importantly, as compositionists have developed more participatory, socially collaborative pedagogies, they have not generally argued for the elimination of the writing teacher’s role in the same way that scholars have argued for the elimination of the supervisor’s role in class visits. In writing classrooms, for example, the advent of peer review has not entirely supplanted teacher feedback on student writing. And writing workshops have not obfuscated the contributions of effective, trained, experienced workshop leaders. Instead, writing faculty have adjusted pedagogical strategies. By contrast, *vis-à-vis* Mills, most of the scholarship denigrating supervisory class visits seeks redress by essentially replacing them altogether with one (or a combination) of the following: peer observation (Arredondo and Fueyo 1994), self-observation (Menti 1993), or modeling by inviting apprentice teachers to visit supervisors’ classes (Stark 1974).¹

To my mind, however, despite the value in these alternative approaches and the problems that can delimit supervisory class visits, eliminating supervisory visits altogether is not the solution—they can instead become especially meaningful instruments for pedagogical and programmatic growth. WPAs are in leadership roles, responsible in part for mentoring faculty (newer and more experienced) in their development as teachers of writing. And while some might critique this as an endorsement of Foucauldian power structures or a rendering of teaching as easily portable and acontextual, I remain skeptical of pedagogies that entirely discredit the mentoring process. Bartholomew Brinkman (2006: 175) likewise critiques arguments that dismiss advice from teacher-mentors, such as Jay Parini's *The Art of Teaching* (2005):

[According to Parini,] we can find our best teaching selves only after years of failure—and that's if we are fortunate enough to have the time and energy to actively improve our teaching and not just try to get through the day. While I appreciate Parini pointing out the struggles in finding a voice and personal authority in the classroom, I would have liked to have seen more practical advice than he finally gives us. . . . What masks have worked in the past? What are the advantages and risks to displaying a sense of humor, to letting one's politics be known, to showing one's softer side?

Parini, of course, does make reasonable points: teaching practices are not easily transportable, and pedagogy is highly contextual. Humor that works for one might not work for another; what has failed in the past might succeed in a different context; experience, through trial and error, is irreplaceable for pedagogical growth. Still, to dismiss altogether the approaches experienced faculty and supervisors have toward thinking through pedagogy, and to forestall opportunities for these conversations, would be to miss valuable growth opportunities for mentors, mentees, and their colleagues. Importantly, the primary value in pedagogical supervision and mentoring is not to trade or hand down teaching practices or preferences. Rather, it is to encourage meta-reflection and foster a dialogue about epistemological approaches to pedagogical choices. Along with Brinkman, I believe that value remains in creating occasions for these types of conversations between supervisors and faculty. And supervisory classroom visits are one key vehicle for initiating them.

Where I would extend Brinkman's defense of mentoring, though, is to insist that the mentoring processes in supervisory class visits involve dialogic conversations rather than the unidirectional paradigm so often ascribed to these occasions, and that these conversations contain deliberate mechanisms

for transparency—advice should flow both ways, and this dualism should be made overt. It bears noting that, as apt as the Foucauldian metaphor for class visits may initially seem, it cannot be sustained in terms of the purported invisibility of the observer. This is because, in a classroom visit, the visitor—even when he or she is a supervisor—is very much on display as well. Remarking on the inherent reciprocity of observation, John Berger (1997 [1972]: 9) points out in *Ways of Seeing* that, “soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. . . . If we accept that we can see that hill over there, we propose that from that hill we can be seen.” That is, the gaze—even the coolest, seemingly most detached supervisory gaze emanating from the back of the classroom—always and ever turns in on itself. The gaze can and should be reversed.

Reversing the gaze in a transparent way demonstrates that WPAs are also learning themselves how to become more effective teachers, mentors, and administrators, and they are often training new or future WPAs. Because of their connection to the discipline and their awareness of how the scholarship manifests in writing programs around the country, WPAs are in a strong, unique position to work with faculty to understand and respond to the evolving, dynamic circumstances, practices, and theories of effective writing pedagogy. WPAs also have the distinctive programmatic capability to serve as conduits of learning; by visiting faculty classes, WPAs can magnify across an entire program the practices and theories emerging within individual classrooms.

Moreover, the evaluative component of supervisory class visits should not be undervalued—as seems to have been the case with my “Churn and Burn” experience—or written off as compulsory drudgework—as seems to have informed the “I’m Sorry, but . . .” experience. As Anne Marie Flanagan (1994: 73) insists, “Evaluation is necessary. Good teachers must be rewarded for their efforts and be encouraged to continue working hard and striving to be better. Poor teachers need to improve their performance if they wish to continue teaching.” Significantly, though, the kinds of evaluation supervisors can achieve through class visits include not only assessing individual faculty performance, as in Flanagan’s terms, but also evaluating and protecting student, programmatic, and institutional goals and interests. WPAs have a responsibility to students, parents, communities, and institutional administrators; evaluating faculty through class visits is one of the strongest means WPAs have for reflecting on and perhaps revising teaching practices and programmatic goals.

To carry the connection between writing pedagogy and supervisory

class visits one step further, the advent of revision and peer review has not (in most cases) preempted teachers' evaluative response but has instead meant that this should be deployed in conjunction with formative, summative, and interrogative feedback. Even as teachers coach and mentor students to grow as writers, encouraging and facilitating cooperation and collaboration, they are also still evaluating, assigning grades, and otherwise managing behavior, attendance, and other classroom issues. Sometimes grades really can help students learn *if* the grades are made meaningful with appropriate, formative feedback. In short, the reason my first supervisory class visit was ineffective was not just because I received a C+ but because the criteria for that C+ remained generic and the occasion failed to generate sustained, meaningful inquiry with my supervisor and/or others into, for example, what authority means in the writing classroom and how it may be variously enacted. Used in a more meaningful way, the C+ might really have spurred me to deep pedagogical reflection instead of just humiliation and regret.

To be clear, then, I am not arguing that the responsibility for pedagogical evaluation and reflection be located exclusively with supervisors, nor should it be exclusively tied to supervisory class visits. Rather, I am arguing that, alongside peer observation, self-observation, and modeling, supervisory class visits, conducted with transparency, reciprocity, and reflection, are and should remain a meaningful aspect of pedagogy.

Indeed, since I became a WPA and have subsequently had the opportunity to visit numerous faculty classes, I have been struck with nearly every visit by just how much *I learn*, not only about a particular faculty member's performance but also about my own pedagogy and course design, about programmatic, institutional, and professional goals, and about the arts of observation and mentoring. In the interest of not only making these visits more reciprocal but in making that reciprocity more visible, I have increasingly sought strategies for communicating to faculty what I have learned from them through a particular visit. These visits have often resulted in faculty self-assessments that are reflective and composed, and they have promoted significant developments in my own pedagogy and programmatic administration. That is, they have become formative not only for the faculty members whose classes I visit, but also for me as a teacher and a WPA, and for our program.

It seems, as well, that I am not the only WPA who learns from classroom visits, at least according to several posts on a spring 2008 WPA listserv thread. The listserv conversation began with an inquiry by WPA Gary Hawkins into how he might respond to an adjunct, creative-writing instructor who had recently declined his request to observe her class. Many of the listserv

responses reflect Edith Tatal's conclusion in "Improving Classroom Practice" (1996: 52): "Experienced classroom teachers [were able to identify changes] in their actual classroom practice — changes that improve their effectiveness — as a result of the new perspectives they gain . . . by supervising a student teacher." On the WPA listserv, Kathy Fitch, for instance, wrote that she approaches visits "with the attitude and spirit of *teaching colleagues* who are committed to learning *from one another*, supporting our collective success, and keeping our focus on serving students best" (2008; emphasis mine). Similarly, Risa Gorelick recounted an interchange with an adjunct in which she reassured the teacher that she "wasn't coming in to criticize her teaching but to observe and see what she was doing right *and to learn from her*" (2008; emphasis mine). Likewise, Michael Day wrote, "We do observe each new TA . . . and . . . I find that *I learn as much or more about teaching and how the program is doing than they do*" (2008; emphasis mine).

One might immediately recognize in comments such as these the larger ideologies of teacher-as-learner or teacher-researcher, and they are therefore not, in and of themselves, exceptionally remarkable. What is notable, though, is that these remarks are coming from WPAs, rather than from student teachers or faculty involved in peer-observation exchanges, and that they appear on a listserv devoted primarily to WPA interchanges. Although non-WPAs are members of the WPA listserv, I would suggest that the idea that WPAs conceive of class visits as opportunities to be evaluators *and* learners is not as readily apparent to those outside the inner sanctum of WPA conversations, particularly faculty whose classes WPAs are visiting. The following post from the same WPA listserv thread, for example, offers second-hand testimony to the ongoing perception that most supervisory visits are conceived of as primarily evaluative and unilaterally focused on the teacher being visited: the adjunct teacher whom Gorelick eventually reassured had at first indicated that "she was angry [because] she hadn't been observed in a decade and wasn't happy to have [Gorelick] come and see her and be her 'victim.'" As another example, Joseph Lee (2007) reports that the British lecturers' union is establishing a code of conduct for classroom visits because they had received too many reports of "repeated inspections by 'intimidat[ing]' line managers."

The classroom-visit forms most accessible from Internet and published sources attest to how often classroom-visit discourse reifies the myopic perception that most formal class visits, especially those by WPAs or other supervisors, but even those by peers, are framed as unidirectional, if not also somewhat intimidating. Teaching documents such as these, of course, have

a rich and complicated institutional history, and it is difficult to truly discern how individuals and programs actually use such documents. My point, though, is that the forms themselves offer evidence for why supervisory visits are often not as effective as they might be in encouraging reflection, evaluating faculty and program goals, and improving pedagogy.

One of the most widely used models for classroom-visit forms, for example, is Peter Seldin's 1980 *Successful Faculty Evaluation Programs*. The three model forms Seldin provides are clearly crafted and point to many important aspects of pedagogy, but also graft on a nearly exclusively evaluative shade to the classroom visit and suggest that the person being visited is performing on a one-time basis under the scrutiny of a master evaluator who is him- or herself relatively free from such observation. Seldin's Form 4, Classroom Observation Report, for instance, includes a measured Lichert scale evaluating the faculty member's efficacy from highest to lowest on such issues as "uses class time effectively," "demonstrates enthusiasm for the subject matter," and "overall rating" (76–77). Although the form includes space for open-ended remarks, it too prompts a unidirectional focus: "What specific suggestions would you make concerning how this particular class could have been improved?" (77). The class-visit forms available online from various institutions often follow this unidirectional, solely evaluative framework and, as such, miss the opportunity to visibly inscribe reciprocity on the occasion. For example, in the Classroom Visit Evaluation Form from Centre College (2003), the visitor fills out a form with "positive or negative comments" in response to "Organization: Is material presented in an orderly, understandable fashion?" and "Content: Is the level of material presented appropriate to the class? Is the class intellectually challenging and stimulating?" and other questions.

Most curious about this persistent positioning of supervisory visits as unidirectional rather than reciprocal is that we have an alternative, more egalitarian model. Peer visits, now essentially a staple of teacher preparation, are more often modeled on peer workshopping of writing, where the benefits are mutual, not only, or even primarily, for the author but also for the respondents. Highlighting one of a number of similar programs, Lott Hill, Soo La Kim, and Robert Lagueux (2007) feature a Teaching Partnership Program at Columbia College Chicago that fosters a "culture of collaboration" (17) by creating small groups of faculty to "exchange class visits, meet informally, produce a report on the experience, and consider curricular and pedagogical intersections" (18). Jill Cosh (1999: 25) outlines the advantages of peer models like this: "In a reflective context, peer observation is [focused] . . . on the

teacher's own development, rather than on any presumed ability to develop the teaching of one's peers or colleagues. Those of us who have observed in this spirit know that there is a great deal to be learnt by reassessing our teaching in the light of other teaching styles."

Surprisingly, though, even some of the peer-visit forms that resist parts of Seldin's model nevertheless continue to emphasize unidirectional and detached evaluative components. In "Peer Review of Writing Faculty," for instance, Ellen Strenski (1994: 63–64) argues against checklist forms: "The value of checklists themselves is questionable, especially when items are given a numerical weight. . . . The administrative impulse to quantify performance . . . is understandable, particularly when instructors are competing for reappointment or advancement and when administrators want comparable data for ranking purposes. But the impulse must be resisted." Instead, Strenski insists on tailoring forms for the context of particular visits and class settings, and to her credit, the UCLA form she reproduces usefully replaces quantification with description ("Describe the instructor's presentation style"). However, the template still focuses solely on the faculty member whose class is visited and positions the visitor solely as the expert casting judgment: "What are the instructor's major strengths? Weaknesses?" and "Do you believe your visitation was at a time when you were able to fairly judge the nature and tenor of the teaching-learning process?" (65). Again, these forms are no doubt deeply situated within institutional context. Still, my point is that the forms themselves offer an untapped textual opportunity to improve the practice of supervisory class visits by incorporating reciprocity and transparency and that they instead seem often only to reify the very problems they perhaps sought to rectify in the first place.

Strategies for Supervisory Classroom Visits

Surely, while the stakes of evaluation by a supervisor will likely outweigh whatever evaluation occurs in peer classroom visits, there can still be real value in modeling supervisory class visits after a more egalitarian model. Discovering this value demands a commitment to making supervisory visits reciprocal rather than unidirectional—that is, formative for *both* parties—and to try to make more visible the many ways that WPAs are learning through these visits. In what follows, I offer several specific strategies for achieving more visibility, transparency, and reciprocity, and then, before concluding, I address possible challenges that might be involved in this approach.

Weave Reciprocity through Visits, Ideas, and Materials

As indicated above, I strongly encourage reciprocity by inviting the faculty member to my class prior to my scheduled visit. While some faculty may hesitate to offer genuine feedback to a supervisor, I have found that they often take the opportunity to demonstrate how skilled and reflective they are as teachers. Most important, reciprocal class visits empower and enable the faculty members whose classes I will soon be visiting to model a way of framing a class visit, a preferred methodology for being a visitor, and a language through which to discuss the visit.

When Keith visited my class, for example, he asked me questions about how I might better wrap up the paper workshop and suggested a five-minute debrief in order to help students focus on the main take-aways. Then, when I visited Keith's workshop, I was able to discuss his own debriefing strategies. Subsequently, with Jen's visit, I mentioned that I was working on these workshop debriefs, and she suggested several strategies for encouraging students to write more substantive revision plans following each debrief. In this way, Jen and Keith saw me working through a pedagogical issue and were able to offer collective input (even though we were not officially a peer-classroom visit team).

With the reciprocal visit between Michael and me, together we worked on issues involving student contributions during paper workshops. First, when Michael visited my class, we noticed that students contributed often and energetically but that they tended to stray away from the actual text at hand. Michael and I subsequently discussed strategies for jumping in at certain points to redirect sidetracked conversation, as well as offering more directive questions (i.e., Where in the text does this question emerge? On which pages, in which sentences, did you notice X?). During this conversation, Michael also revealed that students in one of his sections were overly quiet during paper workshops; he wondered if students were sticking so closely to the text that the conversation became stymied, or if perhaps he was jumping in too often to offset the silence. Because we conducted a reciprocal visit, when it came time for me to visit Michael's class, we were better able to pursue his questions about how to handle silence, how much and how often to facilitate workshop conversations, and how to most effectively foreground particular moments in student texts. In the process, through this reciprocity and transparency, both Michael and I learned valuable pedagogical strategies, even amid my evaluation of his class for his upcoming review; the interchange, in fact, enhanced my evaluation since I had more of a sustained, meaningful experience.

Sometimes a reciprocal visit is not possible, or the exchange does not yield such evident links. As an alternative, reciprocity can also involve me discussing with the faculty member an aspect of his or her class that seemed especially significant and perhaps applicable to my own or others' teaching. At its most basic, this may involve a text, as when I visited Erik's class and then asked to borrow the portion of Pierre Bourdieu text he had used as an example of inflated academic language. Similarly, in Karin's class I learned about methods of speed reading and then asked to borrow this material for my own class conversations about the range and variety of scholarly reading practices.

More often, however, this version of reciprocity emerges not so much in me directly lifting an idea or text—which only very rarely works because teaching is not a transportable, acontextual practice—but instead through initiating a pedagogical conversation about the impetus behind certain practices and how they might be adapted. In Stephanie's class, for example, which focused on environmental conservation, I admired how she shared with students correspondence between herself and a local forest manager. During our post-visit conversation, we discussed ways I might pull in more real-world experiences to my class, which focused on volunteering. As another example, in Matt's class I appreciated how he offered genuine, enthusiastic praise to the students. In our post-visit conversation, we spoke about how and why he did so, and I left with renewed energy for meaningfully praising student writing. Importantly, this did not mean that I attempted to mimic Matt's enthusiasm or strategy for communicating that praise, which would have seemed deceptive to my students since I am more reserved in nature. Rather, I spoke with Matt about why praising student writing is important, and then I reflected over how I might weave some measure of additional praise into my feedback to students in class and on their texts. Letting faculty members see that I value aspects of their work expands the unidirectional focus, reshaping supervisory visits as not only evaluative but also as collective pedagogical learning experiences.

Revise Class-Visit Forms to Reflect Reciprocity

One of the ways in which we might work to make the reciprocity undergirding the observational gaze more explicit becomes evident if we turn to Dartmouth University's "Classroom Visit Post-Observation Guidelines" (2008). Question 8 asks, "What did you learn from teaching/observing this class session?" This duality of the learning potential, where both parties can learn from the experience, subtly and simply interwoven into the question with a

slash, would be the kind of moment I would suggest should be given much more weight and visibility on a class-visit form. The “New Teacher Academy Observation Guide,” produced online by Newport News Public Schools in 2008 but no longer accessible, offered another textual model by asking the class visitor to respond to Reflection: What did I learn? As a third option for making WPA learning more explicit on forms, we might turn to the class-visit form from the writing program where I work (see appendix). Here, we position the faculty member as the author by asking him or her to articulate—in his or her own words—the context surrounding the visit, the aim of the particular class, and then, following the post-visit conversation, the strengths of the class and any aspects that might benefit from additional reflection. Originally, the final box on the form asked for additional thoughts on the part of the visitor. When I began visiting faculty classes as a WPA, I was stumped as to what to write in this final box; by this time, the teachers and I had already discussed the visits and they had already included my feedback in the earlier boxes. What, I often wondered, was left to say? Finally I decided to use this as a space to make apparent that which I had learned through the visit: what might I be able to take back to my own class or to the larger program itself? This reciprocity is now reflected overtly in the prompt for that final box.

As indicated above, such reflective, reciprocal space is not alien to the work of writing teachers. Many peer-workshop forms include space for readers to articulate what they learned from responding to others’ writing projects. Including similar space on supervisory classroom-visit forms would help transform a unidirectional, anxiety-ridden assessment into more of a reciprocal, transparent dialogue.

Use Class Visits to Generate Programmatic Professional Development

Class visits are one of the strongest opportunities for supervisors to generate material for programwide workshops, training, or other professional development. I work overtly to position class visits not only as about individual teaching but also as a glimpse into our collective pedagogy and our programmatic goals and practices. Shaping class visits as part of a social enactment rather than an individual performance evaluation has enabled me to suggest, after class visits, that Erik develop a workshop for faculty about effective sequencing of assignments and that Tamera share strategies for incorporating visual elegance and sophistication on course documents.

Positioning supervisory visits as a way to explore a collective, social pedagogy rather than exclusively to assess an individual’s performance mirrors the ways that writing is often effectively positioned as a social act rather

than a solitary endeavor. This also resonates with the way many writing teachers respond to student drafts by identifying global, classwide questions and issues rather than repeatedly communicating the same ideas to individual students time and time again. That is, if everyone can benefit from foregrounding assignment sequencing, what sense would it make to limit the praise to Erik only? By the same token, if a number of teachers have questions about how to more effectively handle classroom-management issues, such as attendance and tardiness, I need to rethink my approach to these matters during our annual pre-service training seminar. Making pedagogy a collective endeavor in these ways helps strengthen the program as a whole. And again, this is not about offering a specific assignment or idea that other teachers are then expected to transport into their classrooms but is instead inviting colleagues to share their approaches to various issues or ideas.

Use Class Visits to Strengthen Observational Strategies

Strengthening my own observational strategies is also a vital mechanism for learning and making that learning visible. Like many WPAs, I received very little training in observational methods and instead found myself early in my administrative career relying primarily on my personal experiences and my intuition. In keeping with the ethnographic spirit of Flanagan's "The Observer Observed" (1994), which tracks how supervisors negotiate the politics of class visits, I continually evaluate—and invite faculty to do so with me—how I might revise my observational strategies. Sometimes this involves structuring the visit by using such texts as Ruth Wajnryb's *Classroom Observation Tasks* (1992), which offers a variety of resources and areas of foci; other times it involves me asking the faculty member to reflect back on the class visit itself, to share ideas about how I might be more effective through my presence as a visitor and through my feedback in pre- and post-conversations. I might even ask faculty in an anonymous survey to evaluate and respond to my visits and feedback. Or I might record via iPod, video, or other means our pre- and post-visit conversations and invite a third party (or myself) to think about how these conversations might be framed as constructively as possible. Similar attention might also be directed usefully at the faculty peer classroom visits encouraged in our program so we can think together about ways of training our faculty to become more effective visitors of their own and others' classes.

Potential Challenges in Applying a More Transparent, Reciprocal Model

As is reflected in each of the above suggestions for how supervisory classroom visits can become reciprocal, transparent moments of learning, it is not enough merely to think about the ways in which supervisors can learn from these visits; this learning must be accompanied by deliberate strategies for making that learning transparent to the faculty. Still, as with any sustained reshaping of approach, some cautions must be raised, which I briefly address below before concluding.

Will This Approach Weaken Supervisory Ethos?

Some might argue that positioning supervisors as learners could weaken their perceived ability to mentor, teach, and lead, as somehow compromising their scholarly and pedagogic ethos. Such a possible weakening might also be exacerbated by the power dynamics already in place at an institution due to a number of possible variables: whether it is a predominantly research- or teaching-focused context, what has been the programmatic history with evaluation and class visits, who the supervisor is (i.e., age, race, experience, class, gender, demeanor, etc.), and who the faculty are (i.e., demographics, rank, full-time, adjuncts, graduate students, etc.). However, even alongside these power dynamics, as teachers and scholars we readily and often insist that continual learning, made explicit and emerging from all that is around us (not only from mentors and supervisors), enhances rather than diminishes our pedagogical ethos. This, of course, is the cornerstone of such influential texts as *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), in which Donald Schön argues, “When a practitioner reflects in and on his practice, the possible objects of his reflection are as varied as the kinds of phenomena before him and the systems of knowing-in-practice which he brings to them” (62). Similarly demonstrating that effective reflection emerges in many contexts, Paula Wasley (2007) documents that at Brigham Young University, faculty position themselves as learners by inviting nonenrolled students to visit their classes in a program titled SCOT—Students Consulting on Teaching. Here, “student consultants . . . offer a student’s-eye-view of the classroom [by being a] ‘faux student.’” One faculty member involved in the program stresses how positive the experience has been for him: “‘It’s a reflective, powerful thing,’ [Ferrin] says. ‘I come up with the answers myself with them urging it out of me.’ And, he notes, the benefits aren’t all one-sided. A few of his former consultants acquired an interest in education after having sat through so many of his classes, and have in turn asked him for letters of recommendation to graduate school.” Far from feeling as though this experience disrupts a necessary power hierarchy,

faculty such as Ferrin affirm the substantive benefits gained from accepting learning from many sources, not just senior mentors.

Will This Approach Shortchange the Faculty Member?

Another potential argument against reciprocity and transparency in supervisory visits involves asking whether, in making explicit supervisory learning through class visits, one risks shortchanging the faculty whose class is visited. In a claim that rings true nearly three decades later, Michael Flanagan (1979: 17) suggests that a “key feature . . . [of classroom visits is a] focus on teachers’ needs.” If, indeed, this is a primary supervisory responsibility during class visits, then supervisors should be cautious not to foreground their own learning at the expense of the faculty member’s.

That said, a considerable amount of background noise happens during class visits anyway. I find it nearly impossible not to focus on aspects of a class visit that exceed the particular parameters of what a faculty member has asked me to focus on and whatever evaluative criteria are currently in place. For instance, if I have had a particularly difficult time recently in class trying to involve nonnative speakers of English in seminar conversation, it would be difficult for me not to think about this during a class visit, even if I were supposed to be focusing exclusively, for example, on a teacher’s tone. Inviting supervisors to share that which they learn through visits is, in many ways, merely making transparent what is already happening. Such transparency, moreover, need not obscure the faculty member’s interests or concerns but can instead amplify and expand those areas on which he or she hopes to focus.

Will This Approach Be Ineffective with Negative Learning Moments?

Undeniably, there have been times when what I learned from a particular class visit is not necessarily that which I would want to make apparent to the faculty member. If a class really goes poorly, I would hesitate to offer empty or false praise, or to provide backhanded compliments by describing what I learned *not* to do or say. Still, in a post-visit conversation, the supervisor might nevertheless discuss how the visit might prompt a rethinking of programmatic training and development. Perhaps if my first supervisor had invited me to facilitate a roundtable discussion with my graduate-student colleagues on issues of authority in the classroom, that C+ would have generated significantly more improvement for me and others as well. Redistributing and sharing pedagogical responsibility will enable faculty members to be

more connected with one another and will help strengthen pedagogical and programmatic growth.

Conclusion

As indicated earlier, in suggesting that we reconsider and reshape supervisory classroom visits as reciprocal, visible learning experiences, I am not arguing that we need to eliminate or devalue the evaluative aspects of supervisory visits, nor am I arguing for diminishing the formative prospects for the faculty, nor, finally, am I arguing to obfuscate alternative modes of class visits. What I am suggesting is that supervisory class visits are a uniquely powerful mechanism for faculty and programmatic growth and that supervisors and faculty will be able to tap into the fuller potential of these visits if we reshape them as more broadly evaluative and formative, as reciprocal, explicit learning moments for faculty members, supervisors, and the program.

WPAs spend so much time making these visits. And, truth be told, when I first became a WPA, I was so excited about and challenged by my new administrative responsibilities that I deprioritized, to a certain degree, my own teaching. After two or three years of middling course evaluations and a self-awareness that my focus was not sufficiently on my own pedagogical growth, I realized that in visiting others' classes I was able to borrow and reflect on a variety of exciting pedagogical practices. Moreover, as a new WPA, not much older (and sometimes younger) than the faculty I was supervising, I sometimes felt that giving advice and rendering judgment without also making visible that which I was learning was, in effect, dismissing their experience and knowledge and limiting the potential of such occasions. It was not that I resisted or dreaded the evaluative aspect, which is vital, but that I wanted to graft more onto the visit and, in so doing, also make the evaluation more meaningful. Embarking on a strategy of class visits that showcased my own learning enabled me to work with faculty on teaching writing in more relevant, sustainable ways, helping us to articulate and define our practices more deliberately and helping me to better facilitate ways of sharing that learning across our program.

Appendix: Class Visit Reflection, Duke University

Class Visit Reflection

Course title _____

Instructor _____

Date _____

To be completed by instructor before pre-visit meeting

Context

Describe the course you are teaching and the role of this class meeting in the arc of the semester's work.

Aim of class

Describe your teaching objectives for this particular class session. Describe the primary area of inquiry you are interested in reflecting on through this class visit.

To be completed by instructor after post-visit meeting

Narrative of class

Describe what occurred in this class meeting. You may want to note what events went according to plan and what changes or improvisations took place.

Plans for further work or revision

What might you do differently? What changes or refinements might you make to your teaching practices?

To be completed by visitor after other sections are completed

Self-Reflection / Additional Comments

What did you learn from this class visit? How might you grow pedagogically from having discussed the teaching materials, the course, and the visit? Do you have any additional comments?

Signatures

Instructor _____ Visitor _____

Note

1. For additional approaches and resources regarding class visits, see Stephen Wilhoit's "Recent Trends in TA Instruction: A Bibliographic Essay" (2002).

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