



Sharing the Wealth Using *Polishing Diamonds* - a non-evaluative self-reflection model to improve teaching

◆ **Philosophy:** “*Polishing Diamonds*” (PD) is founded on the philosophy that one of the most powerful forms of professional development for faculty is faculty learning from one another.

◆ **Statement to Participants:** We appreciate your willingness to open your classroom and share your expertise as a teacher. We hope that through this process of observation and shared reflection, you will experience an enhanced enthusiasm for teaching, and an increased appreciation for the excellent work of your colleagues.¹

◆ **Goals:**

1. Observe, analyze and celebrate good teaching
2. Increase understanding and appreciation for the work of colleagues
3. Experience being a student
4. Formulate a plan for enhancing your own teaching based on your observations and reflections and the shared reflections of your diamond colleagues, and the others.²

◆ **Note on Sponsorship:** We particularly solicited the support of the College Faculty Development Office for several reasons:

1. Librarians are members of the faculty association and we wanted to capitalize on Faculty Development initiatives which we could participate in or adapt. (In this case we created a parallel framework to the program in which teaching faculty participated and increased our credibility as partners in education by identifying it as such.)
2. To increase visibility of the significant teaching role of academic librarians. Our initiative was included in the College Faculty Development, Library and Library Instruction Advisory Committee annual reports. Although all of our librarians are responsible for instruction in addition to collection management, reference, coordinating roles, discipline liaison and committee work, our instruction statistics show that many of us spend the equivalent of 2-3 full courses on teaching. This was an “eye-opener” for the Faculty Development Office and higher administration of both the college and the library.
3. To increase collaboration and enhance partnerships across the college.
4. To underwrite the project financially – the College Faculty Development Office provided the *Polishing Diamonds* participants’ booklets and paid for off-campus lunches for all participants in the Diamond Share and hosted the closing celebration.

¹ Milner, D. (2007). *Polishing Diamonds Participant Information*. Faculty Development, Grant MacEwan College.

² Ibid.

Your feedback is appreciated. For further information, contact Karen Hering heringk@macewan.ca

Critical Attitudes and Behaviours to Achieving Brilliance

Critical to the Success of *Polishing Diamonds* is a classroom visitation process that is **free from evaluation**.

In order to create a safe, supportive and energizing environment in which participants can share both joys and challenges encountered in teaching, emphasize....

Reciprocity and shared responsibility: mutual exchange of visitations, all must assume the dual roles of teacher/student, observer/observed. All participants experience and share the risks and opportunities of inviting others into their classes. Secondly, participants of each diamond jointly share responsibility for the organization of their activity so that effort expended by any one participant is minimized, a climate of collegiality is built, and a team effort is ensured.

Self-reflection: *PD* is an opportunity to improve one's own teaching. It is NOT an opportunity to improve OR to evaluate a colleague's teaching. Keep observations and reflections self-focused. The key question: What did you observe that you might use or adapt to make your own teaching more effective?

Appreciation: *PD* is an opportunity to identify and celebrate the behaviours and practices that create a positive learning environment. Expressing observations and ideas generated from the observations in a positive way creates energy, inspiration and enthusiasm. It also focuses attention on goals for improving teaching and a means of achieving those goals.

Respect: It is critical that all participants enter their colleague's classroom with an attitude of respect for both the students and the instructor, recognizing that different methods and techniques are required in different disciplines and classroom situations and that all teachers have better and worse days. Each class is unique in that it is a gestalt of what students, instructor and librarian brings to the classroom and the success or execution of the same lesson plan may differ widely from session to session.

Suggested Timeline

Week	Activity	Task
One	<i>PD</i> Kickoff; Diamond organization	Participants meet; establish Diamond operating agreements; share teaching schedules
Two	Class visit one	Arrange visits
Three	Class visit two	Organize materials for visiting colleagues
Four	Class visit three	Visit Record observations
Five	Reflection	Analyze observations; prepare for Diamond share
Six	Diamond Share Session	Share personal, positive observations with Diamond colleagues
Seven	Diamond Polishing Celebration	Share process observations; share highlights of diamond share

Getting Organized

Arranging visits: the purpose is to observe colleagues in their “natural state”. Discourage extra preparation or creating a “special class” that requires extra work and time commitment to the project. Little rather than lots of advance notice helps avoid this tendency. Structure the visits separately for broadest impact (i.e. Your diamond should not all attend the same class) – this provides a wider range of observations to share later, and acclimatizes participants to regularly having visitors in the classroom. (This is particularly important if you want to move to a culture where colleagues freely visit each others’ classrooms or have training or evaluation programs of which observation is a component.)

Role of the visiting librarian: resist the urge to participate – this takes attention away from observation of the flow of the session, how colleagues handle challenging situations (large class sizes, needy students, technology problems, etc.) Restrict your role to that of observer.

Information exchange: encourage participants to share any contextual information briefly before the class. This includes the teaching faculty or your objectives, research assignment, class or course outline, parameters affecting your lesson plan, etc.

Information to be shared with the students: most students are curious about visitors in the classroom. Introduce the visiting librarian; explain the purpose of their visit and their role as observer. Students appreciate efforts made by faculty to improve teaching and this is tangible evidence of that effort.

Classroom visitation: Observing an entire class from start to finish offers the best (and least disruptive) experience for you, your colleague and the students. If a scheduling conflict prevents a full class visit, discuss the least disruptive means of joining and leaving the class. A visit of at least 60-90 minutes is required in order to adequately sample the classroom experience. Don’t discount longer classes that include student-focused work – observe student engagement, librarian-student-teaching faculty interactions and involvement, timing, flow, ways used to keep all on track, engaged, etc.

Diamond share time: set this time at the Kick-off meeting to give a deadline for classroom visitations and avoid scheduling conflicts. “Breaking bread together” relaxes participants and invites good conversation. Bring your notes and have coffee or lunch together in a quiet place away from interruption and distraction.

Keep your reflections positive and persona, focusing on what you have learned. Share your reflections on the following questions: What did I learn from others that I want to initiate in my own teaching? What did I learn from others that I want to continue doing in my own teaching? What new ideas for teaching have been generated from what have I observed that I plan to incorporate into future classes? What changes have I made or plan to make as a result of my observations?

Celebration and Windup: Reward the effort and participation of colleagues. Share highlights and “diamonds” uncovered. Reflect on the experience as a whole with regard to enhancing team cohesion and overarching information literacy programming, the sharing of ideas, relationships between class content taught by colleagues in different classes, role reversals. What were the most stimulating and most difficult things about the experience? What was the biggest idea you took away from your observations and reflections? What would you like to see done differently or next time?

◆ Keys for Success

Get Support from Supervisors and Chairs: extra manpower may be needed to cover the Reference Desk or other obligations of staff – particularly in smaller libraries or campus libraries. The program may need to be mandated from above if instruction staff is hesitant to participate or feel they don't have time. Articulating teaching improvement as a priority and establishing non-evaluative peer observation as a structured project in the library's strategic plan will assist in getting the support of all affected by the time commitment.

Provide advance warning: to both instruction staff and to Chairs/supervisors to assist in planning. Staff will spend a minimum of 1.5 hours/week over 7 weeks in activities related to the project. This will increase if travel between campuses is involved. [We announced the fall initiative the previous spring so staff could plan their time and scheduling in anticipation of the extra time commitment.]

Promote as part of a college wide teaching improvement initiative: to increase credibility among all stakeholders. Identifying librarians as partners in education rather than trainers of technology and systems invites discussion and collaboration in areas of teaching and learning scholarship.

Choose and organize the diamonds strategically: use the opportunity to mix novice and veteran librarians, staff from different campuses or subject areas, personality types and teaching styles. This is an opportunity to put people with whom they normally do not share ideas. [We kept track of who was in the first diamonds together and when we ran the program the second time two years later, we once again mixed the diamonds.]

Keep the project duration tight (under two months): Participants should be involved with a *PD* activity every week to maintain momentum, "hallway buzz" and energy. [Our second run extended the visitation period. It was much more difficult to generate good conversation regarding observations and reflections in the last two stages six weeks after some visitations took place.]

◆ Successes

- Energized staff with new ideas and encouraged creativity and risk-taking
- Provided a reality check for those teaching the same classes (ex. English team)
- Team building activity
- Recognition of the wealth of expertise within our ranks
- Increased communication
- Learning opportunity for new staff
- Raised the teaching profile of library staff within the rest of the college
- Opened the door to informal classroom visitations

◆ Unexpected bonuses

- Built bridges and understanding among different generations of library staff
- Increased respect and appreciation for contributions of both novice and veteran library staff
- Has significantly informed the Reference assistance provided to students at the Reference Desk
- Increased awareness and participation in discussions centred on teaching and learning theory, teaching excellence and information literacy
- Increased sharing of ideas on teaching and learning

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◆ Challenges

Getting Buy-In from staff: Many staff (both librarians and library technician III's teach) were not comfortable teaching in front of their colleagues. Promoted as an initiative for all instruction staff whole instruction team **strongly** encouraged to participate.

Unexpected Stress: While most staff experienced stress that was unexpected but manageable, one staff member indicated she would not participate again if given the choice. Stress can be dissipated if classroom visitations are a normal part of teaching activity.

Travel time: Factor in travel time between libraries or campuses. In our case, branch/campus librarians spent extra time (15-45 minutes each way by car) travelling to another campus on 6 different occasions; for central campus librarians extra travel occurred on 3 occasions.

Scheduling/instruction loads: Timing in the term and instruction load can affect outcome. [Our instruction staff teaches to the departments they liaise with resulting in varying teaching loads.] Instruction loads can vary with the time of the term. It can be difficult to identify a time period for PD so that all classroom visits can take place within a 3 week period. Extending the time period for visitations can make the project drag on, losing momentum, energy and interest.

Mass visitations: our initial foray into this initiative resulted in groups of 3 observers going together to observe the same class. Fewer gems were discovered and shared, students were distracted, and colleagues spent travel time socializing rather than reflecting. As a result, separate visits were expressly written into the "Rules of Engagement" and two years later when we repeated this activity, observers went to different classes by the same instructor. During week six, each diamond shared observations from 12 different classes not 4. Week seven celebrated the highlights and reflections from 12 times the number of active diamonds. Separate visits help to offset any "bad" days an instructor may have as well.

◆ Suggestions for extending the model

- Repeat as a structured non-evaluative, self-reflection framework periodically to incorporate new staff and rejuvenate old staff (recommended every 2-3 years)
- Extend participation to other post-secondary institutions within reasonable distances. Create Diamonds for same-subject librarians from different academic institutions.
- Create *PD* framework for librarians from high school/junior college/transfer programs to inform understanding of the needs, abilities and expectations for incoming/exiting students.
- Integrate librarians into the college-wide *PD* model that includes both teaching faculty and librarians observing each other.
- Alternate a non-evaluative model with one that provides opportunities for feedback where desired.
- Adapt the model for public, special and school libraries offering book talks, storytime, technology training and information literacy workshops.

Polishing Diamonds is an adaptation of a teaching improvement process called Teaching Squares developed at St. Louis Community College in Missouri. Acknowledgments to David Milner, former Faculty Development Coordinator, and the College Faculty Development Office at Grant MacEwan College, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

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