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TA peer observation as "just part of the job" - impacts on confidence, community and mindset in both novice and veteran TAs

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Teaching Assistants (TAs) are a cornerstone of many courses, but often have little experience or formal teaching training. Many of our TAs report that they begin a TA role with low confidence and a feeling of isolation. Supporting our TAs on these aspects is incredibly important, but often challenging - particularly with multi-section courses, large teams, and instructor workload constraints. Further, TA training is often opt-in and thus unintentionally excludes those who may most benefit from it. One effective approach to support TAs in their teaching is peer observation. We investigated how to integrate peer observation and structured feedback directly into their TA role, in a large first-year biology lab course. We scaffolded components of peer observation throughout the semester in our weekly lab prep meetings. We first introduced the concept of supportive, constructive, and goal-directed peer observation. We trained TAs to use an observational protocol (modified from COPUS (Smith 2013) & RIOT (Paul & West, 2018)). We then set two rounds of peer observation, each followed by structured feedback conversations among TAs and as a team. We assessed the impact on TA confidence, community, and mindset. Data collection included pre/post-surveys (Likert, short-response). Over the semester, TAs reported an increase in their confidence and sense of community. Some were initially hesitant about peer observation, but later saw the value. TAs reported that peer observation helped them feel more connected to their department and peers. They also described more familiarity with resources and supports available to them. From an instructor perspective, this approach built community during TA meetings, and had minimal impact on workload. Thus, we plan to integrate this into future offerings of the course, and hope that using peer observation can advance how we both train and promote community among these essential members of our teaching teams.

Keywords: TA, peer observation, training

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