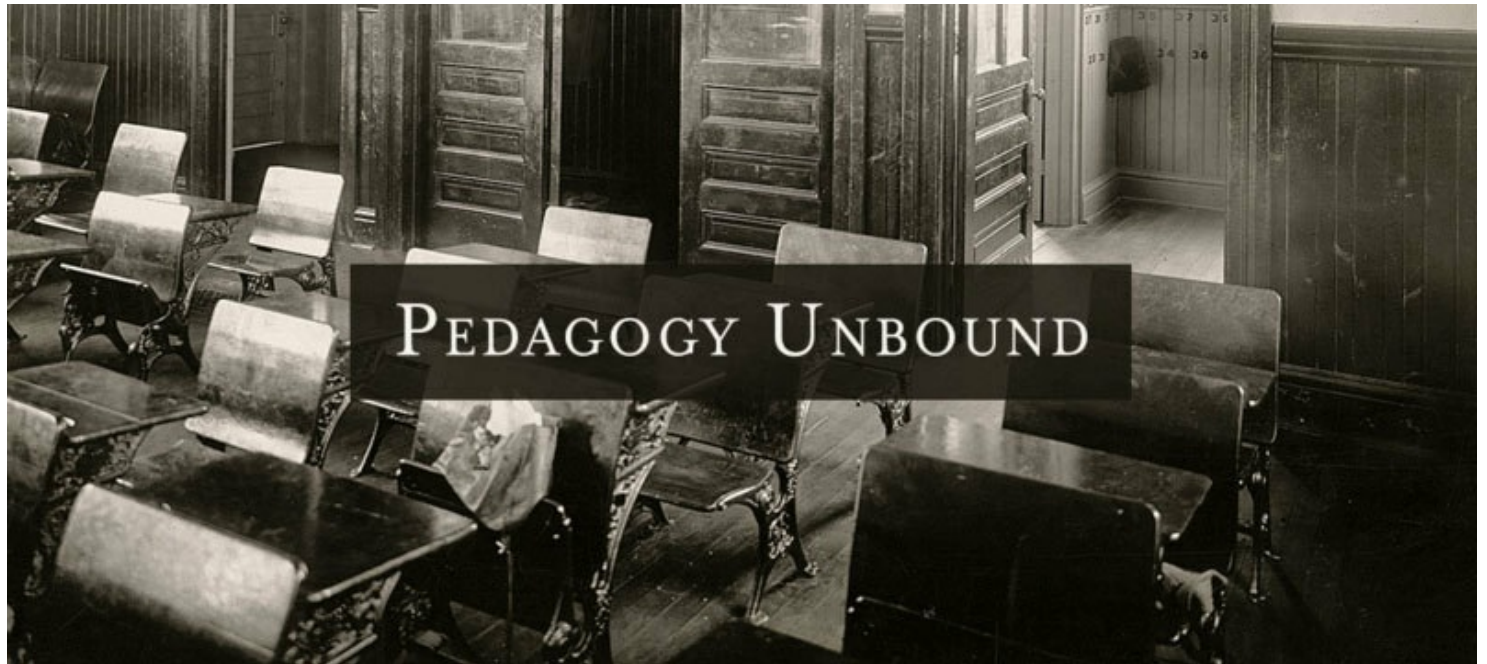


# You're Never Too Old to Observe or Be Observed

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So much of the work that goes into teaching is necessarily invisible. Nobody sees your best teaching days — when everything clicks, when you get your class to truly see the world differently — except for the students in the room. Most of us don't teach for plaudits, but it's a shame that our best work in the classroom is usually unseen by our peers and superiors. It's also a shame that those of us who want to improve as teachers don't get the benefit of learning directly from excellent teachers in our fields.

Consider how you learned about your research discipline in graduate school. Sure, you got ideas, advice, and information from your adviser and from other professors, but you also had the benefit of reading other people's work to see how scholarship in your field was done. When it comes to developing as teachers, however, most of us haven't been able to learn by watching others. We can hark back to our own teachers, but that's a pretty limited sample.

This past spring, I had the opportunity to team-teach for the first time, with my colleague [Matt Gilchrist](#). Together we taught a writing course for graduate students, and I learned as much, if not more, than our students. Being able to see another teacher work, especially when that teacher is as talented as Matt (he's particularly good at fostering student discussion), was extremely valuable to my classroom practice. This fall, I get to teach the course again, this time with my equally talented colleague [Megan Knight](#), and I already feel like I'm learning so much.

Of course, not everyone is able to team-teach a course. So how else might we get to see our colleagues in action and learn from their classroom expertise? The answer: Ask your colleagues if you can sit in on their classes.

All around you are expert practitioners of your craft, and all that stands between you and their classrooms is a polite request. Most professors, I would bet, would not have a problem with a colleague sitting in on a class. The instructor can explain to students that you aren't there to conduct an evaluation — just to observe for your own benefit. Be unobtrusive, sit in the back, and take notes.

Many academics get a chance to sit in on a colleague's classroom as part of their department's evaluation process. In my department, every faculty member [gets observed and evaluated by a peer](#) once a year. But why restrict such visits to official business?

Ideally, departments should encourage faculty to sit in on each other's classes regularly. It would be pretty easy for most departments to set up a rotation so that every instructor has a chance to sit in on the classes of two or three other teachers each semester. Such a system would encourage the sharing of ideas, lead to better professional relationships (thus making it easier to find someone to write a teaching-centered letter of reference), and support departmental collegiality and morale.

When you observe someone else's classroom, you notice all the little ways that each teacher differs. What seemed straightforward — [the way you call on students, perhaps](#) — is now revealed to be a pedagogical choice. The very experience of opening up to a different approach might be the most important benefit you take away from a classroom observation: If someone else can do things differently, so can you. But that won't be the only thing you learn. Think of all of your expert strategies, all the wisdom you've developed over the years. You get the opportunity to take a peek into someone else's bag of tricks to see how their magic is made.

You might want to stick to observing teachers with a lot of experience; those new to the job may be more self-conscious about being watched. But the request is so low impact — another instructor sitting quietly in the back will not disrupt most classrooms — that there's really no reason not to ask anyone you're curious about learning from.

There's another, more subtle, benefit to doing this: Like [Mike Cross, the professor who enrolled as an undercover student](#), you'll get to see the classroom from the students' point of view. Even just the physical difference — sitting in the back of the classroom instead of standing at the front — can be eye-opening. In addition to any strategies you pick up, that change of perspective can be helpful to your teaching. What's your class like for the student at the back of the room?

The ways to approach teaching your subject are more varied than you think. But there's really only one way to get a sense of that variety: See it for yourself. I particularly recommend this practice to graduate students, who should be looking to expose themselves to as wide an array of teaching approaches as possible. But established instructors can benefit, too — sitting in on another teacher's classroom may provide the push you need to break out of your pedagogical rut. There may be good reasons to do things the way you've always done them. But watching a colleague teach may supply you with good reasons for trying something new.

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