Peer Observation Report for Greg Newby
INLS 183: Distributed Systems and Analysis
Fall 2000

During the Fall 2000 semester, Diane Sonnenwald and Evelyn Daniel (in two separate classes) were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to observe Greg Newby teaching his INLS 183 class, Distributed Systems and Analysis. We met with Greg prior to our visits and discussed his well-organized syllabus, schedule, and sample assignments. This advanced course, which requires INLS 181 as a prerequisite, is one that attracts a large number of mostly IS students – approximately 40 for the Fall 2000, according to Greg, some of whom were auditing. It is a course that Greg has designed (invented) to meet the needs of a systems administrator, although many students take the course simply to become more knowledgeable users.

Greg has crafted what appears to be a highly effective method of dealing with the great range of technical skills that students have at the beginning of the course. A series of exercises are provided that require installing software or another systems administration task. A point system suggests how the write-up of the installation experience (via Web pages) will be weighted. Although students may choose (with some constraints) the tasks they wish to tackle, each assignment must be progressively more difficult (in Greg's judgment). The structure of the assignments allows an even playing field yet still challenges each student.

Greg provides a weekly schedule and class notes. Student projects are posted on the web and students are encouraged to read them and learn from one another. He reported that he divides his class time between classroom and lab, noting that the students often preferred the classroom. Greg appears well prepared and provides feedback promptly to students after grading their projects online.

The careful preparation and well thought out assignments and evaluating methods seem appropriate to the kind of application class that INLS183 is. The class is well received by students as attested by the numbers of students who enroll in it.

In the classes we observed, Greg started on time, identified the class agenda for the evening, and related it to previous classes via a brief recap and then pointed the direction for future classes. This teaching technique grounds and orients the students. In his lecture/presentation, Greg is relaxed and informal – one hand in his pocket, a conversational tone and a frequent flash of low key humor. Greg used some "fillers" ("um-m, uh, you know") but these did not detract. The light in the back of the classroom perhaps made it easier for students to take notes (although we observed very little note-taking) but it tended to wash out the screen (Time for a projection replacement!).

Greg used many acronyms in his presentation but students appeared comfortable and not mystified. He occasionally called for questions but rarely paused to wait for them. Despite this, a few students raised questions, often receiving relatively long

answers with demonstrations and examples. At one point, he commented that his response was "probably more answer than you wanted." Greg definitely takes the position of "expert" in his teaching. As he addressed the topic for the evening, he moved quickly to provide a lot of technical and factual background information and quick demonstrations but very little theory. The body language of the students indicated that they were alert and attentive, although in one session several students came in late and not all students were in attendance.

The classes we observed were enjoyable (always fun to learn something new). Greg exhibited mastery of the content and presented it in a well-organized way. The material itself is relevant to professional systems administration jobs, if not theoretical or conceptual. His remarks and the material provided to the students appeared to incorporate relevant recent changes (in what is a fast moving industry). The practical emphasis of the course was clearly appreciated by the students.