

Evaluation of Faculty Teaching: Methods of Evaluation

Peer Review of Classroom Instruction

Section I. Introduction, Overview, and Starting Points

A Brief Introduction to Peer Review of Teaching.....	2
Instituting a Peer Observation and Review Program.....	3
Establishing a Peer Review Program.....	6
Guiding Principles for Quality Peer Review of Teaching.....	10
Four Stages of Peer Review.....	11
How to Review a Peer’s Teaching.....	12
Notes on Bias, Reliability, and Training.....	15



Office of Writing, Research and New Media

A Brief Introduction to Peer Review of Teaching

Though it can assume many forms, peer review of teaching always involves faculty members visiting each others' classes, observing the instruction being offered, and reporting on what they find.

Peers are often in the best position to comment on an instructor's mastery of course content, instructional skills, and rapport with students. Peers are also often in the best position to offer instructors alternative course material and alternative pedagogies.

There are two basic purposes for peer review of classroom teaching: formative and summative. **Formative review** is primarily intended to facilitate faculty development. The results, often shared only with the classroom instructor, are intended to improve teaching. **Summative review** is primarily intended to evaluate faculty teaching. The results are used for administrative purposes: hiring, promotion, merit pay, and so forth. The results are shared with department chairs and promotion and tenure review committees.

According to Britain's Bolton Institute, peer review of teaching should

- contribute to and inform the staff development needs of individual teacher and their embodiment in the staff development plans of the areas to which they belong;
- be flexible and adaptable, recognising the variety of learning contexts and teaching styles which are appropriate to higher education;
- influence and improve practice;
- encourage and help staff with any identified difficulties;
- be subject to monitoring and evaluation of both the process of peer review and the outcomes.

Instituting a Peer Observation and Review Program

What Does Peer Evaluation Involve?

Though it can assume many forms, peer **observation** of teaching always involves faculty members visiting each others' classes, observing the instruction being offered, and reporting on what they find. In many cases it also involves a **review** of the faculty member's course material, perhaps through an examination of the instructor's teaching portfolio.

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How Can Peer Evaluation Aid Teaching Evaluation?

Some aspects of teaching can only be evaluated properly by people who have expertise in the field. Peers are in the best position to evaluate the currency of a faculty member's curriculum, choice of reading material and assignments, presentation of course material, rapport with students, and teaching philosophy. Peers are also often in the best position to offer instructors alternative course material and alternative pedagogies.

How Are Peer Review Programs Typically Designed?

In many cases, members of the department Promotion/Tenure Committee conduct peer observation and review. In some cases, tenure-track faculty will have their classes observed every term; in others, every year; and in others, in selected years (perhaps years two, four, and six of the probationary period). Tenured faculty often have their classes observed when they submit an application for promotion; other departments observe tenured faculty on a rotating basis as part of a post-tenure evaluation program.

In better designed peer observation and review programs, peer evaluators visit at least two or three consecutive class meetings and the faculty member has at least two or three different courses reviewed. When they observe a course, all peer evaluators should be employing the same checklist or observation guide to ensure that the faculty member receives consistent types of response. While many guides can be found on the Web, departments often like to develop their own.

What Do Peer Reviewers Typically Do?

There are three basic steps to any peer observation of classroom teaching: a pre-observation meeting, the observation, and a post-observation review. During the pre-observation meeting, the evaluator and faculty member discuss the instructor's class plans for the visitation days, review any assignments or handouts the students will be working on, and decide if there are any particular areas of instruction the faculty member would like to be evaluated. During the observation, the reviewer sits quietly in the back of the class, following the agreed-upon guide to evaluate the faculty member's performance. If the department does not use a guide, then the reviewer keeps a running description of what the teacher does in class, noting particular strengths and weaknesses. During the post-observation meeting, the reviewer and faculty member discuss the reviewer's responses and answer any specific

questions the faculty member may have. In most cases, the reviewer then writes a letter summarizing the evaluation and sends copies to the faculty member, chair, and Promotion/Tenure Committee.

How Can a Department Institute a Peer Review Program?

Step 1 Decide who will be peer observed and/or reviewed.

Basically decide if you want to use peer observation/review to evaluate non-tenured and/or tenured faculty.

Step 2 Decide how often this type of evaluation will take place.

Decide on a timeline for this type of evaluation. As indicated above, it can be done every term, every year, or on selected years. The same timeline need not apply to both tenured and non-tenured faculty.

Step 3 Decide who the peer reviewers will be.

Here there are several options, largely varying by the degree to which the faculty member being reviewed has a say in who the peer evaluators will be. One approach is to simply appoint the peer reviewers, giving the faculty member no voice in the process. Another is to offer the faculty member a list of several possible reviewers from which to choose two or three. A third is to appoint some reviewers and have the faculty member choose others.

Step 4 Decide what kind of observation or review guide the evaluators will employ.

To ensure that the reviewer in every course is offering the faculty member response on the same elements of instruction, it is advisable to employ some type of guide or checklist. The department will need to choose a particular checklist or devise one themselves.

Step 5 Decide which peers will observe/review which faculty member when.

The pair or group of peer reviewers will need to schedule the observation carefully so the widest possible range of courses are evaluated. They might decide, for example, that one reviewer will visit a required, entry-level course, another a required, upper-level course for majors, and a third a graduate-level course. The goal is to ensure that the faculty member receives feedback on the range of courses he or she teaches.

Step 6 Decide how and to whom the evaluators will report the results of the observation/review.

Here, two decisions need to be made. First, how will the results of the evaluation be communicated to others: by letter, by report, by completed observation guides? Second, the department needs to decide who sees the results. The faculty member, obviously, needs to see the results, but who else sees them is a matter for debate.

Establishing a Peer Review Program

Background Work

Peer review of teaching can be a useful way to find out some things about student learning and faculty teaching. Effective implementation requires that an entire department discusses and, in some sense, agrees on why and how peer review is to be performed. It is particularly important that faculty who are likely to be reviewed have significant input into how and why such a review is to be performed. We think that peer review of teaching programs that are imposed on a department from outside the department or by a small subset of the department are unlikely to be effective or helpful. In this section, we pose a number of questions that we think a department should address as a group, and come to some consensus on answers. The questions are listed first, then discussed in a little more detail, including some common responses. The responses of your department may be similar to the range of responses indicated, or they may be quite different.

Questions:

1. What kinds of information would the group like to get from a peer review process and what will they do with it?
2. Who should get to see this information?
3. Is peer review, as the group understands it, a good way to get this information?
4. What other (non-peer review) information does the group need to make a complete picture?
5. What are the major impediments to implementing a peer review process in this group?
6. Is the group, in general, enthusiastic about using peer review for information gathering?
7. How will the group organize itself to take the next steps toward implementation?

The intent of addressing these issues before beginning a peer review of teaching program is to clarify to all what is sought and what kinds of results are likely to be obtained. Among the many elements that contribute to successful peer review programs at those institutions that have been successful with peer review, is the sense of participation in the design and implementation of the program by all parties. Settling these issues beforehand can alleviate much of the concern (though not all) surrounding a peer review program, and make it more likely that the program will accomplish the goals set out for it.

We outline seven questions which should be considered in designing a peer review program. We suggest that a majority the discussion of these questions centers on question #1. This question, if fully explored and explicitly addressed, makes many of the other questions relatively easy to respond to.

Question Details

1. What kinds of information would the group like to get from a peer review process?

Common responses:

- information on "How good is my teaching, and how could I make it better?"
- information for promotion, i.e. a description of teaching and teaching development for an individual
- information on what students have learned in a class/curriculum
- information on relevance/interest/utility of course/curriculum

There are many more kinds of information which departments could seek from a peer review of teaching program. As a later questions suggests, there may be other better ways of finding some of the information in this list. This issue, of what kind of information does a department want is critical in designing a peer review of teaching program which will actually provide reliable information of the kind the department is seeking.

2. Who should get this information?

Common responses:

- only the person being reviewed (may be appropriate when "How good is my teaching, and how could I make it better?" is the major departmental objective)
- colleagues
- department chair/administrators
- divisional committee

This issue, who sees the results of a peer review, is often one of the most difficult in developing a peer review of teaching program. If a clear set of objectives for peer review has been established from question #1, there may be less contention on the issue of who sees the results. For personal review and feedback, for example, it may be quite appropriate that only the reviewer and reviewee see the results. For tenure promotion cases, evidence of peer review of teaching [may be required by] divisional committees, so some documentation of the review will need to be presented to the department chair and the divisional committee. For other objectives developed by the department, discussion of who will see the results before any peer review has occurred is essential.

This issue gets at the nub of what will the results be used for. Will they be for promotion? Merit raises? Firing "lousy" teachers? Helping all faculty improve their teaching? As noted above, these issues should be settled before the program is initiated, and the decisions made need to be adhered to.

3. Is peer review, as the group understands it, the best way to get this information?

Common responses:

- yes (reviewing peers is the best or only way to find out what we'd like to know)
- no (reviewing peers really won't provide useful information on a topic)

While peer review can provide useful information on many teaching and learning issues, it does not provide information on all issues. In some cases, it may not be the best way to find out what a department wants to know. For example, peer review is a great way for a good teacher to find out how she/he could be better. It is probably not a great way to find out what students like best and least about a course or curriculum unless student interviews are included as part of the peer review. Peer review can help obtain information about teaching and learning which is not available by other means, but it should not be the only way in which information about teaching and learning is obtained. Different methods (student questionnaires, focus groups, other "tests") should be employed to obtain as complete a picture of the teaching and learning experience as possible.

4. What other (non-peer review) information does the group need to make a complete picture?

Common responses:

- student questionnaires
- student interviews
- graduate interviews (5 or 10 years after graduation)
- student performance measures (standardized tests, professional registration,...)

The intent of this question is to focus on the objectives set out in question #1, and consider whether peer review of teaching can provide all or part of the information sought. If peer review can provide only a part of the information sought, what will constitute the other parts? (c.f. program assessment requirements for accreditation)

Reliance on student questionnaires, because of the well-developed process to administer them, is tempting. We encourage departments to think of student questionnaires as a source of a particular kind of information, and to include that information with other sources in evaluating teaching and learning.

5. What are the major impediments to implementing a peer review process in this group?

Common responses:

- lack of time
- lack of experience in peer review
- mistrust of the process

For any department, there are real impediments to initiating a peer review program. If these impediments are strong enough, any peer review program may be doomed, and those attempting to develop one may be wasting their time. These issues need to be addressed at the beginning of the program, and they need to be dealt with. As each department character and culture is different, we doubt any canonical solution to these impediments exists. The members of the department are in the best position to decide what their major impediments will be, and how to overcome them. Some, like lack of experience, will go away as experience is gained. Others, like lack of time, won't go away and need to be addressed directly for a program to solidify. For example, "lack of time" usually implies that this task (peer review) is added to the range of tasks faculty are already responsible for, and must compete for time with other teaching and research activities. Clearly, this is true. Departments may shift this discussion somewhat by suggesting the issue is as much one of priorities (which is most important) as one of total tasks and total time. Departments have flexibility in establishing and promoting activities that they feel are of very high priority over others of a lower priority.

6. Is the group, in general, enthusiastic about using peer review for gathering information?

Common responses:

- yes (we really want to get the information peer review can provide and are willing to do what it takes to get it)

- no (we don't want to know this information badly enough to do peer review)

This is a question which summarizes, in some sense, several of the previous ones. At this point in a department discussion, the issues of what information might be gained from a peer review of teaching program and what it will cost in time and effort should begin to be evident. Departments need to decide whether the benefits outweigh the costs. If so, a peer review of teaching program could be quite successful; if not, it is unlikely that developing and implementing a program will be beneficial.

7. How will the group organize itself to take the next steps toward implementation?

Common responses:

- we have no idea
- let's look [online for samples]
- forget those Bozo's; let's go read lots of journal articles and invent our own peer review techniques

This is the key step towards implementation--what happens after a department has decided it wants to do peer review of teaching? Are people willing to put in the time and energy to make the program a success? Further, the department has agreed on what its objectives are for peer review, and what the results will be used for. What's next? There are several issues included in "What's next?" For example, who will complete the description of the department's peer review program to formalize the "Why?, How?, Who?, When?" Who will seek out the resources available? The first issue needs to be settled by the department. We think that the broader range of ideas and opinions used to form the program, the better; so we would encourage the entire department to continue being involved in the development.

University of Wisconsin

Guiding Principles for Quality Peer Review of Teaching

Whether a peer review of teaching includes classroom visits, a teaching portfolio, or a more limited submission of teaching materials, there are certain general principles to consider.

- No surprises. Faculty must know the use to which a peer review will be put! The reviewer and teacher must agree on the process of peer review.
- Knowing and understanding a subject does not mean you can teach it well. Good teachers are made, not born.
- Considerable thought and effort are needed for good peer review.
- The notion to sit beside, that is, two professionals working collaboratively, is critical.
- Do no harm. The person being reviewed may be concerned about being found wanting, about being less than excellent, or being treated unfairly or harshly. Confidentiality in a formative review must be maintained.
- Peer review includes a focus on the thinking behind the work--faculty members' reasons for teaching the way they do, as well as the actual work itself.
- Peer review should focus on specific teaching behaviors (e.g., syllabi, handouts, organization of lecture, eliciting questions from students, level of content).
- Discourse should be based on reasoned opinions, not personal biases or judgments. A good peer review requires reflection.
- Build on strengths. It is easy to determine what needs work. Be sure to identify what went well.
- Good peer review involves being honest about the issues, but tender on the person.
- Feedback must be provided in a timely and thoughtful manner, and the reviewer should meet with the faculty member being reviewed to provide this feedback.
- Be patient. Improving teaching takes time.
- The process of peer review takes time. Yet the sense of contributing to teaching development and working with colleagues usually makes the additional responsibility and time commitment worthwhile.
- Reviewers also benefit from peer review. Ideas to improve their own teaching are likely to develop.

Lemoyne University

Four Stages of Peer Review

1. Pre-observation Briefing

The peer reviewer and faculty member meet before the class to discuss the course's goals and structure, the teaching agenda for the observation days, the material that will be covered, and the questions the peer reviewer will seek to answer.

2. Observation

The peer reviewer observes the faculty member's class. In most cases, the peer reviewer will want to visit two or more consecutive class meetings.

3. Post-observation Briefing

A follow-up meeting between the peer reviewer and faculty member to discuss the reviewer's observations and suggestion, clarify the faculty member's view of the course and his or her performance, and consider changes the faculty member might want to initiate.

4. Reporting

The peer reviewer writes up a letter or report submitted to the department chair and/or promotion and tenure review committee detailing the observation and conversations. The faculty member should receive a copy of this letter or report as well.

How to Review a Peer's Teaching

Introduction

Those who participate as reviewers in the process of peer review of teaching have an opportunity to contribute to the coherency and assessment of their curricula. For example, when an instructor reviews a colleague's teaching within the same department or college, s/he can more clearly see how her/his own teaching activities contribute to the curriculum and how courses within the curriculum interrelate. The new perspectives instructors gain by participating in peer review can help improve the learning experience across a program by helping faculty transform their approaches and course content, and make explicit the connections between courses.

Serving as a reviewer should be an expected contribution from established faculty in providing leadership in teaching. A thoughtful and carefully conducted review is an invaluable aid to an instructor or a decision-making body, and reviewers' efforts should be rewarded.

There are several general guidelines that apply to all forms of peer review of teaching. First, there are no universal criteria for evaluating teaching. The criteria to be applied in any review depend on several factors, including the discipline, size and type of class (including distance learning formats), characteristics of the instructor, and characteristics of the learners. Thus, any review is context-specific.

Second, it is essential that the reviewer and the instructor being reviewed agree in advance about the focus of the review and the criteria to be used. Any review of instruction should address the needs of the person being reviewed. Does s/he want to develop/improve teaching? Or does s/he want to produce evidence of teaching quality for a formal review? The person to be reviewed may want feedback about specific aspects of teaching; if so, the review should be focused on, or at least include, these aspects. In any case, advance discussion and agreement are essential. There are dozens of things that one might observe during a lecture, discussion, or clinical teaching experience; obviously, no review can attend to all of these.

Third, it is essential that the reviewer be informed about and open to a variety of approaches to instruction. One of the issues that peer review touches on is academic freedom. The freedom to espouse ideas and to educate in the way one believes is best is paramount to the quality of a major university. Faculty members within a single department may have divergent perspectives on their discipline. It is essential that a review of teaching not infringe on the rights of the person being reviewed. It is important that the reviewer share or be informed about and open to the approach taken by the instructor. Some have suggested that reviewers should not only share the same orientation toward instruction, but that they should be from the same discipline or even subdiscipline. Such similarity may be important in some cases, but it does not seem necessary in all cases. There are times when the fresh eye of someone from another discipline or another campus may provide valuable feedback.

What follows are some general considerations for reviewers to think about.

1. Who should conduct the review?

An important consideration in selecting a reviewer is the purpose of the review. If an individual is seeking to use the review to improve teaching, the status of the reviewer with regard to professorial rank and membership in the same department may not be important. A review focused on assessment of content requires an expert in the same discipline. One focused on effectiveness of teaching methodology requires a reviewer with experience in employing those methods. If the purpose of the review is to provide evidence for a personnel decision, considerations that may be important in selecting reviewers include professorial rank, objectivity (reviewer outside the department, college, or perhaps, the institution), and credentials (recognized expert in the discipline or teaching methodology).

The individual being reviewed should be an integral part of the process and, therefore, should play a role in selecting or providing names of reviewers.

2. What is the process?

Include the individual being reviewed in designing the review process. Implementation of the review will be more effective, and the individual will be more receptive to feedback, if s/he has played an integral role in the process.

Meet with the colleague you are reviewing prior to conducting the review.

During the pre-review meeting, you can discuss:

- the purpose of the review and the aspect(s) of teaching you will be considering.
- your colleague's teaching philosophy, course objectives, syllabus (means of meeting the course objectives), and assessment of student learning.
- the review technique, including in what form and to whom feedback will be given.
- other questions/concerns.

Understand the purpose of the review.

- Is your colleague seeking to improve his/her teaching and student learning?
- Has the department chair or mentoring committee requested the review to provide evidence of the quality of teaching in order to rank/compare the individual within the unit/profession for personnel decisions (e.g., appointment, promotion, tenure, teaching award, merit)?

Understand the aspect(s) of teaching you are reviewing.

There are many aspects of teaching that can be reviewed over time. It is essential to understand clearly what aspect is being reviewed currently in order to provide a useful evaluation. Although not an exhaustive list, some examples follow:

- Are you being asked to observe the instructor in the classroom with the students? If so, what aspect are you evaluating: lecture style/presentation, effective use of small group discussions/exercises to achieve course goals?
- Are you being asked to review syllabus materials and assignments to ascertain whether the content is appropriate, current, and properly sequenced?

- Are you be asked to evaluate the student response to the class by: 1) observing what the students are actually doing in the classroom and how they are interacting with the instructor and/or each other, 2) interviewing students, 3) ascertaining if students have achieved certain goals or have enjoyed their experience in the course as a result of the teaching, or 4) obtaining information from students in some other way?
- Are you being asked to review instructional objectives and goals to ascertain if they are sensible and achievable, to observe how the instructor gives feedback to students, to review examinations, to examine the conceptual framework for a course, or to decide if the course material is integrated, representative, and intellectually rigorous?
- Are you being asked to evaluate how the course fits in with the overall curriculum?

Select and become familiar with a review technique appropriate for the aspect(s) of teaching you are reviewing.

Choose a technique based on the purpose of the review and what aspect of teaching is being assessed. The techniques included on this website contain descriptions of their purpose and implementation, including the time needed to conduct the review. Each technique has advantages and disadvantages. In some cases, you may work with the colleague you are reviewing to select an appropriate technique; in others, you may be asked to use a particular technique, e.g., observing teaching.

The frequency of review over time (how many times during the course or during the faculty member's probationary or post-tenure review period will the review be conducted) should be determined. In addition, it is important to establish criteria that are progressive as the instructor's experience and rank increase.

Understand in what way and to whom you should deliver feedback.

Feedback may be delivered verbally or in written form (e.g., letter, standardized form) to the colleague or to the department chair/mentoring committee.

The nature of the feedback depends on the relationship of the reviewer and the colleague being reviewed. The colleague will be more receptive to constructive criticism from a reviewer that is trusted and has a positive relationship with the colleague. We recommend that you begin with areas of strength before engaging in a discussion of areas that require improvement. Feedback should be as specific as possible.

3. What are the advantages to the reviewer?

Faculty who serve as reviewers gain recognition as they assume a leadership role in teaching and contribute to the overall coherency of the curriculum of their department or college. They are exposed to a wide variety of teaching issues and techniques as well as to a wealth of content, which may have an impact on their own teaching.

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Notes on Bias, Reliability, and Training

Primary Sources of Bias

1. disagreement about what constitutes good teaching, both in the discipline and in higher education
2. interpersonal relationships between the observer(s) and the instructor and its related issue of who selects the observers
3. reputation of the instructor being observed
4. lack of consistency in the process
5. lack of training of observers

How Reliability Can Be Increased

1. training of observers, including what criteria to use, how to apply them, observational skills, record-keeping, and how to provide constructive critics
2. more than one observation by more than one observer
3. based on consensus about what constitutes good teaching in the discipline
4. consistent process for all instructors and observers
5. all procedures clearly understood by all
6. instructor plays a role in the process
7. use of validated observation instrument

Topics to Include in Observer Training

1. observational skills (of both instructors and students)
2. use of protocols and forms
3. record-keeping
4. review of syllabi, exams, assignment, labs, and texts
5. constructive feedback
6. building consensus among reviewers

7. reconciling forms and narrative notes
8. final report writing

DeZure, Deborah. "Evaluating Teaching Through Peer Classroom Observation." Changing Practices in Evaluating Teaching. Ed. Peter Selden. Bolton, MA: Anker, 1999. 72-3, 79.