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PEER REVIEW OF TEACHING: AN OVERVIEW

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Introduction

This teaching resource summarizes background information on peer review of teaching, describing its various types and the processes for conducting such a review. Use of this information should assist in better informed, more systematic decisions and procedures to help faculty improve their teaching. The recommended readings provide extensive information on peer review.

Better teaching is something to which every faculty member can aspire. We believe that all faculty can benefit from thoughtful attention to their teaching, and deserve help with such efforts. Even if done for personnel reasons (e.g., renewal, tenure decision) the goal of a peer review of teaching should be pedagogical improvement.

Purpose of Peer Evaluation

Peer evaluation of teaching is becoming more prevalent nationally. Broadly, its goals are to:

- Help faculty examine their teaching for purposes of self-improvement, and
- Systematically assess teaching performance as a professional faculty activity in connection with personnel decisions.

Benefits of Peer Review

Attention to the improvement of teaching may be the most important step we can take toward maintaining and improving the quality of education our students receive.

Peer review is one step toward more faculty ownership of teaching, toward making its discussion and improvement more visible in the academic community. Making peer review community property assists both new and established faculty to enhance their teaching effectiveness.

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Pressures beyond the academy seek greater accountability and responsibility for teaching. Peer review is one way faculty can document what it is we do as teachers.

Peer review demonstrates attention to the art and craft of teaching by the profession and assists good teachers to become better.

Peer review adds professionalism to the process of evaluating teaching.

Reflection by both the faculty member being reviewed and the reviewer is a key benefit of peer review. Teachers must step back, formulate and organize, and present what they value and do with students. Talking with others often helps teachers reflect on their pedagogy. Reading materials in the Recommended Readings may generate questions, suggest ideas not previously considered, and help organize responses.

Reflection on one's teaching includes questions such as:

- What are my strengths as a teacher? What do I do best?
- What are my limitations? What must I learn to do better?
- What do students perceive are my strengths as a teacher? Why do they like my courses?
- What do students perceive I need to do more of, or improve?
- What have I done to maintain or improve my teaching?
- Who are the first people I would talk to, and sources I would consult, about a teaching problem?

Reflection also applies to reviewers who must avoid hasty judgments, and reflect on the person with whom they will be doing the review, and the course and materials to be read or visited.

Reviewers must put aside their own model of teaching (e.g., lecture format) to best consider the teaching and faculty member being reviewed (e.g., discussion, small group format).

Summative and Formative Aspects of Peer Review

Evaluation is a powerful means by which faculty learn department, college or university expectations of teaching, and it can encourage faculty attention to their teaching. If formative values and procedures are included within summative requirements faculty should have greater opportunity and incentive to increase their teaching (and morale).

Review processes must be explicit; faculty must know what information is expected from them and how it will be used.

Review processes must be fair; information requested must represent both the criteria used to evaluate teaching (e.g., listed in department renewal and tenure policy) and the complexity of the teaching process.

A practical distinction has evolved on many campuses, wherein summative evaluation is tantamount to that which is used for rendering personnel decisions and formative evaluation frequently is the more voluntary form, often initiated by the instructor and often at a point in time that is post-tenure. Yet the distinction is not absolute, in that each type of evaluation can contribute to the other.

Summative peer review is most associated with junior faculty. When done in a supportive manner it may be vital in helping them become better teachers and in retaining them. Our philosophy is that the summative process must include opportunities for self improvement. Absent such chances it is strictly an evaluative and critical process, with the steps needed to improve the rating (one's teaching) left to inference.

Feedback is most useful if it focuses on teaching behaviors and practices over which the instructor has some control.

How information is communicated during a peer review can be more important than the content. Faculty can be anxious, defensive, or eager to learn about their teaching. Descriptive information with examples will be heard more readily by faculty being evaluated and have more impact than evaluative comments.

Problems in teaching must never be explicitly identified unless accompanied by alternative solutions. Any recommended changes in teaching must be achievable.

A teaching enhancement philosophy is one in which concern, even during summative peer review, is on helping colleagues to think about their teaching, maintain their strengths, and improve their teaching. Evaluation of teaching for summative purposes without this philosophy makes no sense.

Formative peer review frequently involves direct classroom observation, videotaping of classes, evaluation of course materials, assessment of instructor evaluations of the academic work of students, and teaching portfolios. (Keig & Waggoner, 1994, have an excellent discussion of formative review methods, with examples, including the use of videotape.) The faculty working with the teacher may not even give advice, but merely reflect on what they have discussed, experienced in the classroom, or read in portfolios.

Formative peer review works best if one focuses on one or two specific behaviors or on specific components of the course such as texts used or tests.

Forms of Peer Review: The Classroom Visitation Process

This is a common form of peer review. Some important points:

- It takes considerable time and effort.
- Trust must be established and maintained. The process may cause the person being reviewed to feel vulnerable.
- Both the person being reviewed and the reviewer must take ownership of the process. No one is an expert, both faculty work together as colleagues, trying to assist one another.
- An honest exchange of strengths and suggestions for improving teaching is important. Always begin by discussing what is right and good about a colleague's teaching.
- Reviewer training and experience strengthen peer review.
- Too much feedback information can be overwhelming and confusing.

Pre-Visitation Conference

During this meeting the observer gathers a great deal of information concerning the teacher's goals, the class, students and specific problems to which the reviewer should attend.

The Class Visitation

There are differing opinions on how classroom observations should be conducted. Some suggest the reviewer act as an observer, perhaps with numerical forms filled out as the class progresses. Others recommend behaving as a student would, sitting in class and taking notes. Regardless of the role one adopts, after class one would use reference materials on classroom behaviors (the Recommended Readings contain many examples) as sources to organize observations and impressions.

Faculty should know when someone will visit class. The argument is made that what is seen is best behavior. That is exactly the point. What is the faculty member's best effort?

Post-Class Visitation Meeting

This meeting works best as discussion, not just the observer giving feedback.

It is best if the teacher gets the first opportunity to comment.

Start by discussing what the teacher is doing well, and why.

The reviewer may ask one or two questions such as:

- How do you think the class went?
- What went well or not so well?
- What were your teaching strengths? Weaknesses?
- What did you like best about this class?
- If you had to change one thing that happened in this class, what would it be and why?

Examples are more useful and powerful than generalities.

Forms of Peer Review: Course Materials

Course materials may be submitted as part of a Teaching Portfolio with observation and comments by the faculty, or faculty members may submit them with no portfolio component, although the literature does not recommend this practice. Course materials may include but are not limited to documents such as:

- Course syllabi
- Course assignments
- Learning experiences such as tests, papers, projects, and presentations
- Exams and grading practices
- Text and required/suggested readings; WEB sites

Criteria for evaluating course materials must be explicit. These criteria mirror teaching portfolio criteria.

Forms of Peer Review: The Teaching Portfolio

There are three sources of teaching data: students, peers-colleagues-consultants, and self. Teaching portfolios focus on self evaluation and assessment, the teacher as a reflective practitioner. In writing a teaching portfolio, teachers are confronted with the question of whether the way they teach and spend their time is congruent with their philosophy of teaching and goals for students. Often faculty work with a collegial coach, using the portfolio as a springboard for discussions about one's teaching.

The body of the teaching portfolio deals with questions such as:

- The faculty member's teaching philosophy
- The goals of one's teaching
- Successes in the classroom
- Areas for improvement
- Goals for the next two or five years of teaching.

A teaching portfolio contains documents and materials that collectively capture the scope and quality of teaching performance in a careful and thoughtful manner. It displays and documents one's teaching, using selected information and solid evidence of effectiveness. Attached materials include the syllabus, exams, reading lists and texts, assignments, and so forth.

Several of the Recommended Readings have detailed teaching portfolio information.

Feedback

The process of giving feedback during a peer review is critical if those being reviewed are to improve their teaching. The chances that teaching improvement will occur increases when feedback:

- Is accurate and specific, with examples
- Contributes to what the teacher has already thought about (dovetails with self knowledge)
- Comes from a trusted and credible source
- Is given in a supportive, nonjudgmental manner
- Has positives intermixed with areas for growth
- Provides specific alternatives for aspects of teaching that need change or improvement
- Is focused
- Is relevant
- Allows for discussion and interaction.

Guiding Principles for Quality Peer Review of Teaching

[Based on the Guiding Principles appearing in Perlman & McCann (1998) and Chism (1998).]

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.

1. 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.
2. Knowing and understanding a subject does not mean you can teach it well. Good teachers are made, not born.
3. Considerable thought and effort are needed for good peer review.
4. The notion to sit beside, that is, two professionals working collaboratively, is critical.
5. 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.
6. 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.
7. Peer review should focus on specific teaching behaviors (e.g., syllabi, handouts, organization of lecture, eliciting questions from students, level of content).
8. Discourse should be based on reasoned opinions, not personal biases or judgments. A good peer review requires reflection.
9. Build on strengths. It is easy to determine what needs work. Be sure to identify what went well.
10. Good peer review involves being honest about the issues, but tender on the person.
11. 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.
12. Be patient. Improving teaching takes time.
13. 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.
14. Reviewers also benefit from peer review. Ideas to improve their own teaching are likely to develop.

Recommended Readings (* Denotes a Good Place to Begin)

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