

for your consideration...

suggestions and reflections on Teaching and Learning

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Peer Observation of Classroom Teaching

Most faculty members would probably agree that student evaluations do not provide a complete picture of their teaching. Although it is clear that students can reliably judge many aspects of a course and a teacher's methods, their perspective is necessarily limited to their personal experience as students. Logically, one's colleagues might be able to fill out the picture in important ways and thereby provide a more complete assessment of teaching. In the search for better ways to evaluate and improve teaching, many institutions are experimenting with systematic peer evaluations that include classroom observations and peer review of course materials. In a comprehensive evaluation program, the results of student evaluations and peer evaluations, along with course materials and syllabi, are brought together in a teaching portfolio that presents a reasonably complete picture of an individual's teaching competency.

Currently, classroom observations are not widely used in higher education, either for summative evaluation or for teaching improvement. Although junior faculty members are usually observed as part of a review for contract renewal or for a tenure decision, this may be the only time anyone visits their classrooms. When peer observation is used to promote teaching improvement, some general guidelines will probably provide sufficient structure for the program to work reasonably well. The staff of the Center for Teaching and Learning can help develop an informal program in your department. However, if peer observations are to be used for evaluation and personnel decisions, a much more formal structure is required in order to insure fairness and reliability.

It is possible for formal and informal systems to coexist in the same department, but the nature and purposes of each one must be clearly distinguished.

Peer Observation for Evaluation

Although peer evaluation of research is the norm in higher education, peer evaluation of teaching is considered a new and potentially dangerous practice. The criteria for evaluation of research are generally agreed-upon within each academic discipline, but the lack of parallel criteria for teaching makes peer review more problematic. Consequently, one of the first requirements for developing a peer evaluation system is that the faculty reach consensus on the dimensions of teaching that will be evaluated. A large body of empirical research on college teaching, much of it performed in the last fifteen years, offers a secure basis for establishing criteria for teaching effectiveness, as well as methods and procedures for evaluating instruction. No system of peer evaluation of teaching will work without the same commitment to collegiality and fairness that is applied in peer evaluation of research. If the system lacks integrity, it will fail.

Based on research studies and the experience of institutions in which peer review of teaching is practiced, the following elements seem to be essential:

1. Developing a peer observation system requires extensive discussion among the faculty of the school or department. They should reach consensus on the purpose and procedures of

the system and be allowed to try it out before it is officially adopted.

2. Peer observers should be trained. One of the reasons faculty members object to peer observations is the fear that their colleagues may be unqualified to assess their unique teaching style. At UNC, the Center for Teaching and Learning can provide appropriate training in the principles and practice of classroom observation.
3. Observers must use a standardized observation/report form to insure greater reliability across observers. The form should reflect the dimensions of teaching that the department faculty believe are important to effective instruction in their field. Figure 1 lists aspects of teaching that commonly appear on observation forms. A variety of forms are available from CTL.
4. Teams of at least two colleagues should perform the observations (together). The teams can be drawn from a pool of trained faculty in the department, and the teacher being observed should help make the selection.
5. At least three observation visits in a course are necessary for adequate sampling. The schedule of visits must be negotiated with the teacher being observed and there should be no unannounced observations.
6. Procedures should require pre-observation and post-observation conferences between the visiting team and the teacher. In the pre-observation conference, the teacher can describe the course design, his/her teaching philosophy, the kinds of students in the course, the goals for the classes that the team will observe, and his/her methods of teaching. This conference is absolutely necessary to provide an adequate context for the observations. A post-observation conference should be held as soon as possible after the last classroom visit. The observation team should present their draft report to the teacher at this time and discuss the strengths and weaknesses they perceived during their visits.
7. Copies of the final report should be sent to the teacher and the department chair (or the administrator in charge). The teacher should

have the option of adding his/her own report to that of the visiting team.

8. All procedures for the system must be clearly specified and followed to the letter. When personnel decisions are at stake, evaluation procedures must be the same for every teacher. The basic procedures described above are designed to reduce apprehension and to provide checks and balances to insure a fair assessment.

Figure 1. Observation of Teaching

Structure and Goals

Does the instructor's presentation show clear signs of planning and organization? Are the various instructional elements (lecture, blackboard material, handouts) effectively integrated? Is the class time used efficiently? Is the material presented effectively? Does the instructor respond appropriately to unanticipated situations?

Teaching Behaviors

Does the instructor maintain sufficient eye contact with students? Is the oral delivery too rapid, too slow? Does the instructor exhibit distracting mannerisms? Is the language used understandable to students? Is the instructor active enough? Too active?

Instructor-Student Rapport

Does the instructor demonstrate fair and equitable concern for all students? Do the students seem receptive to the instructor's ideas? Are student questions answered clearly and simply? Is the instructor sarcastic to students? How would you describe the instructor-student relationship?

Subject Matter and Instruction

Does the instructor demonstrate adequate knowledge of the subject? Is the instructor up to date in the discipline? Are the transitions between topics effective? Is the course material presented in a lively and interesting style? Is the material appropriate for course and student level? Are the students generally attentive? Does the instructor demonstrate enthusiasm for the subject? For teaching?

General

Do you believe you can properly judge the teaching-learning process in the classroom visited? Would you recommend this instructor to students advised by you? Why or why not? What specific changes are needed to strengthen teaching performance? How would you rate this instructor against others teaching similar courses in the department?

(from Seldin, Changing Practices in Faculty Evaluation, p. 144)

From these procedural standards, it is obvious that a fair and effective peer evaluation program requires a considerable investment in faculty time. Schools and departments that adopt such a system must be prepared to allocate sufficient time for the purpose. Because of the cost, in some academic units, peer evaluation is reserved exclusively for tenure and promotion decisions. As long as the standards listed above are observed, other elements of the system can be adapted to special conditions within departments. The staff of the Center for Teaching and Learning has helped develop formal systems of peer observation in several academic units at UNC and are available for consultation on the topic at any time.

Peer Observation for Teaching Improvement

Asking one or two colleagues to sit in on your classes and discuss their impressions is the simplest form of peer observation, and this kind of arrangement is particularly beneficial if the observer is an experienced teacher with some familiarity with the literature on college teaching. You should still meet before the observations to discuss your teaching approach and to identify specific areas of instruction on which you would like some feedback. Teaming up with another faculty member for a semester, working on your courses together, and visiting each other's classes may provide a more intensive and rewarding experience, but it also requires a much greater time commitment.

Asking your colleagues to view videotapes of your classes and provide suggestions for improvement is less time-consuming than other methods for getting peer feedback, but some of the classroom experience is undoubtedly lost. Also, to work effectively, this approach still requires that you provide some context for your colleagues before they view the tapes (e.g., the objectives for the lessons, your teaching style, your particular concerns, etc.). The Center provides a videotaping service for faculty and graduate teaching assistants, and Center consultants are also available to provide feedback on your teaching.

Qualities of Effective Peer Observers

The effectiveness of both formal and informal arrangements for peer observation depend, to a large degree, on the characteristics of the observ-

ers. In one UNC department, faculty members who were asked to describe the qualities of an effective observer generated the list of characteristics that follows:

1. Has sensitivity; empathizes with the person being observed.
2. Sees improvement as the primary objective of the evaluation process
3. Is an experienced teacher.
4. Is a good listener.
5. Gives specific, constructive feedback and advice.
6. Has integrity; takes the process seriously; prepares for the observations.
7. Sees different styles of teaching as valid and acceptable.
8. Is not doctrinaire about teaching methods.

These characteristics consistently appear in the literature on peer observation, and successful programs emphasize the necessity of keeping them constantly in mind when visiting classes. The basic task of a peer observer is to ascertain if the method being used seems to be effective, not whether it conforms to notions of teaching derived solely from personal experience. There are many ways to be effective.

Constructive Criticism

When writing an observation report, and especially when providing feedback to a teacher, it is important to exercise one's skills in giving constructive criticism. Constructive criticism is descriptive and specific; it is focused on the behavior rather than the person and is directed toward behavior that the teacher can change. Constructive criticism is also "affirming": achievements and efforts toward change should be acknowledged and suggestions for further change should be made in a positive way. The paragraph below, taken from a peer observation report from another university, exemplifies this last point:

"The time and energy you have devoted to the preparation of the class discussion questions is clearly well-received by the students — they do the work and are clearly interested in the subject. This is a definite plus. You might find that many of the detailed, fact-based questions could be provided for the student to self-test their comprehension, and design others as integrating questions for discussion in class. This tactic works especially well in small groups . . ."

Assistance

The staff of the Center for Teaching and Learning is available for consultation on all aspects of teaching evaluation. Please call 966-1289 for an appointment.

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