

## **Why Introducing or Sustaining Peer Review of Teaching Is So Hard, and What You Can Do About It**

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If you happen to meet a department chair who hasn't had to handle a complaint about student evaluation of teaching, chances are that she or he hasn't held the position very long. Whether they are pleased with their own ratings or think of evaluation of teaching instruments as the root of all evil, faculty members sense that there is something missing in a teaching evaluation system that relies on student opinion alone. They find that the information they receive is not detailed enough to guide their improvement and protest (often in contradiction to research findings) that faculty influence these ratings in all sorts of ways, from "dumbing down" courses to inflating grades.

While scholars generally support the reliability of student evaluation of teaching when a good instrument is used and administered correctly, they also advocate multiple sources of information on so complex an activity as teaching. Given this advice and the widespread dissatisfaction with student ratings, why is it so hard to maintain peer review of teaching as an alternative and complementary system? Here are some reasons and some thoughts on how to address the challenges they pose.

### **NORMS**

**Peer review violates norms of privacy and egalitarianism in teaching.** First, teaching has long been an activity that is thought to be highly personal. When anthropologists want to test for the existence of a norm, they sometimes use a technique called "breaching," the deliberate violation of a suspected norm, to gauge the reaction to the action. Translated into the college teaching context, try walking into a class and sitting down to observe without asking the instructor in advance. It's highly probable that you will be asked what you are doing in *his* or *her* classroom. Although Lee Shulman and others at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of College Teaching have called for teaching to be "community property," a public activity open to inspection and discussion on teaching approaches, the move to this state of affairs is likely to be uncomfortable for those who have been socialized into a system based on privacy in teaching.

Second, teachers are accustomed to being nonjudgmental about the performance of their peers. Whether from professional courtesy, the realization that teaching is difficult, or the conviction that there are many acceptable ways to teach, colleagues generally refrain from making suggestions or offering themselves to others as sources of expertise in teaching. This norm lies behind skepticism about teaching

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awards and merit increases, which often embarrass those honored and are devalued as meaningless by others. Linked to the previous norm of privacy and coupled with the natural human tendency to avoid being frank with others about their performance, the norm of egalitarianism renders faculty members uncomfortable in situations involving making judgments about others' teaching.

## **PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

**Effective peer review is too time consuming and involves knowledge and skills that faculty members don't have.** Given expanded expectations for faculty productivity in recent decades, any idea that presents the possibility for consuming more time is likely to get a hostile reception. Since most people (incorrectly) regard peer review of teaching as synonymous with classroom observation, investing valuable time in scheduling peer visits and writing onerous reports does not seem like an attractive or efficient activity—nor one that will be much appreciated. Peer review is thus seen as a time sink.

Most faculty members are also wary about their own capacity to make good judgments about teaching, as well as the ability of their colleagues to do so. Comfortable with discipline-based knowledge and practices, they are less sure of ways of viewing and talking about teaching philosophy and performance. To some, teaching is an art or personal trait that can't be analyzed; to others, it is perfectly straightforward—one knows good teaching when one sees it. Peer review thus either seems mysterious or much ado about nothing.

## **FEAR OF BIAS AND REPRISAL**

**Personal or professional rivalries will contaminate the process and create deep divisions or recourse to legal remedies.** In addition to fears about the skills of reviewers, faculty members often wonder if their past relationships with peers or differences in style or disciplinary thinking will influence the peer review process. A proponent of qualitative research in a highly quantitatively-oriented department might be anxious about whether this difference in perspective will affect a teaching review. An instructor who prefers to lecture might feel that a peer reviewer who supports active learning will view the teaching from only this perspective. And, faculty members often wonder if they are legally vulnerable if conflict escalates.

## **DEALING WITH THESE RESERVATIONS**

With concentrated attention, even these powerful reservations against peer review of teaching can be addressed. Three approaches can help:

- Present rational arguments, but don't ignore the affect.
- Create a practical peer review process.
- Embed peer review in the culture of the unit.

**Arguments.** The most powerful arguments for peer review of teaching incorporate both rational and emotional qualities. The rational approach to the reservations above stresses the importance of quality teaching to the unit—for increased student retention and success, for attracting more majors, for garnering awards, and overall reputation. It highlights the fact that an extremely high percentage of the unit's budget is devoted to faculty salaries and that personnel decisions have lasting consequences on the health of the unit, especially when tenure is involved. The rational approach argues that investing an extra three hours each year in a faculty member's assessment is worthwhile, given the possibility of a lifelong employment decision or the use of a substantial amount of the unit's budget on the faculty member's salary. It points out that training for reviewers is part of a good process and that mutually agreed-upon criteria can be identified as the basis for the judgments.

Emotionally, it is important to address distrust of evaluation, violation of personal style and space, insecurities about performance, anxieties about time, and fear of bias. All these feelings require reassurance and as nonthreatening a start as possible. For these reasons, it is often helpful to begin a peer review system by focusing on the formative aspects—stressing coaching and affirmation. Reciprocal exchange teams, with voluntary choice of partner, are an excellent way to begin. Given a practical system (see below), these exchanges will be based on a faculty-constructed process, prepared reviewers, and time-conscious procedures. They will be introduced in the spirit of inquiry about student learning and how faculty can better facilitate success, rather than being tinged with overtones of establishing a teaching hierarchy or weeding out poor performers.

**Practical process.** Key to the development of a good process of peer review is clarity about goals and procedures, but a highly important consideration is practicality. Emphasis should be placed on engaging peers efficiently and only at key times. Practicality also means sharing the work equitably and allocating resources and rewards to get the work done. For example, rather than calling for every course to be peer reviewed every time it is offered, a staggered schedule of reviews can focus on regular coaching reviews early in the career and fewer as the teaching is established. Checklists or short focused response forms can

be developed for use by the reviewer. Reviewers can work from teaching materials such as syllabi and tests rather than incorporating visits in every review. And the process of peer review can be folded into other procedures, such as teaching award nominations or annual reviews, so that it is efficient. Examples and ideas that can help in the development of a process are included in *Peer Review of Teaching: A Sourcebook* (Chism, 2007).

**Embedding in the culture.** Long-term, the most important consideration for implementing lasting peer review of teaching is to make sure that the culture of the unit is in accord with the values of peer review. Alignment of the criteria and sources of evidence used in peer review with other processes in the unit is one way to strengthen peer review. The articulation of a short list of principles of good teaching by colleagues in a unit, for example, can serve as the basis for a peer review process as well as other teaching activities, such as new faculty orientation. Creating routine occasions for talking about teaching also helps to dispel the notion that teaching is a private activity rather than a team enterprise. At a department meeting, it is important to consider a discussion of student retention or graduation figures from the perspective of how learning can better be facilitated as equally important to a budget decision if a culture of teaching is to be cultivated. Asking faculty to report on peer review activity (either as a reviewer or as one being reviewed) on an annual report acknowledges its importance as well.

## **CONCLUSION**

Peer review of teaching is a professional responsibility that is vital to teaching excellence. With focused attention, good systems can be introduced and flourish. Over the long term, the investment can reap substantial rewards for the health of academic units.

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## **REFERENCES**

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