

Understanding Roles and Goals of a Peer Review System

Initial clarity about the reasons for engaging in peer review and expectations for the role that is to be played by each person in an academic unit is a hallmark of good systems of peer review. This chapter will treat the topics of roles and goals.

ROLES

Effective peer review of teaching involves the collaboration of several parties, including the chairperson, colleague being reviewed, and peer reviewer. Each has a role in the process and can contribute different things.

The Department Chair

The chair is responsible for creating a climate that values peer review. This can only be situated within a climate that values teaching and therefore supports continual efforts to develop and evaluate teaching. Department chairs can create a supportive climate in a variety of ways.

Assuming intellectual leadership for the effort. Effective chairpersons are knowledgeable about the literature on good teaching, on teaching assessment, and on teaching improvement. Chairs can show faculty that teaching can be analyzed and assessed in valid and reliable ways. They can convene meetings to set up a peer review system that is thorough and informed.

Communicating high expectations for teaching and peer review. Through pronouncements and actions, the chair can alert faculty to the seriousness with which teaching is taken in the department. Faculty can be continually informed that peer review is expected and should receive their full attention. Although concerns about how much time goes into effective peer review are important, the department chair should communicate a clear sense of the high priority that must be placed on this function.

Making teaching public. Chairpersons can work to ensure that there is ongoing public dialogue on teaching at department meetings, workshops, and other occasions. The chair can strive to be personally accessible for discussion of teaching issues. Peer review then becomes a natural part of the dialogue.

Providing sufficient resources for peer review. The way in which the chairperson provides leadership in selecting new faculty, allocating rewards, and making assignments clearly indicates a stance on teaching. Chairpersons can be on the alert for ways in which they can provide time and resources for serious peer review.

Assisting in the assignment of peers. The chair can oversee the process of assigning peer reviewers to assess the work of a given faculty member. This task might be accomplished by delegating it to a faculty committee, by direct nomination or appointment by the chair, or whatever arrangements make sense in the department. The chair can help to ensure fair and helpful reviews by being alert to interpersonal conflicts, philosophical differences, and other conditions among the teaching staff that might get in the way of good peer review.

Taking part in the peer review process. The chair can set an example by being personally involved in formative peer review, observing classes of faculty, reviewing their materials and the like, and providing feedback. The chair plays an important role in summative peer review, setting the tone of the review committee and encouraging it to make decisions based on careful analysis of the information that is available.

Providing guidance to peer reviewers. The chair can help to arbitrate differences among peers that arise during the review process and can intervene as necessary to help provide perspective on differences among faculty, standards for judgment, and comparisons.

The Colleague Being Reviewed

Teachers being evaluated can provide important contextual information needed during the peer review process. They can also initiate actions for formative review, inviting peers to provide feedback on course materials, classroom performance, or other aspects of teaching.

For formative purposes, teachers can provide, during preobservation conferences or other interchanges, information concerning appropriate materials about the course, the instructional strategies, the level of students taking the course, and other contextual information that can be helpful to the reviewer.

The role of the colleague in summative peer review is to assemble the best evidence of teaching available and to provide additional evidence at the request of the committee. Such evidence includes representative samples of course materials, a chronological record of teaching responsibilities, a list of publications and presentations on teaching, student evaluations of teaching, records of consultations or feedback from sources outside the department, and other things required by the department or institution in a dossier.

The Peer Reviewer

The peer reviewer can be developer, information gatherer, or judge. In the role of developer, he or she is supportive, assisting the colleague in teaching development, and offering suggestions for change and improvement. As information gatherer, the role is one of collecting appropriate information to be used formatively or summatively in the peer review process. As a judge, the peer reviewer evaluates sources of data on teaching that are used for personnel decisions. Ideally, the peer reviewer will play only one of these roles for any given faculty colleague, separating the formative and summative functions.

The role of the reviewer in formative peer review is to gather appropriate information from the colleague during preobservation conferences or other interchanges concerning appropriate materials about the courses taught, the instructional strategies, the level of students taking the courses, and other contextual information that can be helpful to the reviewer. Once information is gathered, the peer reviewer has the responsibility to view the teaching products or performance in light of the

context and make helpful comments and suggestions to the colleague in follow-up sessions.

The role of the reviewer in summative peer review is to collect that information that the reviewer is best qualified to judge. A review of the literature on the role of colleagues in peer review of teaching (Cohen & McKeachie, 1980) states that peer reviewers are in an ideal position to judge course content and design, materials, and instruments used to assess student achievement. Peers are also the appropriate judges of the products of the scholarship of teaching and the colleague's contributions to teaching development in the department, college, institution, or profession. The peer reviewer should assess the evidence in these areas according to departmental and institutional standards and render fair evaluations based on these standards.

GOALS

As has been stressed throughout this sourcebook, it is important to adopt separate procedures for formative and summative peer review. Formative peer review is intended for improvement of the person being reviewed, and the emphasis is on constructive feedback. Summative peer review is intended to be the basis for a personnel decision, such as promotion, tenure, or merit pay, and the emphasis is on making fair judgments.

Formative Peer Review: Providing Constructive Feedback

In providing a colleague with feedback for improvement following a class observation, review of materials, or other peer review activity, it is helpful to consider the following:

- Authentic feedback is built on a relationship of trust, honesty, and genuine concern for the individual. Rivalries, flattery, and condescension get in the way of effective dialogue.
- Descriptive information provides the colleague with concrete details on which decisions for change can be based. It allows the colleague to consider whether the description fits his or her intentions and to make adjustments if not. (Example: "Ninety percent of the class time was devoted to teacher

talk,” or “The syllabus never lists the causes of the French Revolution as a topic to be treated.”)

- A focus on behavior rather than personal attributes isolates those things that can be changed more easily and avoids associating personal blame with problems. (Example: It is better to say “I noticed that the students appeared tired when they did not have a break during the three-hour class” than “You are really inconsiderate.”)
 - Feedback that is rooted in the needs of the colleague is most helpful. It is responsive to the self-identified questions that the colleague has, to the stage of his or her career, and to the individual’s capacity to absorb information and make necessary adjustments. Reviewers should encourage colleagues to identify the questions and concerns that they themselves have. (Example: “In looking over this test, what items do you have uncertainties about?” “Would you like suggestions for redoing the whole format or just changes on specific items?”)
 - Peer review activities should be followed by prompt feedback. While recall of details is fresh and colleague expectation for response is high, dialogue between the peer reviewer and colleague should occur. It is often helpful to schedule a meeting time for this exchange at the same time when the initial peer review activity is scheduled.
 - Checking periodically during a feedback session to hear how comments are being heard and interpreted is helpful. (Example: “Can you summarize the main points I have made about what I saw in the laboratory exercise?”)
 - If multiple peer reviewers are involved, it is useful to check for agreement on specific observations or advice. (Example: “Did anyone else notice that students’ attention levels lagged after the first fifteen minutes of lecture?” “Do you find the layout of these handouts confusing?”)
 - Feedback that is forward-looking helps the colleague to go beyond the peer review activity. When suggestions for specific change or a plan for development are part of a feedback session, the colleague has identified a practical outcome. (Example: “I would suggest that you limit the content of your
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overhead transparencies and use a bigger, bolder font so that students stop complaining that they cannot see them or copy them down quickly.”)

Summative Peer Review: Rendering Judgments

When peer review of teaching is performed for summative purposes, several guidelines are relevant:

- Reviewers should make sure that they are appropriate judges. If there are conflicts of interest, if the teaching is being done in a specialized area that is unfamiliar to the reviewer, if there are longstanding personality conflicts between the reviewer and the colleague being reviewed or the reviewer and other peers on a review committee, or if there are other compelling reasons why the reviewer cannot do a thorough and fair job, the reviewer should request to be excused from the review.
- Adequate conditions should be available for summative peer review of teaching. If there is an attitude of distrust, insufficient time, or lack of evidence, these must be addressed before a good review is possible. If lead time has been lacking, an extension should be sought. If there are insufficient materials or an absence of the contextual information needed to understand the materials, the missing information should be requested from the colleague under review.
- The review should be based on standards. To prevent personal preference from prevailing, standards for effective teaching based on institutional, college, or departmental policies should be used in making judgments about teaching. Often, professional associations have documents that contain teaching standards as well. Peer reviewers should make sure that they obtain copies of these standards in advance of the review. If they are not available from any of these sources, a discussion of standards is necessary at the start of the review. They should be made explicit so that the basis for the review is articulated.
- Conclusions should be tied to evidence. Statements about the teaching of the colleague should be rooted in the specifics of the documentation that has been provided (e.g., a finding that the instructor lacks content knowledge should be supported by references to some particular mistakes or

omissions that have surfaced in the review of materials or classroom performance).

- Summative peer review conducted at personnel decision-making checkpoints (promotion and tenure, contract extension, merit pay) should be comprehensive and comparative. Unlike formative peer review of teaching, summative review should focus on overall performance. While judgments about this performance should be grounded in specifics, the attempt should be to assess the teaching holistically over an extended period of time and range of conditions, rather than to focus on a given instance. For this purpose, then, isolated findings should not determine the conclusions so much as general patterns. These patterns need to be viewed within the context of the teaching performance of the colleague's peers as well. (Example: Is the involvement in teaching improvement efforts heavier, lighter, or about the same as the involvement of others in these activities within the department? Should it be so, given the context of the department and expectations for the colleague?)

Peer review should be thoughtfully conducted. Reviewers should have the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with other peers while the process takes place. A hallmark of an effective review is that the reviewers themselves learn through the process. As they surface teaching issues for judgment, their conversation should help to illuminate the issues involved. The review should culminate in a written summary that is thorough, grounded in evidence, and clear in its conclusions.

REFERENCES

- Cohen, P., & McKeachie, W. (1980). The role of colleagues in the evaluation of college teaching. *Improving College and University Teaching*, 28 (4) 147-154.
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