

## **Peer Review of Teaching**

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### **Preamble**

Increased emphasis is being placed on peer review of teaching in post secondary institutions (Blackmore, 2005; Byrne, Brown, & Challen, 2010; Chism, 2007; Hamilton, & Gaff, 2009); however, as Hira and Cohen (2011) note, “Teaching excellence is becoming a difficult summit to climb. The most precarious part of that climb is a missing support – the lack of a reliable system for accessing and rewarding teaching” (para. 2).

At the heart of the issue is the debate over the purpose of peer review as quality enhancement versus quality assurance (Byrne, Brown, & Challen, 2010; Kilfoil, 2014). The latter is often seen as ‘managerial surveillance imposed by leaders’ (Napier et al., 2014) that does little to improve or enhance teaching (the focus of the former) (Sachs, & Parsell, 2014).

Another issue is the reluctance on the part of academics to embrace peer review of their teaching even though there is wide acceptance of peer review of research (Hira, & Cohen, 2011; Iqbal, 2013). Assessment by peers can be daunting, but heavy reliance on quantitative student feedback for determining the effectiveness of teaching is also problematic (Bernstein, Burnett, Goodburn, & Savoy, 2006; Hira, & Cohen, 2011). While student feedback is important as one measure of instructor effectiveness, that of the day-to-day interaction in the classroom, Bernstein et al. (2006) argue that “peer review of teaching should refer to a much more complete examination of the intellectual work of teaching” (p. 6). These other aspects include: course content, academic rigor and appropriateness of objectives and topics (eg. preparation for advanced course work);

subject matter expertise; instructional materials and methods; and, assessment and grading.

At the University of Alberta, the recent Renaissance Committee Final Report emphasizes the need for "a comprehensive, clear and transparent [evaluation] system ...[which] has multiple sources of information collected through a variety of methods and assessed at multiple points in time" (p. 69). The U. of A. General Faculties Council policy states that, "Evaluation of teaching shall be multifaceted. Multifaceted evaluation shall include the Universal Student Ratings of Instruction set out in Section 111.3 and other methods of assessing teaching designed within the individual Faculties to respond to the particular conditions of that Faculty. Such assessments shall include one or more of the following: input from administrators, peers, self, undergraduate and graduate students, and alumni" (section 111.2). Peer review of teaching is one way in which to address multifaceted evaluation of teaching.

### **What is peer review of teaching?**

Peer review of teaching is informed collegial assessment of faculty teaching for either fostering improvement or making personnel decisions. There are two main types of peer review: formative and summative. Both formative and summative are recognized as integral to a comprehensive evaluation of teaching.

#### *Formative review*

Formative review of teaching has as its purpose the development and improvement of teaching practice. At the University of Alberta, this form of peer review can range from engagement in a number of activities offered by the Centre for Teaching and Learning including: **Teaching Squares** in which the focus is on gaining new insight into one's own teaching by observing others in their classrooms; **Mentoring Circles and Teaching Co-mentorships** where colleagues collaborate informally as either a group or one-to-one in mutually beneficial conversation about teaching and learning; and, **Peer Consultation** in which a trained peer consultant works with an instructor at his/her request to gather information from both classroom observation and student feedback regarding specific instructor questions or concerns.

### *Summative review*

“When teaching is viewed as professional knowledge there must be an accepted way to define characteristics of teaching excellence and to make judgments based on a stated set of criteria and standards that reflect the complexity of teaching” (Chism, 2007, p. 13). In that regard, summative review is informed collegial judgment about teaching intended for evaluative purposes. It is comparative in nature thereby enabling the evaluator to determine the quality of teaching performance with respect to performances of peers and to predetermined standards. Summative review of teaching is also multidimensional in that it includes multiple kinds of valid and reliable evidence (ratings, reflective statements, narrative appraisals, teaching artifacts such as syllabi, etc.) from multiple sources (administrators, students, peers and self).

“Performance appraisal is a complex and controversial human resource technique” (Blackmore, 2005, 219). Accordingly, summative review is a formal, systematic process that requires consistent standards and structures that are seen as fair and equitable across faculty. Having a clearly articulated plan for summative peer review of teaching is essential to the success of any program. Faculty need to be well informed about what will be expected of them throughout the process and to feel that the process is consistent, fair and equitable.

The following guidelines provide a step-by-step framework for initiating a summative peer review of teaching. This process will need to be adapted to address the unique teaching and learning contexts of the faculty, department and/or unit wishing to implement such a review process.

Six phases have been identified as being integral to the planning of any summative review:

1. establishing the purpose for peer review
2. determining what will be reviewed
3. choosing who will be reviewed

4. deciding on procedures for conducting a review
5. implementing the review process
6. revising, renewing and sustaining the review process

### **Phase 1: Establishing the purpose for summative peer review of teaching**

The first step in designing a review protocol is to decide what you wish to achieve by implementing a summative peer review of teaching process. This phase begins with the clear articulation of goals and desired outcomes for the program (See Appendices A & B). Here too decisions will need to be made about what information should be collected to address the desired outcomes, how that information is to be used, and by whom. In order to determine readiness for such an undertaking and to encourage faculty involvement, a survey aimed at identifying their knowledge about summative peer review of teaching and any questions and concerns about it they may have is recommended. This feedback can then be issued to guide the development of the faculty/department/unit protocol.

### **Phase 2: Determining what will be reviewed**

Once the goals and desired outcomes for the summative review of teaching program have been determined the next step is to decide what aspects of teaching are to be evaluated as part of the review. Initially the unit/department/faculty will need to identify what is considered to be effective teaching and valuable student learning (See Appendices C & D). These may vary for specific teaching contexts and academic disciplines. The elements of effective teaching and learning identified can then be defined in terms of standards or benchmarks to used in the actual evaluation. (In some cases these standards may already exist, i.e. those needing to be addressed for accreditation purposes). Here is where it is important that teaching is recognized as more than classroom performance. Other aspects of teaching to be considered as part of the review include course design, course materials used, contribution of the instructor to teaching in the faculty/department, and impact of the course/the instructor on student learning.

### **Phase 3: Choosing who will be reviewed**

Thirdly, decisions are made about who will be reviewed (probationary and/or tenured faculty, sessionals, clinicians, etc.) and whether participation in the review process will be considered mandatory or optional.

#### **Phase 4: Deciding on procedures for conducting the review**

Phase 4 addresses the logistics of the review process. Once the decision has been made about who is to participate, the next step is to determine when and how often over a career a faculty member should engage in summative peer review of teaching. A second important aspect of this phase is to decide what success criteria would provide evidence of the standards identified in Phase 2 (See Appendix E & F), and what performance expectations are to be applied to these criteria (i.e. meets expectations, exceeds expectations, below expectations, etc.). Following that, what evidence for checking the criteria against will need to be collected (i.e. observation(s), syllabi, course materials, assignments, the instructor's philosophy of teaching statement, materials that communicate course policy and practices, assignments and assessment of student performance, samples of instructor feedback on student work, reflective statements, etc.) and what kinds of discipline specific tools will be used to collect this evidence (templates, checklists, guiding questions, rating scales, etc). (See Appendices G – M)

Another aspect of this phase requires thinking about who the reviewers will be, who selects them and on what basis, how many will be needed, and how they will be trained. It is recommended that more than one reviewer is used for each case in order to allow for comparison of notes and the writing of one consolidated letter of recommendation. One of the two reviewers could be drawn from outside the faculty in which the review is taking place to alleviate concerns around power and authority. This external person would focus mainly on pedagogy, with the internal reviewer bringing content expertise. Training reviewers will be a very important element in the success of the program; this is where CTL can be of assistance. Being a reviewer can take a significant amount of time so it will also be important to think about how their time will be recognized (acknowledged at FEC).

Lastly, decisions need to be made about who will be responsible for interpreting the evidence (solely the reviewers, the faculty member, chair or director, combination of

these people), what format the reporting will take and to whom the report will be provided. Confidentiality is of primary concern here (See Appendices O and P for Sample Report forms).

### **Phase 5: Implementing the review process**

Once the first four phases are completed, the next critical step is to communicate the plan to the faculty. Faculty members will need to be clear on: the purpose of the review, the standards for teaching and learning to be applied, the areas to be assessed, the aspects of teaching to be reviewed, the review protocol, and the outcomes of review. To increase ownership in the review program, you may also wish to provide opportunities for some faculty control over aspects of the review such as allowing the person being reviewed to decide what class will be observed and what aspects of their teaching they would like the review to focus on, encouraging pre-review discussion for the instructor under review to have an opportunity to describe unique and specific teaching and disciplinary contexts, and post-discussion for them to address and expand on things noticed during the review (Donnelly, 2007; Harris, Farrell, Bell, Devlin, & James, 2008).

### **Phase 6: Revising, renewing and sustaining the review process**

Once established, regular review of the protocol is highly recommended as a final phase of any summative peer review of teaching plan. It will be important to decide what type of program review will provide the desired information about its successes and glitches, and how specifically the plan will be monitored and assessed. Encouraging feedback from the reviewers, those whose work is being reviewed and from faculty members at large will be important to improving and sustaining the process. Ultimately the greatest outcome from engaging in the process (as with formative review) would be to use the data collected to improve the quality of teaching in the faculty/department/unit.

The accompanying chart provides an overview of this protocol along with sample questions to guide each phase. The attached appendices include examples to accompany each phase as well.

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### **Websites consulted in the design of this summative peer review of teaching protocol**

Texas A & M University. Peer review of teaching guide. <http://learning.tamu.edu/resource/peer-review-teaching-guide#indexthree>

University of British Columbia. Peer review of teaching initiative. <http://ctl.ubc.ca/about-isotl/programs-events/ubc-peer-review-of-teaching-initiative/>

University of Waterloo. Peer review of teaching <https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/professional-development/reviewing-teaching/peer-review-teaching>

University of Wisconsin. How do I design a peer review program? <https://tle.wisc.edu/teaching-academy/how-do-i-design-peer-review-program>

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# Procedures for Developing a Summative Peer Review of Teaching Protocol

## Establishing the Purpose for Peer Review

What are the goals of the program?  
For what reasons is teaching being reviewed?  
What are the desired outcomes?  
What kinds of information are you looking for and what will you do with it?  
Who should get to see the information?  
How can the outcomes of the peer review be used?  
What are the impediments to implementation?

## Determining What Will Be Reviewed

What is considered to be effective teaching in your department/faculty?  
What ways of teaching are valued in your discipline?  
What kinds of student learning is valued?  
Are these values/expectations communicated clearly to the faculty?  
What areas of teaching should be assessed? (i.e. course design, classroom performance, course materials, contributions to teaching within the department/discipline)  
Are there already standards that exist for these areas that should be applied?

## Choosing Who Will Be Reviewed

Who may benefit from taking part in this program?  
Which faculty members will be involved?  
What will be the policy regarding participation?

## Deciding on the Procedures for Conducting Reviews

- a) When, how often and for what length of time will reviews take place?
  - Will teaching be reviewed once, or multiple times? Will it be reviewed during one course, or in various courses?
  - At what point(s) during the term/year will evidence be gathered? At what point(s) during a faculty member's career?
- b) What will be reviewed?
  - What aspects of teaching will be reviewed?
  - For the aspect of teaching being reviewed, what are the crucial elements?
  - What are the expectations for performance on these elements?
- c) What evidence will be collected?
- d) How will evidence be collected?
  - Who will the reviewers be?
  - What types of tools should be used to gather evidence in a consistent way?
  - What criteria will be used in the design of these tools?

## Implementing the Review Process

What input will faculty have into the peer review process?  
What control, if any, will the faculty member have over the process?  
How will the expectations for the review be communicated to the faculty?

## Revising, Renewing and Sustaining the Review Process

What type of follow-up will occur after the review process?  
What resources will be available for establishing and sustaining the program?  
How will the plan be documented and communicated?  
How will the plan be monitored and assessed?  
How often will it be reviewed and revised?  
What kind of support will be made available to faculty member whose teaching is in need of improvement to meet the unit's standards?