Evaluating Faculty Performance

A Practical Guide to Assessing Teaching, Research, and Service

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Peer Observations as a Catalyst for Faculty Development

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Nearly 15 years ago, when I received a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education grant to strengthen a peer visit program at the University of Maryland University College, I discovered that institutions with open classroom doors were a rarity. I was invited to do a few workshops—but only a few—including one at a major research institution where the provost cheerfully introduced me to a roomful of chairs and then exited, leaving me feeling like Daniel in the lion's den. I quietly put away my prepared presentation and gulped, "Let's talk about classroom observations. What do you currently do?" In fact, at that point I couldn't give away a workshop for chairs—or anyone—on classroom observations. The prevailing mood was much like the "Welcome to the Academy" cartoon by Signe Wilkerson with intense faculty members on individual islands in shark-infested waters. They hold aloft signs saying, "Bug Off," "Keep Out," and "No Trespassing." This personal observation was confirmed by an article written by a scholar from the UK who described the 1980s in the U.S. as a time when the peer review of teaching was "dormant" (D'Andrea, 2002).

The Current Climate for Peer Review of Teaching

Happily, that climate has changed, thanks in large part to groundbreaking work by Lee Shulman, Patricia Hutchings, Peter Seldin, and Nancy Chism. Much of the credit goes to the former American

Association for Higher Education (AAHE), which launched the two-year project "From Idea to Prototype: The Peer Review of Teaching" in January 1994. Since then, classroom observations have become much more business as usual, often for a wide range of purposes such as promotion and tenure requirements, department accountability, teaching awards, intrinsically motivated desires to excel, and collegiality. At present, classroom observations are often discussed within the context of the peer review of teaching, which includes broader components such as "teaching circles, mentoring, classroom visits, course portfolios, the pedagogical colloquium, and a few others, all of which are documented and reported on in *Making Teaching Community Property*, . . . published by AAHE in 1996" (Pat Hutchings, personal communication, June 14, 2005). The current Peer Review of Teaching Project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Hewlitt Foundation, is described by Hutchings as a "consortium of six research institutions [that] develop campus communities that explore and apply peer review for documenting, promoting, and valuing the intellectual work of teaching." Peer classroom observations have been increasingly linked, as well, to the scholarship of teaching and learning (D'Andrea, 2002). In fact, Hutchings concludes,

> Classroom observation might well be adapted to the purposes of the scholarship of teaching and learning. The key point, perhaps, is that the scholarship of teaching is not an evaluation of classroom practice (and of course sometimes classroom observation *does* serve this function) but an inquiry, an investigation, into some question that the teacher sees as important to practice in his or her classroom or field. When classroom observation serves inquiry, it can certainly be a tool for the scholarship of teaching and learning.

As Hutchings suggests, the literature on classroom observations often addresses the prickly issue of observations intended for summative evaluation (often linked to promotion and tenure) and formative evaluation (often linked to faculty development). Although the final use of the data collected may vary, the *process* of collecting the data—the classroom observation itself—should remain the same, a point made in 1989 (Millis) and earlier, if based only on the economics of supporting two different faculty assessment practices. Svinicki and Lewis (n.d.) similarly find the two purposes mutually supportive:

> Although the outcomes of formative and summative observation are different, effective formative peer observation serves as a vehicle for effective summative peer observation and evaluation at the departmental level. Most authors believe that the two processes are compatible and mutually supportive of faculty involvement in either formative or summative peer observation. (p. 5)

The Basics of Classroom Observations and Review of Course Materials

The basics of classroom observations have been spelled out repeatedly (Arreola, 2000; Brinko & Menges, 1997; Chism, 1999; Keig & Waggoner, 1994; Lewis & Lunde, 2001; Millis, 1992). Regardless of their purpose, it is critically important to follow a three-step process for observations: a *previsit consultation,* where the visitor and the faculty member discuss a range of topics, either face-to-face or via phone or email, and the visitor reviews the syllabus and other relevant class materials; the *visit itself;* and the critically important *follow-up visit,* where the two parties exchange ideas and observations.

For the *previsit consultation,* I like to start with the context of the class. What are the overall course objectives? What are the objectives for the particular class I will observe? How do you expect to achieve these objectives or goals? Where does this course fit in the curriculum? Who are the students? What have you asked them to do in preparation for this class? Is this class typical of your teaching or are you introducing new approaches, techniques, or methodologies? Are

there any problem areas, such as cliques or dominating students, that I should watch out for? What has preceded the lesson?

Then I move to the faculty member's expectations of me. What should I read or review prior to the visit? What two or three things do you want me to focus on for this observation? (I suggest topics such as pacing, clarity, and so on.) What do you hope to achieve from my visit(s)? (The answer to this question often depends on the purpose of the visit.) What final product do you expect me to provide? (For example, oral feedback, a formal report, or a written summary that can go into a teaching portfolio.)

I review the syllabus and any relevant course materials within the context of this pre-observation discussion and preparation. The syllabus, for instance, should spell out the overall course objectives and the context for the particular class. I also read it carefully to determine if objectives, assessment, and activities are aligned. If, for example, a stated objective in a given course is to challenge students to think critically and to solve problems using higher-level thinking skills, then I look carefully at the assignments and examinations. The examinations, in particular, should reflect the objectives: multiple-choice and true/false exams are not likely to encourage or reinforce higher-level thinking skills. Three useful sources for checklists and peer review forms for course materials appear in Braskamp and Ory (1994), Chism (1999), and Weimer, Parrett, and Kerns (2002).

We then discuss the logistics for the visit. Where will the visitor sit? (I recommend about three-quarters of the way from the front of the room next to as many students as possible, not at the back or on the periphery.) Should the visitor be introduced? (Absolutely.) What role will the visitor play during the visit? (It's up to the instructor. I have served as a peer editor along with composition teachers, been a fly on the wall, or contributed to in-class discussions. Some disconcerting roles can occur when the observer is expected to be the expert. I remember my adrenalin pumping when a composition teacher unexpectedly said, "That's a very arcane grammar point: Let's ask our distinguished visitor." More benignly, in an ESL classroom, I was asked to give a native speaker's pronunciation of key words.) How will the feedback be offered? (This decision is usually determined by the purpose of the visit. I often provide oral feedback before writing a more formal report, particularly if I am preparing a single summary report based on multiple visits.)

The *visit itself* should unfold as the two parties have discussed. The teacher introduces the visitor, who is sitting three-quarters of the way into the classroom and participating as the two agreed. But be open to unexpected opportunities. For example, when a University of Nevada–Reno professor decided to have his class simulate a battle between the Redcoats and the Colonials, I made a snap decision to join one of the lines, dropping to my knees to "reload" as the students in the row behind pretended to "fire." This worthwhile experience reinforced for me the power of active learning.

The *follow-up visit* (sometimes called a debriefing) should provide reflective insights into what the observer saw, what the teacher intended, and what the probable outcomes—particularly the impact on student learning—might be. To give the teacher ownership of the feedback, I try to start with probing questions. How do you think things went? What was the best thing about today's lesson? What would you change? What do you think students learned? When I offer feedback, I try to emphasize choices around what I have observed—"Your Venn diagram could not be seen at the back of the room. Could you consider a larger sketch, a handout for students, or a PowerPoint projection?" I describe things as concretely as possible—"The student responses I observed suggested positive rapport: They clustered around you before class, joking and asking questions; 85% participated during the discussion on vehicular suicide; 18 apples were carefully aligned on your desk." I also focus, using action verbs, on future changes. Overall, the goal of a feedback session should be twofold: to reinforce the teacher's good practices, providing reinforcement and confidence, and to offer the motivation and knowledge for positive changes to strengthen teaching.

Just as this post-conference discussion helps both parties to reflect on effective teaching practices, the observation process benefits both parties. The visitors, even experienced ones who might be considered mentors, can gam a great deal from observations and subsequent reflection, which can in turn influence teaching innovations, insights into campus life, and content knowledge.

Building Departmental Buy-In for Classroom Observations

Given the benefits both parties accrue, classroom observations can be a powerful force for department cohesion. If departments emphasize formative evaluation, voluntary faculty involvement in evaluation can positively affect department "morale and collegial climate" (Keig & Waggoner, 1994, p. 128). However, individual faculty members may remain opposed to observations unless there is a concerted department push to make them relevant, developmental, collegial, and fair. Massy, Wilger, and Colbeck (1994) list peer evaluation as one of several factors in departments that support effective teaching. McNinch (n.d) notes that "if colleagues, in assessing the teaching of their peers, can agree on the appropriateness of the data gathering observation process and instruments, they will have taken an important first step in assessing and improving teaching in higher education." Often a good starting point for discussion is the observation instrument itself. If there is agreement on the instrument, then the visits are more likely to occur according to mutually agreed-upon guidelines. Getting departmental buy-in for a well-designed observation instrument takes careful planning and cooperation. I recommend a focused narrative for the instrument, one that reflects well-thought-out teaching criteria but that allows the observer to take notes holistically. I typically jot down notes as a student would, providing a rich context, but in the margins of my legal tablet I make notes as an observer (e.g., "Students seem confused here. Many were frowning, whispering to neighbors, and thumbing through their textbooks").

Three Department Models for Designing or Redesigning an Observation Instrument

A Traditional Model

I met with the graduate program director of the University of Nevada-Reno's atmospheric sciences program to discuss how this interdisciplinary unit might initiate a classroom observation process. After conducting an interactive workshop that covered the nuts and bolts of professional classroom visits, the participants were convinced of the benefits of peer classroom observations and formed a subcommittee to review a thick packet of observation instruments I had given them. They next prepared a "straw man" instrument they felt would fit faculty needs and sent it for review to other faculty members, who provided constructive feedback. This process allows all faculty to be involved in the final product but with a minimum of individual effort. This type of committee-based involvement in the development of an evaluative instrument is fairly common in academic departments.

A Participatory Model

Jim Greenberg, from the Center for Faculty Excellence at the University of Maryland, created a participatory activity that I have often encouraged faculty to adopt for departmental development of instruments. It begins with a broad focus. A chair or other facilitator asks faculty members, working individually, to fill in a table with the heading "My Evaluation of Teaching" and two columns: "What I Would Evaluate" and "How I Would Do It." After faculty have worked for five minutes or more, the facilitator asks them to draw a line and start a new table labeled "A Supervisor Evaluating Me," with two similar columns: "What I Would Want Evaluated" and "How I Would Want the Supervisor to Assess It." Participants conduct paired discussions, noting similarities and differences in their responses. Then the debriefing begins. Using a flipchart or overhead transparency the facilitator presents a series of responses divided into two columns: "What Should Be Evaluated" on the left and "How It Can Be Evaluated" on the right. In the right column all references to classroom observations are highlighted (see Figure 6.1 for sample entries).

Figure 6.1 Sample Evaluation Responses

What Should Be Evaluated	How It Can Be Evaluated
Rapport with students	Student interviews
	Classroom observations
	Student evaluations
Subject matter knowledge	Review of course materials
	Review of publications
	Classroom observations
	Informal discussions

This activity serves several purposes. For one, classroom observations are often cited as a valid way of measuring faculty performance, a fact that reinforces the need for departmental use of them. But it is important to note that the right column also captures the departmental view of what should be measured. This list helps to identify the criteria for good teaching. In fact, these entries could be categories on the department's observation instrument.

I always conclude this activity by presenting a summary of Feldman's (1988) groundbreaking article, "Effective College Teaching from the Students' and Faculty's View: Matched or Mis-Matched Priorities?" We compare the nine criteria for good teaching from

Feldman's research—knowledge of the subject/discipline, course preparation and organization, clarity and understandability, enthusiasm for subject/teaching, sensitivity to and concern with students' level and learning progress, availability and helpfulness, quality of examinations, impartiality in evaluating students, overall fairness to students—with the criteria generated by the faculty members. This comparison leads to further discussion of an observation instrument that reflects well-thought-out components of good teaching.

An Innovative Model

A colleague and I developed a series of structured activities that allowed supervisors observing student teachers to redesign the classroom observation instrument. The same model would be highly effective for a disciplinary department either designing or redesigning an instrument. The activity is modeled on a cooperative learning team rotation activity called Send-a-Problem (Millis & Cottell, 1998). Teams of faculty worked on one specific teaching component (Team One initially worked on Component One, Team Two on Component Two, etc). After approximately 40 minutes, each team rotated to another component (one number higher), where they worked without knowing what the previous team had contributed. During a third rotation, each team worked on a third component. During the fourth and final rotation, each team reviewed the input from the three other teams and prepared a synthesis that combined the best ideas and clearest phrasing from all of the groups.

This process began when the participants arrived for a half-day retreat. As they signed in, they drew a playing card that randomly determined their assignment to a four-person team. The current observation instrument focused on five broad components of good teaching (called domains): knowing your students, planning for instruction, delivery and management of instruction, assessment, and professionalism. We arranged five easels, one for each domain, around the meeting area (a large private home), with four large posters containing instructions attached to each easel.

The first three posters, in blue, were identical. They specified two tasks: "Task A: Brainstorm five to eight phrases that best describe this domain and write them below. The phrases must be observable and measurable"; "Task B: List three to five key questions for this domain. These questions should capture what you think needs to be addressed in the observer's comments." A third task, the equivalent of a "sponge" or "extension" activity in cooperative learning, was optional. It challenged participants to prepare a feedback session with these instructions: "You are planning a feedback session based on your observation of this domain. List the concrete suggestions you would make to generate productive change and desired outcomes."

To be certain that no ideas would be lost, we also instructed the participants to write down any phrases, questions, or suggestions that fit another domain. These were left at a designated spot for later use during the synthesis.

The fourth and final poster we attached to each easel was in yellow and contained instructions for designing a synthesis based on input from all four teams working on the given domain. It is important to note that easels and large posters are not essential. Most academics might be more comfortable with the traditional Send-a-Problem format of preprinted worksheets that each team places in a file folder after completion (see Appendix 6.1).

Each four-member group met at the designated easel. The discussions within each group included issues directly related to the given task such as the need to clarify or eliminate ambiguous terms in the current instrument; the desirability of combining overlapping categories; the need to align all assessment measures; the challenge of writing criteria that are both observable and measurable; the need for concise phrasing through active verbs and precise, not wordy, language. From a faculty development standpoint, however, these discussions generated a collegial sharing of best practices in both teaching and in serving as an observer.

Classroom observations, regardless of how they are eventually used, can play a crucial role in faculty development. The most obvious person to benefit is the individual observed, but the observer, too, often learns from the experiences. To provide the greatest impact, an entire department should be invested in the observation process, including development of the instrument and the guidelines for review. Svinicki and Lewis (n.d.) offer 13 concrete suggestions for departments wanting to include peer observation as a part of peer evaluation, including training the visitors and developing and redesigning observation forms. The payoffs can be enormous. As Weimer (1990) notes, "[Observations] need to be an ongoing part of teaching. They keep instructors fresh, encourage and develop accurate self-assessment, and make obvious the complexities of the teaching-learning phenomenon" (p. 122).

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Appendix 6.1
Sample Worksheet

If you come up with phrases, questions, or suggestions that fit another of the five teaching components, write them on the index cards at this station and then put them in the folder for that specific component.

Teaching Component One

Task A: Brainstorm five to eight phrases that best describe this teaching component and write them below. The phrases must be observable and measurable.

L. ____________________ 5. ____________________
2. ____________________ 6. ____________________
3. ____________________ 7. ____________________
4. ____________________ 8. ____________________

Task B: List three to five key questions for this component. These questions should capture what you think needs to be addressed in the observer's comments.

L. ____________________ 4. ____________________
2. ____________________ 5. ____________________
3. ____________________

Task C: Optional: You are planning a feedback session based on your observation of this teaching component. List the concrete suggestions you would make to generate productive change and desired outcomes.