

Evaluation of Teaching and the Role of Peer Observation

Because teaching is a multi-dimensional activity, assessing what we do as teachers requires a multi-faceted approach. No single instrument can capture all aspects of any individual style or method of teaching. Student surveys, for example, can measure whether student perceptions of what we are doing are aligned with what we ourselves think we are doing, but assessing our teaching requires more than “consumer impressions.” *Peer observation is just one part of a comprehensive evaluation program and should be used alongside and in conjunction with other methods of evaluation.*

What is peer observation?

As a basic definition, peer observation is the process by which university instructors provide feedback to colleagues on their teaching efforts and practices.

More nuanced definitions of peer observation distinguish observations for *formative* purposes from those for *summative* purposes. When peer observations are made for *formative* purposes, feedback is given with the goal of helping an instructor improve or alter his/her teaching. When peer observations are made for *summative* purposes, a judgment about a person’s teaching is made for purposes of evaluation (see handout on Formative and Summative Evaluation for further analysis of the distinction).

Definitions of peer observation also distinguish *holistic observations* of teaching from *observations of in-class instruction*. *Peer observation that is holistic* might include review of in-class interactions with students and instructor presentations as well as review of course design (e.g., the syllabus), instructional handouts, assignments, exams, and course content (e.g., rigor and appropriateness of material covered). *Observations of in-class instruction*, in contrast, are focused solely on the class-session and the tools the instructor uses during that session to teach the students.

Why peer observation?

There are several benefits that accompany peer observation. First, reviews from peers provide a source of evidence regarding teaching effectiveness for committees such as Rank and Tenure to use so that student ratings are not the only or primary source of information.

Furthermore, though students are well-equipped to assess their own experience in a course, colleagues are better suited for evaluating each other on matters of content and professionalism. Some key areas in which faculty are considered to be expert reviewers include:

- Course organization
- Clarity and appropriateness of course objectives
- Classroom management and engagement of students
- Selection of course content
- Effectiveness of instructional materials (e.g., readings, media)
- Appropriateness of methods used to teach specific types of content
- Commitment to teaching and concern for student learning
- Support of departmental instructional culture

Additionally, peer observation opens up dialogue about teaching. Too often, teaching is viewed as a private act and, as such, discussions about teaching and the transition of expertise from one to another do not occur. Through peer observation, the classroom becomes more of a public space, and as a consequence, all involved (i.e., both the observer and the person being observed) learn something about their teaching.

What are the risks in using peer observation?

One downside of peer observation is that it may be difficult for even a well-intentioned observer to filter out his/her own bias against a given teaching method or personality while conducting an observation. For example, someone who values strict classroom control and considers the instructor's presentation to be the key learning object of the classroom may not keep an open mind when observing moments of seeming chaos in a collaborative learning classroom, and vice versa. *For this reason, instructors who use peer observations for feedback will need to consider the observer's assumptions about teaching and plan for multiple visits by multiple peers.*

Another risk is that if colleagues within the same department observe one another and the process is not well-managed, relationships may suffer. For many faculty members, their teaching is a sensitive, almost private topic. And because it is performed by colleagues, peer observation requires a particularly delicate touch. Being informed about best practices for peer observation is one way to reduce the risk of potential damage.

Finally, with regard to peer observation for summative purposes, one observation of a classroom session can never capture the entirety of a person's teaching effectiveness. Just as peer observation needs to be utilized in combination with other tools, individual peer observations should be combined with one another as a way to get a richer sense of a faculty member's teaching across time, across classes etc.