

Using Peer Observation

Peer observation of teaching, in which one faculty colleague observes and comments on a classroom session of another faculty colleague, often serves two purposes. First, peer observation can be used in a *formative* manner, where the information gathered from such a review is meant to help a teacher improve his or her teaching skills. Second, peer observation can be used in a *summative* manner, where the information gathered is applied to personnel decisions (e.g., promotion, tenure, merit).

Formative assessment and peer observation

Peer observation can be used effectively for the purpose of formative assessment. In some cases, an instructor wants to receive personalized feedback on how a course is going, how students are responding to an activity, or simply whether or not students appear to be learning, and peer observation can provide this feedback. *In order for peer observation for formative purposes to be effective, it must respond to the concerns and self-perceived needs of the instructor who requests it. It must also be carried out by someone who is trusted and holds the respect of the person whose teaching is being assessed.*

Summative assessment and peer observation

Peer observation can provide valuable information regarding teaching delivery in one class session despite the fact that a single classroom observation can never provide a comprehensive picture of teaching. For several reasons, best practices suggest that it is hard (if not impossible) to utilize peer observation in a summative way (Arreola, 2007). A single peer observation, by definition, lacks reliability, and observations across a variety of reviewers and courses suffer a similar lack of reliability. Additionally, one classroom session can never capture the entirety of a person's teaching. Furthermore, the presence of an observer in the classroom changes the dynamic of a classroom and therefore may not be a true reflection of a person's teaching. Finally, peer observers may be biased based on what they do in their own classrooms.

In order to strengthen the validity of peer observation as a summative tool, a couple general points must be heeded. First, in order to reduce bias, both participants in the review process (the one doing the review and the one being reviewed) must agree ahead of time on the tool that will be used to make the evaluation. Second, all parties using the review (including the evaluator him or herself, Chairs, Rank and Tenure committees) must see it as an observation of a single class session and must limit generalizations to an instructor's "teaching" more broadly.

What factors are necessary for a fair and effective peer observation process?

The single most important factor in successful peer observation of teaching is the careful preparation (via orientation and training) of the faculty evaluators. This may seem counter-intuitive, since the faculty can cite their great amounts of teaching experience as sufficient training, but it is difficult to over-estimate the risk of launching a program without making sure everyone practices certain procedures and techniques and understands why they are essential. Included next in the toolkit is a suggested process to be followed in conducting peer observations.

Just one tool in the toolbox...

Ultimately, the best summative evaluation of a person's teaching comes from an examination of multiple sources of information across time. Because teaching is a multi-dimensional job, 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. Peer observation is just one part of a comprehensive evaluation program and should be used alongside and in conjunction with other methods of assessment from the toolkit.