Learning to Learn: The Role of Peer Observation in Evaluating Teaching

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This story is part an occasional series highlighting UA initiatives and efforts aimed at optimizing teaching and learning.

How should UA instructors’ teaching be evaluated, for the purpose of promotion and/or tenure?

While it’s convenient to rely on student ratings of instructors from teacher course evaluations, these ratings only tell a portion of the overall story.

In recognition of the need to have a broader range of information, UA promotion and tenure guidelines ? which apply to both tenure- and career-track instructors ? require a peer review of the candidate’s teaching and a teaching portfolio in addition to a summary of course evaluation ratings. While the ratings provide feedback from students, and the portfolio gives the candidate an opportunity for self-reflection, the peer review is where an instructor receives feedback from a colleague.

To facilitate peer evaluation of teaching, the Office of Instruction and Assessment [1] developed the Peer Review of Teaching Protocol [2], which provides tools and resources for the three stages of evaluation: a pre-observation meeting to discuss the target class and goals for the review; a classroom observation or review of the course site; and a post-observation meeting to discuss the observer’s feedback.

The protocol is designed to guide UA instructors in the process of formative review of peers’ teaching, as well as evaluation of teaching for summative review. Formative review is used to provide feedback for professional growth and development; it is usually confidential and nonjudgmental and its goal is self-motivated change. Evaluation of teaching (e.g., for annual reviews and promotion and tenure) is a more formal process; guidelines [3] for using this protocol in that process are available on the protocol website.

The protocol includes:

- Guidelines for the reviewee
- Guidelines for the reviewer
- A classroom observation template (used by the reviewer to record notes during an observation)
- A classroom observation tool suite
  - A list of 82 items to evaluate, categorized into eight areas: lesson organization; content knowledge and relevance; presentation; instructor-student interactions; collaborative learning activities; lesson implementation; instructional materials; and student responses.
  - Since the tool suite was made available in 2015, nearly 60 units have used it.
OIA also has built templates that can be used to customize the list of items being evaluated, as well as video tutorials to assist with the creation and use of templates.

For peer review of online courses, there are additional reviewer and reviewee guidelines as well as an online course review tool with 22 items in four categories: course design; course implementation; interactions; and assessment.

"The program is clear and easy to use," said Gail Burd, senior vice provost for academic affairs and Distinguished Professor of Molecular and Cellular Biology.

The effort also has been commended by leaders in higher education. In 2015, it received the Academic Leaders Tool of the Year award, which is given annually by the Western Academic Leadership Forum, a unit of academic administrators that are part of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education.

Faculty say the protocol has brought more value to the process of peer evaluation.

Less than 10 years ago, the primary evaluation of teaching in the School of Architecture was through teacher course evaluations, said Christopher Domin, associate professor.

Today, teaching evaluation has three parts: course evaluations, teaching portfolios (containing syllabi, project descriptions, handouts and outcomes of student work) and peer evaluation.

"We wanted a more robust understanding of teaching effectiveness," Domin said. "We, as a faculty, recognized that it was really important to have a peer come in and give feedback and suggestions. We thought this was a great 'third leg of the stool.'"

The peer review process and protocol provide "structure and a sequence of events that can give form to peer observations," Domin said, noting that the post-observation meeting is particularly valuable.

"It's a good place to talk about the course, strategize about teaching skills, and see how your course fits into the entire curriculum," Domin said. "There's a conversation about how to make teaching better and how to make evaluation better; that's really helpful. Since faculty are so busy, sitting down to talk about curriculum is a fringe benefit."

The ability to customize the items being evaluated enables the faculty member who is being reviewed to choose those items "that make the most sense for him/her in terms of their styles, the course and the department," said Sue Brown, head of the Department of Management Information Systems.

Being able to create templates for individual tenure-track faculty provides a means to show improvement over consecutive evaluations, she added.

"What I have found is that most people have some things they want to focus on ? and it's nice to use the same template for pre-tenured folks because then we can see how things evolve over time."

For more information about the peer review process and the protocol created by OIA, visit http://teachingprotocol.oia.arizona.edu.