

Some thoughts on educational peer evaluation

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Today, schools, colleges, and universities are looking for innovative ways to improve the educational quality of their institutions. Stakeholders within the academic community all have interest in how good teaching is; in what it produces, and in how it is judged and enhanced.

Students are a valuable data source for evaluation of faculty teaching, and the use of this source, usually with questionnaires, is widespread. Another source of equal value, but unfortunately of less use, is Faculty Peer Evaluation. Teaching entails learning from experience as well as expertise, and is a process that is difficult to pursue alone. Therefore collaboration among faculty may be most promising to educational improvement (Linse, 2006).

Rationale for Peer Evaluation

Literature includes many synonyms for peer evaluation, including peer assessment, review, observation and consultation. Specific definitions are cited by different sources.

- A peer is a small group of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and an approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable (Kaufman *et al.*, 2000).
- Peer review of teaching refers to the participation of colleagues in the

- development and/or evaluation of teaching activities (Boyd, 1989).
- Linking teaching evaluation to professional development, Peer Evaluation can be used to “provide constructive criticism and suggestions to improve weak areas and to amplify strength and enlist experienced teachers to help improve the performance of less experienced teachers” (Chism, 2007).

Methods of Peer Evaluation

The structure of peer evaluation is very important. For any procedure to be valid, reliable and fair, data gathering methods, sources and time should be multiple and widely distributed.

Methods used may include (Boyd, 1989):

- Review of course content
- Observation of teaching
- Reciprocal visits
- Research on a course in a progress
- Review of peer outcomes
- Review of peer course evaluations
- Interviewing peers
- Review of teaching and course portfolios
- Others: reviewing videotapes, discussion /interviews about teaching, documented reviews, review of educational innovations, other course-related materials and colleague references.

Observation is the most frequent method used. The peer-observer may be only passively present, or may be actively engaged in the class while still serving the observation process. Selecting a peer observer can be difficult. Different methods are administrative *ex officio*, *ad hoc* designation by the administration or dean, election by faculty, selection by candidate/observee, or incidental, as in co teaching and joint rounding.

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Peers can judge faculty behaviour in several areas (Batista, 1976):

- Up-to-date knowledge of subject matter
- Knowledge of what must be taught
- Knowledge and application of the most appropriate/adequate methodology for specific content
- Knowledge and application of evaluation techniques for the objectives of the course(s).
- Professional behaviour according to current ethical standards
- Institutional and community service
- Quality of research
- Quality of publications and papers
- Personal and professional attributes
- Attitude towards and commitment to colleagues, students, and the institution

Uses of Peer Evaluation

Many evaluation scholars/progenitors have advanced the field. Michael Scriven (1973) introduced the two basic purposes of evaluation: formative and summative (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2004). They emphasize that instructors who wish to analyze their own teaching and peers' learning can benefit from a colleague's observation. These can be flexible and informal particularly for formative purposes. In contrast, observations for personnel decision-making need to be more formalized and standardized to ensure fairness, reliability and credibility. Several trained colleagues making independent visits provide more credible summative assessment information than does a single colleague making a single visit (Braskamp & Ory, 1994).

Several instruments for Peer Evaluation have been described. On comparison, each has a different background and theoretical basis, different purpose, either formative or for continuous professional development or feedback. The drawbacks of such instruments are in the differences of validity, reliability and feasibility. Lack of clarity of purpose and the theoretical framework can also affect these instruments. Other challenges in general are applying Peer Evaluation in contexts involving personal values, discrepancies between faculty and evaluation due to personal bias. Gaining trust, the cornerstone of peer evaluation, is another challenge.

Formative uses of Peer Evaluation

How does faculty members attending and observing peers in their work place improve teaching? The department as a part of the faculty may specify this process, or may be entered into by individual faculty members who independently want their teaching reviewed by peers (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2004).

Formative peer evaluation with feedback helps to give faculty responsibility to monitor themselves, the power to be in charge of their work and to practice self-regulation. It helps continuation of quality improvement by engaging newcomers in discussions on teaching. They may become aware of their weaknesses and work on fixing them and can identify their strengths and build on them, thus improving practice. It may also help educators learn new ways of practice and teaching by modelling or exemplifying new strategies.

Formative peer observation is most important for junior faculty as a part of the teaching improvement before tenure and promotion review. This can help junior faculty prepare early for teaching demands of their career. Longitudinal studies of junior faculty stress that early teaching demands often become overwhelming and can prevent the expected devotion to quality research and service. Or, more often, teaching responsibilities are neglected as scholarship wins out. Early intervention provides junior faculty with tools for success in teaching as well as, consequently, increased freedom to focus on research and service. Why else should formative peer evaluation of teaching be encouraged? It can improve teaching quality and link with faculty development programmes. It can also develop institutional focus on teaching and help to build a true sense of community. Another purpose is identifying and modelling innovative contributions. Finally, formative evaluation sets the basis for summative evaluation.

Summative uses of Peer Evaluation

Summative evaluation impacts directly on faculty prospects and involves, to some extent, the evaluation of work-place behaviour. It provides information useful for merit raises, promotion, and/or tenure decisions. It not only helps in personnel decision-making, but also in public recognition of faculty contributions, and promotes constructive competition within the academic culture, one based on merit – a teaching meritocracy of sorts.

The development and use of an effective formative peer evaluation process can systematically lead to fair, objective or at least balanced and transparent summative evaluation. Certainly, the observation instruments developed for formative peer observation can often be used for summative review (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2004). For example, observer skills developed in formative peer observations may well be directly applicable to summative processes. Although the purposes of formative and summative observation is different, effective formative peer observation serves as a vehicle and harbinger for effective summative peer observation; the two processes are compatible and should be mutually supportive if properly implemented.

Peer Evaluation has clear benefits as it emphasizes on teaching skills, encourages involvement, fosters excellence, provides and encourages feedback. However, there are some disadvantages as the evaluator may not take it seriously, allowing friendship, and entertainment value to form bias. This will increase the degree of risk with respect to reliability. Other drawbacks relate to reluctance in peers.

Creating guidelines on how to conduct effective Faculty Peer Evaluation (FPE) is imperative. We suggest creation of FPE core committees in medical organizations and medical schools, that could organize a need assessment study and determine the perceptions of higher management, leaders, Peer Evaluation committee members and faculty toward the process. The themes and instrument, which will be used in the process must then be chosen and decided upon.

In summary, peer evaluation is methodologically, ethically, culturally and politically challenging. As with any evaluation, there are different schools of thought, yet there is relatively limited literature on this important topic. The concept itself is not limited to education but can be generalized to other work places. Nevertheless, given the importance of education to generational development, the opportunity for educated peer evaluation in academic venues would address and exemplify the principles of quality improvement and utilization in daily practice.

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