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# Peer Observation of Teaching: A Practical Tool in Higher Education

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# Peer Observation of Teaching: A Practical Tool in Higher Education

## Abstract

There are limited viewpoints in the literature about peer observation of teaching in higher education and how it can be an effective tool to improve the quality of instruction in the classroom (Bell, 2001; Bell, 2005; Bell & Mladenovic, 2005; Brancato, 2003; Chism, 2007; Huston & Weaver, 2008; Shortland, 2004; Shortland, 2010; Smith, Jones, Gilbert, & Wieman, 2013). This article examines literature associated with peer observation of teaching in higher education and offers practical support and guidance from first-person accounts in a larger-sized STEM academic unit (N = 45 teaching faculty) at a public land-grant high intensive research institution enrolling over 36,000 students. Faculty teaching practices play a critical role in student learning and there is always room for continuous improvement and development.

## Disciplines

Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Food Science | Higher Education | Human and Clinical Nutrition

## Comments

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# Peer Observation of Teaching: A Practical Tool in Higher Education

By Jeffrey A. Fletcher

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*There are limited viewpoints in the literature about peer observation of teaching in higher education and how it can be an effective tool to improve the quality of instruction in the classroom (Bell, 2001; Bell, 2005; Bell & Mladenovic, 2005; Brancato, 2003; Chism, 2007; Huston & Weaver, 2008; Shortland, 2004; Shortland, 2010; Smith, Jones, Gilbert, & Wieman, 2013). This article examines literature associated with peer observation of teaching in higher education and offers practical support and guidance from first-person accounts in a larger-sized STEM academic unit (N = 45 teaching faculty) at a public land-grant high intensive research institution enrolling over 36,000 students. Faculty teaching practices play a critical role in student learning and there is always room for continuous improvement and development.*

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WHAT HIGHER EDUCATION FACULTY know about teaching is generally from informal approaches such as experience as students, experience with students, trial and error, teaching assistantships, and interactions with fellow instructors (Dunkin, 1995; McKeachie, 1997). Not too surprising, discussions between colleagues center on content rather than knowledge about pedagogy and structural procedures; generally, good teaching is only connected to good content. The Gow and Kember (1993) survey study of higher education teachers identified knowledge transmission as a primary orientation to teaching (Boice, 1991; Gow & Kember, 1993; Martin & Double, 1998). Gibbs (1995) found that "...lecturers are usually happier to accept that there are problems with courses rather than problems with themselves and are happier to work at the level of changing strategy and method rather than changing themselves" (p. 15). Focusing on changing course content versus changing and/or improving one's own pedagogy is a mindset prevalent in higher education, and as a result, creates widespread resistance and conflict towards peer observation of teaching program initiatives.

Peer observation of teaching in higher education is a topic faculty and departments generally avoid but has numerous documented benefits (Chism, 2007; Sachs & Parsell, 2014). Academics are familiar with the idea of peer review within the context of research and quality assurance, but tra-

ditionally, teaching has not been peer reviewed to the same extent (Gosling, 2005). As Yiend, Weller, & Kinchin (2014) argued, "Despite its widespread use...there are still reservations about the extent to which participation in formative teaching observation can contribute to the development of lecturers' critical reflection and the enhancement of practice" (p. 465). For example, Martin and Double (1998) found, "... some participants went along with peer observation as a sort of obligation, rather than from enthusiasm for the prospect of re-examining their teaching...that the initiative places extra demands on an already heavy and increasing workload" (p. 167).

Nevertheless, teaching observation is widely promoted as a mechanism for developing teaching practice in higher education. As Yiend et al. (2013) discussed, "...formative peer observation is considered by many to be a powerful tool for providing feedback to individual teachers, disseminating disciplinary good practice and fostering a local evaluative enhancement culture" (p. 465). Moreover, Bell and Mladenovic (2008) found in their review of literature that, "...if conducted under supportive conditions, there are numerous benefits of peer observation of teaching" (p. 735). Observation of practice is widespread and normal for professional development in many fields, e.g., health professions, K-12 teachers, and social services (Jones, 1993; Martin, 1996; Martin & Double, 1998).

This research explores the literature related to peer observation of teaching in higher education—definitions, advantages and disadvantages, with a discussion about how departments and programs interested in the process can develop and implement their own program. However, for most institutions, it is not a matter of choice but instead whether or not the institutions require academic units to do it. Using a pragmatic philosophical and interpretative framework of firsthand experiences from a peer observation of teaching initiative at a larger-sized departmental unit in STEM (about forty teaching faculty) at a public R1: Doctoral University – High research activity institution that enrolls about 36,000 students, practical support and tips are also provided. Moreover, this article targets faculty and program leaders looking to improve their own pedagogy, curriculum, and faculty development and can be used as a quick reference guide to begin a conversation concerning this important aspect of professional development. Teaching is one of the many important functions faculty undertake and is one area that continually has room for improvement and development.

## Literature Review

### **Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education**

Peer review (e.g., observation) of teaching is a professional responsibility that is vital to teaching quality. Huston and Weaver (2008) asserted, “The value of peer coaching as a form of continuing professional development for experienced faculty is largely unrecognized” (p. 5). Chism (2007) argued, “With focused attention, good systems can be introduced and flourish. Over the long term, the investment can reap substantial rewards for the health of academic units” (p. 7). It is a collegial process whereby two faculty members voluntarily work together to improve or expand their capabilities and approaches to teaching, and in fact, many articles document the general benefits of peer coaching (also referred to as peer mentoring, observation, etc.) improved morale, motivation, and increased collaborations among faculty members (Brancato, 2003; Huston & Weaver, 2008; Menges, 1987; Skinner & Welch, 1996).

Peer observation of teaching in education can take different forms. Three different models of

observation are generally recognized, *evaluation*, *developmental*, and *collaborative* (Gosling, 2005; Yiend et al, 2014). These models vary depending on who performs the teaching observation and the observation purpose. “The forms of peer review deployed in higher education may be differentiated by contrasting assumptions about the purpose or function of peer review and the implications the function has for authority and power relationships between academics” (Sachs, 2014, p. 13). Nevertheless, the goals of any peer observation of teaching model and experience are multi-fold. As Martin and Double (2005) highlight, the goals of peer observation of teaching models are to:

- (1) Extend and enhance an understanding of personal approaches for curriculum delivery;
- (2) Develop and refine curriculum-planning skills in collaboration with a colleague;
- (3) Enhance teaching technique/styles of presentation through collaborative practice;
- (4) Engage and refine interpersonal skills through the exchange of insights relating to the review of specific teaching performance;
- (5) Identify areas of subject understanding/teaching activity in need of further development; and
- (6) Develop personal skills of evaluation and self-appraisal.

The *evaluation* model serves primarily managerial purposes, generally judgmental, and involves managerial or academic staff monitoring teaching quality to ensure compliance with standards and promote best practices (Yiend et al., 2014). Two other models are less judgmental and formative in character. The *developmental* model involves an educational expert acting as an observer, and a *collaborative* model, which involves an academic colleague, observing each other in a reciprocal arrangement (Yiend et al., 2014).

For academic units coveting a scientific approach to the peer observation process, Smith, Jones, Gilbert, & Wieman (2013) developed a sophisticated protocol called COPUS (Classroom Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM); a process that incorporates data coding, and significant training.

### **Disadvantages: Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education**

After reviewing literature, there are disadvantages surrounding peer observation of teaching in higher education. For example, Kohut, Burnap, &

Yon (2007) conducted a survey on lecturers' experiences from participation in peer observation, and it revealed that while they felt comfortable giving constructive feedback, this was not the case in making critical comments. In other words, though critical reflection is integral in the observation of teaching process, and for enhancing individual and collegial reflection on practice, just participating in peer observation of teaching may not be sufficient. Hatzipanagos and Lygo-Baker (2006) also found that despite the potential benefits of peer observation of teaching, doubt remains about the extent to which participation in formative teaching observation could contribute to the development of critical reflection and legitimate enhancement of pedagogy.

Gosling (2009) also claims that without further training, many faculty are ill equipped to evaluate and provide feedback on the effectiveness of others' teaching. Gosling's argument presents the trivial cost/benefit aspects to peer teaching observation of teaching programs. While there is increasing confidence that peer observation approaches are effective for the development of teachers, there are concerns about instructors' capacity to evaluate the teaching of others and to comment critically and provide constructive feedback on the teaching practice of their colleagues (Cosh, 1998).

### **Advantages: Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education**

There are advantages and benefits for higher peer observation of teaching programs, "...formative peer observation is considered by many to be a powerful tool for providing feedback to individual teachers, disseminating disciplinary good practice and fostering a local evaluative enhancement culture" (Yiend et al., 2014, p. 465). In fact, peer observation of teaching is increasingly promoted as a developmental tool for stimulating critical reflection on teaching practice (Bell, 2001; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). Further, many educational developers and institutions promote teaching observation as a means for faculty to develop their skills in their own and colleagues' pedagogy.

More, Shortland (2010) found that "Despite the potentially evaluative and threatening nature of feedback, an unanticipated issue emerges – professional relationships can be strengthened, leading to the development of enhanced mutual trust and

respect" (p. 295). Observers generally agree to downplay an evaluative role, as evaluation can be both threatening and disempowering (MacKinnon, 2001). University cultures are becoming more and more supportive of teaching and learning initiatives (e.g. outcomes assessment and curriculum considerations) (Roberts, Anderson, Betts, & Oakley, 2002) and supported through written guidelines, explanation and training (Brown, 1993). Additionally, the value of peer observation within instructor development is generally inherent within instructor training programs, in theory, acting as a transformatory tool (O'Connell, Anderson, & Coe, 2000; Peel, 2005).

### **Peer Observation of Teaching Models**

**Evaluation model of peer observation.** This evaluation model serves a primarily managerial purpose and involves senior managerial or academic staff monitoring teaching quality to ensure compliance with minimum standards and promote best practice (Yiend et al., 2014). It is judgmental in nature and might be linked to the observed person's yearly appraisal. For example, its primary purpose is to identify under-performance, confirm probation (tenure), promotion, quality assurance, and assessment with outcomes that report judgments (Gosling, 2005). Moreover, the relationship between the observer and observed is based on authority, seniority, and/or expertise (Gosling, 2005). The institution and/or department benefit from this model, effective management leads to conditions of success. However, this model has its risks - alienation, lack of cooperation, opposition, and/or resistance from faculty (Gosling, 2005).

**Developmental model of peer observation.** The developmental model involves an educational expert acting as observer and aims to encourage reflection on what constitutes *good* teaching practice within the specific disciplinary context (Yiend et al., 2014). Its approach to teaching observation focuses on the process as well as the mechanics of teaching, although arguably the developmental model has greater potential to incorporate educational theory, drawing on the skills and knowledge of the expert observer (Yiend et al., 2014). Like its comparable collaborative model, it is explicitly less judgmental and formative in orientation. In a developmental model, the reviewee benefits. Respected 'developers or senior staff' are conditions for success. This

model too has its risk; e.g., no shared ownership and the potential for lack of impact (Gosling, 2005).

### **Collaborative Model of Peer Observation.**

Similar to the developmental model, it is also less judgmental and formative in framework. Its purpose is to improve teaching through dialogue, self and mutual reflection, and stimulate improvement (Gosling, 2005). The collaborative model is more collegial versus the development model, and not hierarchical, like the evaluation model. As Yiend et al. (2014) argued, “Both the developmental and the peer review models are seen as collegial and aim to encourage reflection on what constitutes ‘good’ teaching practice within the specific disciplinary context” (p. 467). The collaborative model of peer observation is common at the departmental level.

As Yiend et al. (2014) also point out, “Peer observation between...departmental academic colleagues with shared disciplinary content knowledge and understanding of the teaching of the subject can be mutually beneficial for both observer and observe, and can contribute to establishing a departmental culture conducive to the enhancement and valuing of teaching” (p. 467). In using this

model, mutual benefits are produced for observer and the observed (i.e., it is a two-way interaction), and to experience conditions of success, it requires a culture in which teaching is valued and openly discussed. Table 1 is adapted from Gosling (2005) and highlights the characteristics for the evaluation, developmental, and collaborative models.

## **Methodology, Theoretical Framework, and Development**

The reflections, guidance, tips, and practical considerations presented in this article were captured using autoethnographic measures and methods within a pragmatic and interpretive framework; approaches to research and writing that seek to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences in order to understand cultural experiences (Delamont, 2009). Specifically, participant observation was the qualitative methodology used within a pragmatic framework; the goal and focus was on intended outcomes, i.e., enhancing teaching across the department (Creswell, 2012). Multiple approaches were used to collect and analyze the information. Focusing on the outcomes was this de-

**Table 1. Models of Peer Review**

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>	<b>Development</b>	<b>Collaborative</b>
<i>Who is involved?</i>	Senior staff, or chosen evaluators or auditors review other staff	Educational developers observe/review probationers; or expert teachers review others	Teachers/peers/colleagues
<i>Intent</i>	Identify under-performance, confirm probation (tenure), appraisal, promotion, quality assurance, assessment	Demonstrate competency/improve teaching competencies; part of accredited course	Improve teaching through dialogue; self and mutual reflection; stimulate improvement
<i>Result</i>	Report/judgment	Feedback/report/action plan for improvement to teaching and learning	Analysis, reflection, discussion, wider experience, improvement to teaching and learning
<i>Relationship</i>	Hierarchy of power	Hierarchy of expertise	Equality/mutuality
<i>Confidentiality</i>	Between manager and reviewee	Between reviewer and reviewee; may include manager	Between reviewer and the reviewee
<i>Inclusion</i>	Selected faculty: faculty being confirmed for tenure; applying for promotion; teaching award	Faculty on initial training course, faculty identified as needing teaching improvement	All involved in supporting student learning
<i>Verdict</i>	Pass/fail, score, quality assessment	Feedback on how to improve teaching	Non-judgmental, constructive & facilitated dialogue
<i>Items reviewed</i>	Teaching performance, course design, learning materials, student evaluations	Teaching performance, course design, learning materials	Any aspect of course design, teaching, student learning outcomes chosen by reviewee
<i>Benefits</i>	Institution, department	The reviewee (one way interaction)	Mutual benefits for both peers
<i>Conditions for success</i>	Effective management	Respected senior faculty	A culture in which teaching is valued and discussed
<i>Hazards</i>	Alienation, lack of cooperation, opposition	No shared ownership, lack of impact	Confirms existing practice, passive compliance

partment's intent, and being flexible in the planning and implementation process was key. Approaches used to collect and examine the data included email communications, task force committee meeting agendas and minutes, and firsthand written accounts saved into electronic files into a department repository on an online web based storage server.

From firsthand experience in a larger-sized STEM academic unit (N = 45 teaching faculty) at a public land-grant high intensive research institution enrolling over 36,000 students, the following examples and information offers a framework for implementing a peer observation of teaching initiative and is one model of how it can work. This author was a member of a departmental team that spent nearly a year planning, piloting for one semester, and then presenting to department faculty what was renamed as 'Peer Partnerships in Teaching'. The rebranding/renaming resulted from committee discussions and was a strategy to gain additional favor and interest from our departmental faculty.

After discussing this author's research about peer observation of teaching models mentioned in the literature review (a prior version of the literature review was shared with the task force committee), the faculty task force committee unanimously approved the adoption, adaptation, and advocating a *collaborative* styled model of peer observation, rebranded as 'Peer Partnerships in Teaching'. A department faculty vote followed, and passed unanimously. Having observed the many discussions between six faculty members on the task force committee, over the course of many months, I can confirm that any model that is collaborative in nature will have a greater chance of ongoing success. The task force recommended the following parameters and criterion to faculty pairs in this peer partnership in teaching program:

- (1) Each partner should be observed for a course of their choosing but are welcome to do more;
- (2) Each partner should be observed two times per course per semester; and
- (3) A *collaborative* styled model of peer observation is recommended for use.

What follows is a reflection and framework, which provides guidance and practical support for academic units to increase chances of success for peer observation of teaching and lasting change. Appendices A – C provide templates for forms

adapted and recreated from various aspects of the multiple sources covered in this article, and these templates provide practical support and guidance for faculty and/or curriculums in U.S higher education implementing a peer observation of teaching, peer review of teaching, peer coaching or similar, type of program and/or directive. The department task force committee developed each form using elements from multiple sources and were created to best reflect what the task force committee felt would cater to the culture and tastes of our academic unit.

## **Framework for Peer Observation of Teaching: One Model of How it can Work**

For the following framework, and one model of how it can work, participating faculty and committee perceptions and experiences were consulted to confirm and supplement the participant's own observations and experience.

### ***Culture Issues to Be Addressed Throughout the Process***

To be expected, some participants will participate with a sense of obligation, rather than enthusiasm. To tackle this issue, it should be voiced and encouraged that those who commit to the program will get more out of the process and their personal experience. Echoing what Gibbs (1995) argued, proposed innovation design in a unit should go along with, rather than against, 'the culture and values to achieve new goals' and to build on 'skills and processes people can already use'. For example, faculty did not view Smith et al.'s (2013) COPUS protocol favorably. Common criticisms - it is overly complex/ would require excessive effort, it is overly objective, and it ignores the human elements inherent in the process.

**Guidelines.** There are additional guidelines to consider throughout the implementation stages of a higher education peer observation of teaching program. Greater freedom in the observation process relaxes both observer and observed. With our initiative, and as can be seen from Appendix B, lengthy checklists were not used, and instead, guiding points and plenty of room to jot notes was decided upon. Another item that every unit should be mindful of is having a 'climate of respect,' and

it is significant when pairing relationships. Francis (2001) commented that when giving feedback, little attention is given to the complex politics of interpersonal communication. Therefore, selection of peer observation partners is very important. Shortland's (2004) study found the following:

Over time, as relationships become more trusting, or when mutual selection involves partners with already developed productive working relationships, mutual awareness and understanding of appropriate, constructive feedback is enhanced ... A proactive suggestion lies in the partners having jointly shared objectives as these can help to generate a working alliance. (p. 297)

**Benefits and limitations.** It is important that faculty are familiar and comfortable with the intentions and outcomes of peer observation. Linking supportive theory and innovative practice are important to permanent practice. To be of even more value, link other quality assurance measures, e.g., student evaluations, to peer observation and reflection.

**Involvement.** All faculty have other time commitments and deadlines, however, it is important to reinforce that all have a personal as well as professional commitment to their colleagues and friends. Attempts should be made to design the project in a way to gain maximum participation, but carry a minimal premium on time. Enticing reluctant colleagues to take part will be difficult, but overall, the project will produce positive experiences holistically and will help create a more conducive environment. The following section addresses some of the faculty perceptions and challenges encountered in the development of our 'peer partnerships in teaching' program, including practical considerations and guidance/tips/thoughts from firsthand experience on how to address normal challenges

### **The Collaborative Reflection Model of Peer Observation**

The model shown in Figure 1 is adapted from Martin and Double (1998), and summarizes a classic and traditional three-step process. This three-step process helps ensure that the first observation occurrence is positive. It also establishes an appropriate and ongoing relationship for reciprocal engagement.

**The pre-observation meeting.** This meeting is important because it gives the observed faculty member the opportunity to inform the observer about the specific features of the event planned (i.e., the course). The observed person should be clear about the course program content covered already, the learning outcomes for that particular lesson and the teaching strategies that will be used (Martin & Double, 1998).

An important piece of preparation is agreeing how the course lesson will be documented and when it will be made available to the instructor. In most cases, the most efficient form of recording will be note taking and audio, but the occasional use of video can be very useful (Martin & Double, 1998). There are various ways to take notes; the important thing is to capture the essence of pedagogy techniques to form a basis for reflection. For example, it was common practice on partnership agreements that notes became the property of the instructor after the session so they may have time to think about the observation before the feedback meeting.

**Appendix A.** Is a sample pre-observation teaching form template to be used for a conversational meeting to occur before the scheduled class occurrence; the task force committee adapted elements from multiple sources to create what it felt is a form that would be widely accepted by department faculty (Bell & Cooper, 2014; Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004).

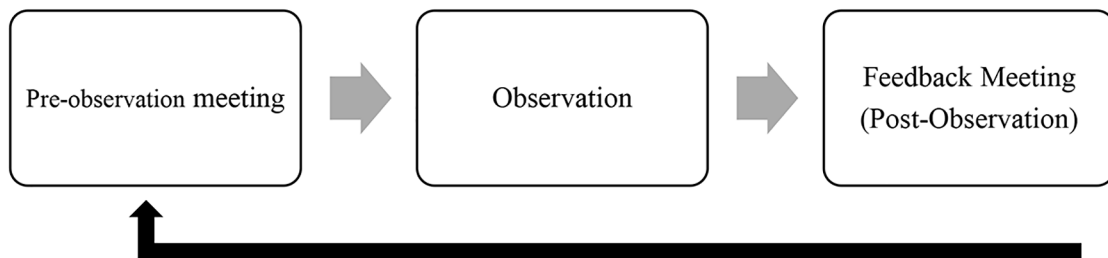


Figure 1. Peer observation and collaborative



**The observation.** An important item to remember throughout the observation stage(s), “Peer review is most useful as a formative process: recognizing strengths and suggesting possible areas for attention or alternative approaches, rather than simply judging” (Martin & Double, 2005, p. 164). To elaborate, Martin & Double’s (2005) study found the following:

- (1) Use a systematic approach in taking observation notes at fixed intervals (e.g., two or three minutes)
- (2) To be effective, the observations must be of both the teacher and the students; dividing the page verti-

cally can help to keep a clear record of both and to emphasize the importance of the interplay between teacher and student

- (3) Beware the ‘expert’ in all of us: it is a well-known psychological phenomenon that when a person is observed performing a familiar task, the observer can be inclined to take on the role as expert, irrespective of their actual level of competence (e.g., think behavior of a sports crowd towards a referee).

**Observation criteria.** Whitlock and Rumpus (2004) contend, “Observers do not have to be experts in education – they are not required to make

judgments on ability, but to provide constructive comments to help the observed to think about how they are helping the students learn” (p. 5). For example, Table – 2, adapted from Whitlock and Rumpus (2004), highlights several factors for consideration. Note, the criteria identified here may not be relevant for every type of class (e.g. differences between lab, lecture, recitation, supervised experience). Moreover, not all criteria have to be considered and/or addressed in any one session; just those that are relevant. In addition, the observed should agree in advance with the observer on any particular aspects related to their own teaching practices (Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004).

**Appendix B.** Is a sample teaching observation form to record the peer reviewer’s assessment of instructional skills and other notes during the scheduled course occurrence; the task force committee adapted elements from multiple sources to create what it felt is a form that would be generally accepted by departmental faculty (Sachs & Parsell, 2014; Buskist, Ismail & Groccia, 2014; Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004).

**The feedback meeting.** If peer observation of teaching is to be productive, this stage and discussion needs to be truthful and constructive. A feedback meeting should occur soon after the session. This way, minor details are likely to be remembered. A good way to start the meeting is for participants

Table 2. Possible Observation Criteria

Possible Observation	Possible Criteria
<i>By agreement – The observer could provide feedback on how the observed...</i>	Plans effectively, setting clear learning outcomes that students understand Shows good subject knowledge and understanding in the way they present and discuss their subject, are technically competent in teaching, and teach relevant skills Develops a session in an orderly and coherent manner Delivers and presents appropriately (voice, projection, pace, audible, eye contact) Makes effective use of physical space; Provides/presents useful audio-visual aids Provides links to previous and future sessions Uses appropriate and varied methods to enable student learning Provides a range of learning activities for the students Develops a good rapport with students Provides students with opportunities to ask questions Evaluates student understanding Challenges and inspires Demonstrates personal skills, enthusiasm, politeness and confidence Manages behavioral issues Respects student diversity Assesses students work/input Uses assignments effectively to extend and reinforce learning Clearly summarizes/concludes the session
<i>...and how the observed helps students to:</i>	Develop the skills and capacity to work independently and collaboratively Acquire new knowledge or skills Develop ideas and increase their understanding Apply intellectual, physical or creative effort Show engagement, application and concentration, and be productive Understand what they are doing, how well they have done and how to improve

to remind themselves of the learning outcomes of the course session observed, and for the instructor to review items they thought went as planned or particularly well. Taking the time to acknowledge and praise areas of evident competence to try to develop an understanding of why a particular situation was perceived to have produced a valuable learning experience (Martin & Double, 1998). For the more difficult part of the feedback meeting – constructive feedback on areas of improvement:

- (1) The observer should be prepared to offer a particular perspective and to engage in speculation on how things might be improved.
- (2) It is important for the observer to be an effective listener at this point and not to try to impose their interpretation of events.
- (3) Reflective questions such as – Why do you think that happened. What would you do next time? How did you feel at this point?

The entire process is cyclical and benefits grow for every loop taken, Moreover, to be effective, and to catch the intellectual attention of the participants, new ideas and strategies should supplement the process (Beaty & McGill, 1995).

**Appendix C.** Is a sample post-observation form and template to frame a discussion and dialogue for both the reviewer and reviewee after the schedule class occurrence; the task force committee adapted elements from multiple sources to create what it felt is a form that would be generally accepted by departmental faculty (Sachs & Parsell, 2014; Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004).

**Providing beneficial and quality feedback.** Whitlock and Rumpus (2004) strongly emphasized that, “...the observation feedback that is given is [should be] both positive and supportive; to help the observed teacher reflect on their teaching... Staff [instructors] should start and end with positive points and intersperse the good with the critical throughout” (p. 5). Moreover, the observer should focus on a

limited number of issues for improving practice, particularly those that appear critical for the student learning experience rather than addressing all in one session (Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004). Table 3, adapted from Whitlock and Rumpus (2004), illustrates some elements of good practice for observers to give beneficial and quality feedback.

**Additional basic protocols.** Whitlock and Rumpus (2004) contended, “The reservations and concerns that staff [faculty] have about being involved in a peer observation system tend to disappear as staff become more familiar with the process. To facilitate this, it is a good idea for peer partners to have a very clear, shared, view of what the process is and where the limits lie” (p. 4). As such, it is advisable to agree on a protocol about how to undertake observations. Whitlock and Rumpus (2004) offer the following suggestions:

- (1) All interactions during the observation and following feedback should be strictly confidential.
- (2) Peer observations and feedback need to be undertaken with a supportive and constructive attitude (or as much as possible)
- (3) No ideas or materials generated for a class should be used, or disseminated, by the observer without permission.
- (4) The sessions that will be observed should be agreed in advance.
- (5) The lecturer [instructor] giving the class should

Table 3. Cues for Providing Beneficial and Quality Feedback

Outcome	Elements of Good Practice
<i>When giving feedback, the observer should help their colleague to...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reflect on their actions, and to identify what went well and/or not so well</li> <li>Explain why they took a certain approach</li> <li>Consider alternative actions</li> </ul>
<i>In discussion, the observer should...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be positive and praise what is good</li> <li>Be specific in their comments</li> <li>Be supportive</li> <li>Avoid taking over the discussion</li> <li>Help their colleague with difficult issues and the development of alternative approaches</li> <li>Be critical of behavior that can be changed</li> <li>Help develop their colleague's self-esteem</li> <li>Be realistic &amp; appreciate working constraints</li> <li>Choose a good time (feedback should not be rushed)</li> <li>Choose a good place (comfortable and private)</li> <li>Remain calm and not be aggressive</li> </ul>

outline their intentions to the observer before the start of the class.

- (6) The presence of the observer should be explained to the students.
- (7) The observer should not participate in the session.
- (8) The observed should not involve the observer as a participant in the class.
- (9) The observer should remain discreet and diplomatic during the session.
- (10) The observer should stay for the whole class or leave at a pre-arranged point.
- (11) Feedback on the session should be provided as soon as possible, and no later than 48 hours after the observed class.
- (12) The observer's role is to help the lecturer achieve his or her objectives from a teaching session, not to impose the observer's view of what should be done.

### **Practical Considerations and Guidance for a Better Chance at Success**

Undoubtedly, there will be faculty members who choose not to participate. The common perceptions encountered, and which required consultation, included:

- (1) Effective peer review is too time consuming and involves knowledge and skills we as a faculty do not have.
- (2) Personal or professional rivalries will contaminate the process and create deep divisions or recourse to legal remedies
- (3) Peer review violates the norms of privacy and egalitarianism in teaching

For providing consultation on these common perceptions, and resistance, the task force committee referenced and borrowed sage advice from the works of Chism (2007) to alleviate these primary concerns. For example:

- (1) Scholars generally support the reliability of student evaluations of teaching, yet why not view peer review of teaching as an alternative and complementary system?
- (2) A rational approach: The importance of quality teaching for the department - increased student retention and success, attracting more majors, garnering awards, and overall reputation. Investing an extra three to four hours each semester is worthwhile. Two class periods, twice per semester is the expected time commitment for our unit.
- (3) Emotional approach: Important to address distrust of evaluation, violation of personal style and space, insecurities about performance, anxieties about time, and fear of bias; all feelings that require reassurance. Foundations were built by solely focusing on the formative aspects - stressing coaching and affirmation and is tinged on the spirit of inquiry about student learning and how faculty can better facilitate success,

not on establishing a teaching hierarchy or weeding out poor performers.

The following are additional tips and guidelines we kept on the agenda for our faculty to keep in mind, which we believed contributed to its success (Huston & Weaver, 2007):

- (1) Goal-setting - Goals are set by both parties; thus empowering both individuals in the process
- (2) Voluntary participation - For both roles, faculty members who are coerced into the process feedback are much less likely to follow advice and/or seek feedback out of their own interest to improve their teaching abilities.
- (3) Confidentiality - Research indicates that for colleagues to trust each other to ask candid questions, or reveal teaching dilemmas, and then each pair must know that the other will not share their conversations to compromise tenure, promotion, or in the case of faculty tenured, compromise the respect they have earned as a teacher (Brinko 1993; Carroll and Goldberg 1989; Hicks 1999).
- (4) Assessment - Whatever level of reporting pairs do, it is important that the content of the conversations remain confidential; and if names are being tracked for assessment purposes, it is important that colleagues' names are not shared with department chairs or administrators who might weigh this information negatively in tenure and promotion decisions.
- (5) Formative evaluation - Is used for formative and developmental purposes vs. summative purposes. Summative evaluations are used to render a judgment, often about tenure, promotion, or salary increases, whereas formative evaluation refers to assessments that are focused exclusively on improving teaching (Cavanagh 1996; Scriven, 1996).
- (6) Institutional support - Central institutional support is in place and sees the service being provided; demonstrating the value and investment in teaching improvement for faculty member at all career stages.

The outcomes of this article's research clearly indicates that peer observation of teaching programs (or similarly named) can be of great benefit for academic units who are ready to participate and believe in a cyclical process of continuous improvement in teaching and curriculum. Peer observation of teaching provides is one tool and road map for academic units to enhance their quality of instruction and/or spread good practice. Academic culture is likely going to create issues in the early stages of the process. However, if participants continue to be encouraged to share and explore viewpoints on what good teaching is, and have the space and freedoms to do so, then the enduring success of

a peer observation of teaching program is within reach. Reflecting on our experience, relationships grew over time, and shared experiences helped to strengthen them. This publication offered practical support to departmental units in higher education with implementing a peer observation of teaching, peer review of teaching, peer coaching, or similar type of a program and process.

## Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

What faculty know about teaching is generally from informal approaches; such as, experience as students, experience with students, trial and error, teaching assistantships, and interactions with fellow instructors. Not too surprising, discussions between colleagues centers around subject matter rather than knowledge about pedagogy and structural procedures; generally, good teaching is only connected to good content and it is a mindset prevalent in higher education. As a result, this mindset creates widespread resistance and conflict towards peer observation of teaching program initiatives and is counterproductive to improving one's own pedagogy. Academics are familiar with the idea of peer review within the context of research and quality assurance, yet conventionally, teaching has not been systematically peer reviewed to the same extent. As Chism (2007) argued,

Peer review of teaching is a professional responsibility that is vital to teaching excellence. With focused attention, good systems can be introduced and flourish. Over the longer term, the investment can reap substantial rewards for the health of academic units. (p. 7)

This research explored the literature related to peer observation of teaching in higher education—definitions, advantages and disadvantages, discussion, with pointers and guidance for how programs and faculty might want to develop their own peer observation of teaching program. As campuses increasingly focus on teaching as community property and engage in post-tenure reviews, peer observation of teaching provides many opportunities. Whether it is matter of choice, or a mandate, peer observation of teaching is an appropriate and meaningful investment in ongoing faculty development. Ultimately, what the final package looks like

is going to, "... depend on the needs of each unique situation" (Smith et al., 2013, p. 626). Additional research to investigate to what extent institutions are mandating peer observation programs in departments compared to institutions that are allowing departments to develop their own would make for a meaningful research study.

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Please provide 2- or 3-sentence bio.

# Appendix A

## Pre-Observation Form

Instructor:	Observer:	
Course:	# of students:	
Type of activity: (e.g. lecture, seminar, lab)		
Length of session:		Minutes
Topic of the session being observed:		

What are one to three specific learning objectives planned for this session?

What strategies will you use to determine if students achieve those objectives during lecture and/or later in the semester?

What learning strategies will be used? (Check all that apply)

- Lecture     Discussion     Demonstrations     Case vignettes  
 Active learning activities, describe     Audio/video/multimedia clips  
 Anecdotes/personal experiences     Solicitation of questions from the audience  
 Turn To Your Partner     Other: \_\_\_\_\_

What else would you like to tell me about the class that will help me better understand as I observe?

What would you like the feedback to include? Are there particular activities/strategies you would like me to pay particular attention to? Do you have concerns about any specific segments/components of the session?

# Appendix B

## Observation Worksheet

Course/session topic(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Please provide comments relative to your observations on the following.

Prompts	Comments
<i>Clarity of objectives</i>	
<i>Planning and organization</i>	
<i>Delivery and pace</i>	
<i>Use of active learning strategies (e.g., methods/approach)</i>	
<i>Content (currency, accuracy, relevance, use of examples, level, match to student needs)</i>	
<i>Participation/engagement</i>	

What went particularly well in this class session?

Observations related to specific feedback requested.

Please add other comments, for example suggestions for any additional teaching resources, or the peer observation process itself.

# Appendix C

## **Post-Observation Form / Discussion Outline**

(1) What went well today?

(2) Did the students demonstrate achievement of the learning objectives? How? Discuss achievement of easy (knowledge) and stretch (application/synthesis) learning.

(3) Here is what I observed about the specific feedback you requested.