

## Evaluation of Teaching: What the Research Says PART 2

This continues our two-part series on evaluating teaching effectiveness. The previous part emphasized two key points: (a) Teaching is a multi-faceted skill that cannot be adequately assessed by just one or two data collection methods, and (b) Faculty and departments need to have discussions about the criteria they want to use to measure effective teaching in the contexts their curriculum provides. "I know good teaching when I see it" simply will not do.

### Classroom Peer Observation

Having such discussions about teaching is particularly important before embarking on a peer observation program. Too often faculty assume that with experience in the classroom comes good judgment of effective teaching. The truth is that there is often relatively little consensus on how individuals define good teaching, even between colleagues in the same department. Some instructors consider a well-delivered lecture the hallmark of good instruction; others prefer to orchestrate interaction in small student groups. Some instructors like a fast-paced change of activities, while others take a slower, more reflective approach. Some instructors teach mostly upper-division and graduate students; others have honed their skills for Gen-Ed and intro-level courses. Without an explicit understanding about the range of acceptable classroom methods, faculty will tend to impose their own style as the yardstick for measuring others' teaching. There is an abundance of peer observation guides available<sup>1</sup> that can help departments create more coherent observation results across their faculty. However, the first requirement is that all department members agree on the relevant criteria to be used before any observation form is selected.

In addition, there are other guidelines that are crucial for meaningful peer observation results: (1) Reviewers should be appropriate judges who have no conflicts of interest or longstanding personality conflicts with the observed and who are familiar with the content area. (2) Reviewers need to have sufficient time—at least one hour per visit—and sufficient contextual information to understand the observed class period. (3) A single classroom observation by one rater is not reliable; at least two or three observations should be made. (4) Observers should be as unobtrusive as possible during the observed classroom period. (5) Conclusions should be tied to evidence, i.e. rooted in the specifics of the documentation that has been provided.<sup>2</sup> Unless such rules are followed, peer observations may remain the most unreliable tool currently used for teacher evaluations.

### Student Evaluation of Teaching

Most student rating forms are mainly concerned with the delivery of instruction. That leaves out many important aspects of teaching that should be evaluated with other tools (see Table in Part 1). Contrary to many opinions, appropriately-phrased and administered student evaluations turn out to be a valid and reliable form of evaluating classroom performance.<sup>3</sup> Global ratings of the teacher or course (e.g., "Overall, this is an excellent course" "Overall, the instructor is an excellent teacher") correlate higher with student learning than do more specific items.<sup>4</sup> There are only a few factors that tend to bias students toward creating lower ratings: (a) If the course is required rather than an elective; (b) if the course is taken by lower rather than upper-level students; (c) if students entered with little prior interest in the course

material; (d) if the courses are in math & sciences rather than the humanities or social sciences. Generally, students are able to report on the extent to which a teacher appears prepared for class session, communicates clearly, stimulates interest, and demonstrates enthusiasm and respect for students. On the other hand, students tend to be poorer judges of the intellectual quality of a course, of its academic rigor, or of its appropriateness to the curriculum.<sup>5</sup> Other common problems with student evaluations relate to how items are phrased (e.g. with a bias for lecturing); how the instrument is administered (someone other than the instructor should administer it, while the instructor leaves the room; students are informed that the results are anonymous and that the instructor will not see the results until after grades have been handed in); and how results are interpreted (evaluations by less than 10 students or less than 75% of enrolled students have low reliability; averaging dissimilar items in an instrument is not appropriate).<sup>6</sup>

### Evaluation of Course Materials

This is where peer judgment can generate results that are much more valid and reliable than those from typical classroom observations that the literature has shown to be least reliable.<sup>7</sup> Besides classroom performance there is a whole other side to teaching that is relatively invisible in any one class session. This side involves the structural decisions every instructor has to make about the scope of the course, its educational goals, reading materials, handouts, multimedia, tests and assignments, assessment system, and a full range of teaching methods and course procedures. These structural elements are every bit as important as the actual live delivery of instruction.<sup>8</sup> An instructor's isolated classroom performance may look good but could possibly hide poor planning, inappropriate student assessment, and a narrow range of teaching methods that exclude students with different learning styles. Colleagues with subject matter and pedagogical expertise can extract these instructional elements by reviewing syllabi, graded assignments and tests, and course handouts such as assignment sheets, rubrics, and lecture notes.

### Teaching Portfolio

Teaching portfolios have become more popular recently because they can equally serve evaluation and improvement purposes. Portfolios provide a longterm perspective that is otherwise difficult to obtain. They allow an instructor to reflect on and document personal growth, describe an underlying teaching philosophy, and lay out the conceptual framework for course and curriculum design that guide his or her classes.<sup>9</sup> While performance and results are what ultimately counts, understanding the context in which an instructor operates makes interpretation of student or peer observation data much more valid.

### Further Information

A wealth of information exists on issues of teaching evaluations, much of it by now in condensed version on the Web.<sup>10</sup> The Center for Teaching and Learning is happy to provide additional input. Contact us at ex. 4468 or [e-hansen@neiu.edu](mailto:e-hansen@neiu.edu)).

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<sup>1</sup> See Preparing for Peer Observation: A Guidebook, at: <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/PeerObserve.pdf>, Observation Checklist from UC Berkeley: <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/observe.html>, and Chism book below!

<sup>2</sup> N. Van Note Chism, 1999. *Peer Review of Teaching: A Sourcebook*. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

<sup>3</sup> R.A. Arreola, 2000. *Developing a Comprehensive Faculty Evaluation System*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chpt. 12). Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

<sup>4</sup> Kansas State's Idea Paper #22 and 32: [www.idea.ksu.edu/resources/Papers.html](http://www.idea.ksu.edu/resources/Papers.html)

<sup>5</sup> Using Student Ratings, NYU: [www.nyu.edu/cte/white.html](http://www.nyu.edu/cte/white.html)

<sup>6</sup> Kansas State's Idea Paper #32, and UNC's Student Evaluation of Teaching: <http://ctl.unc.edu/fyc16.html>

<sup>7</sup> See Chism, 1999, p. 75

<sup>8</sup> See Chism, chpt. 5; Arreola, chpts. 4-6; L. Dee Fink, at: [www.ou.edu/ipd/tips/ideas/evaluation.htm](http://www.ou.edu/ipd/tips/ideas/evaluation.htm)

<sup>9</sup> See P. Seldin, 1997. *The Teaching Portfolio: A Practical Guide to Improved Performance and Promotion/Tenure Decisions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

<sup>10</sup> For an excellent meta-website of such literature, see: [www.tlc.eku.edu/tips/evaluating\\_teaching/](http://www.tlc.eku.edu/tips/evaluating_teaching/)