

(Re)designing a Peer Observation of Teaching Instrument: From Evaluation to Reciprocal Learning

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One of the key elements in ensuring we give and receive meaningful feedback on our teaching is that we have instruments that recognize the reciprocal, fluid, and dynamic process of peer feedback. When we engage peer observation of teaching as a collaborative and reciprocal learning approach rather than as purely evaluative, we can transform how we think about our teaching and student learning with our colleagues. Peer observation can enhance best teaching practices and foster quality teaching through reciprocal collaboration by focusing on continuous improvement of teaching innovations. Scholarship has documented the following benefits of engaging in peer observation of teaching as conversation rather than evaluation:

- **Enhances** professional practices beyond "evaluation of teaching"
- **Prompts** reflective teaching and learning practices
- **Fosters** immediate shifts in design and implementation of teaching and learning activities
- **Builds** reciprocal and collaborative partnerships
- **Improves** student experiences and engagement
- *Potentially enhances* student learning and success

One of the most insightful things in thinking about and enacting peer observation of teaching through a collaborative learning stance is that the instrument places the act of reflection and meaning-making on both the faculty member being observed and on the observer, thereby resulting in meaningful and authentic conversations about teaching. In other words, the instrument has spaces where both the faculty member and observer reflect on teaching and learning, which in turn can shape teaching narratives for annual review. The instrument is a space where the following things can happen:

1. the faculty member being observed can guide the observation by noting their values/beliefs on teaching and their pedagogical questions—areas in their teaching and student learning they'd like to engage others (the peer observer) in conversation about.
2. the observer can provide feedback informed by the faculty member's inquiries as well as the observer's insights as a fellow colleague and teacher who is also developing and improving their own teaching continuously.
3. Subsequently, the faculty member and the peer observer both reflect on what they learned from the peer observation and what future action they will take and why.

This document was informed by the Peer Observation of Teaching Series Faculty Learning Community (FLC) that the Center for Teaching Excellence hosted and coordinated during the Spring

2020 semester. Additionally, the Teaching Excellence Advisory Committee provided feedback and recommendations on the design of this document.

The goals of the Peer Observation of Teaching FLC included: 1. **explore** how peer observation of teaching can enhance best teaching practices and foster quality teaching through reciprocal collaboration and 2. **design** a guided peer observation process that will result in meaningful and authentic conversations about teaching. Faculty representatives across different departments and schools participated in the FLC and committed to rethinking and redesigning the peer observation of teaching instruments in collaboration with colleagues in their respective departments/schools.

Informed by the sessions and content in the peer observation of teaching faculty learning community, this document was designed to serve as a guide with questions and suggestions to assist departments and faculty members across the University in the design of their own peer observation of teaching process and engage in peer observation of teaching feedback through a collaborative and reciprocal learning approach.

STEP 1:

Guided Questions for the Peer Observation of Teaching Process

Our first question: how do we develop well-designed and guided instruments that embrace peer observation of teaching as a reciprocal and collaborative process? First, we must move beyond check-lists, rubrics, or tools that others have designed and instead work with our colleagues toward designing instruments that will elicit peer observation of teaching feedback reflective of our values and beliefs about good teaching and learning outcomes. The following represents a series of steps and questions we can ask ourselves as we (re)design instruments focused on peer learning.

Initiating the process: What is good teaching? Why do we engage in peer observation of teaching? (from Dr. Diana Dominguez)

It is important to emphasize that there should be no “one size fits all” approach to Peer Observation of Teaching, as there are many factors to consider in determining how effective teaching takes place and can be observed and developed within different disciplines and programs. The following questions are designed to help faculty in diverse disciplines and programs develop a Peer Observation of Teaching process and instrument that best fits their needs and goals.

- **Purpose/types of PoT:** Disciplines/Programs should first establish what **kind** of Peer Observation of Teaching they need: **Formative** (designed to help instructors enhance their teaching and learning in their courses) or **Summative** (designed to evaluate and assess as part of a formal reward system used in merit, promotion, and tenure decisions). While these may have different outcomes, they can be complementary. Often the same criteria are used for both types, but it should be noted that **formative** observation provides an **ongoing** process for the development of teaching and allows for mutually beneficial conversations about teaching between observer and observed, which can then contribute more meaningfully to **summative** peer review by demonstrating that evolution over time.

Disciplines/programs need to take several factors into account when designing a Peer Observation of Teaching process and instrument: discipline, makeup of department, student success goals,

accreditation requirements, and the **purpose** the peer observation will serve for the department/program. Questions to ask:

- What do we want our peer observation of teaching process to accomplish? What is the goal of implementing this process?
- How do we view the relationship between formative and summative peer observation/review? Are/should these be separate, or should one lead to the other in an organic, authentic way?
- **Good teaching:** Each discipline has its own markers of what constitutes both student success and good teaching. To develop a responsive peer observation process that also serves the **purpose** you've identified, each department/discipline should be clear on how such a process will align with those disciplinary values. Questions to ask:
 - What do we mean by good teaching in our discipline, department, school, or college?
 - What are the benchmarks of good teaching in our discipline and how do those relate to what our vision of student success goals?
 - What do we mean when we talk about "optimum student learning" in our courses and discipline?
 - How will we know **good** teaching when we see it?
 - What relationship do we perceive between teaching and learning (student success)?
- **Who is a Peer?** A last factor to consider when deciding on the **purpose** of the Peer Observation of Teaching process and instrument is who can be regarded as a **peer** for observation purposes and are these categories different for formative and summative purposes. Questions to ask:
 - Is a peer anyone who teaches in the department or only those with the same rank as the observed? What of those with a higher rank? What are the consequences of limiting or expanding these definitions of peer?
 - What is the value of a less experienced teaching peer observing a more seasoned teacher?
 - Does a peer observer require content expertise to conduct a relevant peer observation?
 - Does the peer observer need to be recognized as a good teacher or be an award-winning teacher?
 - Should there be a variety in observers over time to provide different perspectives and feedback?

Contextualizing the process: What do we value in teaching and how do we align it to outcomes to design guided questions that elicit authentic and collaborative feedback? (from Dr. Colin Charlton)

The following sequence of questions is designed to help you connect the elements of good teaching that faculty value with the required outcomes they are responsible for meeting. When that connection is made, you can then better connect your teaching values and learning outcomes to a particular guiding question on a peer observation document.

- *What are the pedagogical strategies or teaching activities that circulate in departmental or program-level discussions of good teaching practices?*

For example, most of your faculty may agree that all students should be regularly engaged in active learning during class meetings. It could even be more specific, like our undergraduate art students should regularly engage in comparing the artistic quality of different pieces, including their own works.

It could also be that the discussions of good teaching are emerging in a department, program, or unit. Some disciplines experience very little metacognitive discussion of teaching during credentialing processes. It is common to here teachers new to pedagogical reflection in workshops say that they teach the way their graduate teachers taught. It's okay if that is the scene of teaching in your department. Start with examples of effective learning. Are there shared expectations for what effective learning looks like when a student "gets it"? Do faculty have a target for how students behave when they are applying knowledge accurately and/or insightfully? Now, what types of teaching activities or strategies led to that? What types of teaching interactions happened in order for that learning to happen in the way that it did? The answer may not be a consciously shared value, but it is a "good teaching" value that is circulating among faculty.

- *What is the codified and specific knowledge you expect students to learn, which is noted in course outcomes, state objectives, accreditation guidelines, or other official statements of learning goals? How can you connect those outcomes to the previously developed values?*

For example, many of our core courses are responsible for teaching students how to effectively work in teams. The THECB Core Learning Objective #4 for Teamwork states that "[s]tudents will collaborate effectively with others to solve problems and complete projects while demonstrating respect for different perspectives." It's not much of a stretch to see a connection between our two examples at this point. If an Art class in the core is responsible for teaching teamwork, and the respective Art faculty value students working together to compare the value of different works, then we have discovered a connection between critical artistic analysis in group discussion and a need to teach students to solve problems while respecting diverse perspectives. That leads us to articulating that connection in our peer observation instrument.

- *What questions can you develop to focus a peer observer on a trait of good teaching and its partner outcome(s)?*

Here are some possible guiding questions for active learning & teamwork based on the two previous examples for values and outcomes:

1. How varied were the activities of the class, and did the variety foster student engagement?
2. Were there moments of overall disengagement, and what did your colleague do to address them?
3. How did your colleague set up the teamwork activity and how well did the students engage as a team?
4. Were there moments of interaction or intervention by your colleague with one or more teams, and how did that engagement help the work of each team?
5. How well did your colleague design and teach the critical terminology that students used to critically think about multiple pieces of art?

Each of these possible questions focuses on a different element of the class. For instance, #4 is looking at how a teacher interacts with groups to make learning happen. #1 is focusing on the how the activity design affected students. But both are asking the peer observer to observe moments of active learning in student teamwork activities, and are therefore aligning the peer observer's focus with both teaching values in the program and program outcomes.

STEP 2:

The Peer Observation of Teaching Collaborative Process

The Peer Observation of Teaching process has been well-documented in the scholarship and is also encouraged in UTRGV's HOP policies. Well-designed and guided instruments can enact the *dynamic cycle of conversations that facilitates meaningful reflections on teaching and learning*. The following represents recommendations for a guided approach to the peer observation of teaching that enact the teaching values and guided questions referenced above on several levels:

1. **Inquiry-based reflection** (pre- observation)
 - Reflect on goals for teaching, teaching values/philosophy, purpose of the course, goals for the class session, feedback teaching-learning moment, such as assignments, activities, discussions, etc. link to SLOs
 - Identify strengths or what we are proud of in our teaching
 - Ask what specific teaching-learning moment or activity, project, exam design we want feedback on
2. **Reciprocal growth mindset feedback** (observation)
 - Respond to peers' areas they'd like feedback on as well as their strengths and proud teaching moments
 - Explore how teaching-learning moment aligns with course SLOs, faculty teaching values, and feedback inquiry.
 - Frame feedback as recommendations and suggestions (rather than evaluation of teaching) based on what has worked for you.

- Identify what is working well in the peer observation conducted, what you learned as the peer observer, and how you plan to apply it to your own teaching.
3. **Reflective action on teaching and learning** (post-observation)
- What faculty member learned from the peer observer
 - What the peer observer learned from the faculty member
 - What action steps will they each take to continue reflecting on and improving their teaching in current course and/or future course design/teaching moments.
 - How faculty member and peer observer will explore alignment to SLOs, teaching values, and teaching-learning moments.

STEP 3:

Reflecting on the Peer Observation of Teaching Process

Once we design and implement peer observation of teaching instruments, how do we assess/determine to what extent our instruments resulted in collaborative, authentic, and reciprocal feedback on teaching focused on reflection and growth?

Peer observation of teaching instruments should not be static documents year after year. As colleagues in a department and school and within different disciplines/programs, we must be willing and open to engage in regular reflections and conversations about the effectiveness of the instrument in both representing our teaching values and learning outcomes as well as eliciting meaningful feedback. Even as we conduct observations, we must question places in the instrument that may be unclear or counterproductive to our values, outcomes, and purposes for engaging in peer observation beyond a requirement for annual review. In order to do this well, we can engage colleagues in the department in the following reflective process:

- **Regular reflections on the usability of instrument:**
 - To what extent are teaching value(s) aligned to outcome(s) and further aligned with the guiding questions/instrument?
 - To what extent do the guiding questions help the peer observer look for and comment on an area of teaching that highlights the values of the department and a particular outcome?
 - How are these guiding questions integrated into the peer observation instrument so that they are addressed?
- **Dynamic conversations about learning:**
 - To what extent is the document moving from evaluation toward a collaborative and reciprocal learning experience about teaching?

- Where in the document are there opportunities that prompt the faculty member being observed to share their teaching values, objectives for the course, teaching areas (or teaching documents) they'd like peer observer to focus on for feedback?
- Where in the document are there opportunities that prompt reflection for the faculty member being observed and for the peer observer to reflect on their own teaching that may lead to immediate shifts in teaching to improve students' learning experiences and engagement?
- **Reception to revision:**
 - How can we use the reflections and conversations above to revise the instrument to further align good teaching, teaching values, and learning outcomes?
 - How can guiding questions be further revised to elicit thoughtful and critical feedback on teaching?
 - How can guiding questions be further revised to ensure mutual learning and reflection on teaching?

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