The Peer Review Process

We recommend a three-part structure for the peer review process, regardless of whether the review is for formative or summative purposes. This framework is based on best-practices that will support a meaningful exchange of information about the observed teaching, help focus the review on specific teaching goals, and promote substantive conversations that support professional development. These best-practices are essential for formative reviews and enhance the credibility and authenticity of summative peer reviews.

Step 1: The Pre-Observation Meeting

The instructor and the reviewer should meet a few days prior to the planned observation for 30 - 45 minutes. This meeting provides an opportunity to foster trust and develop a working relationship between peers. The pre-observation meeting should accomplish the following:

Discuss the reason for the peer review.

- Is the review motivated by the instructor's desire to grow as a teacher, or has some event or interaction prompted the decision to request the review (e.g., performance evaluation, student feedback)?

Obtain information relevant to the review.

- The class syllabus, student demographics, course placement in the curriculum, and other information will help the reviewer understand the class type, the context for the review, and any challenges associated with it.

Agree on the purpose of the review.

- On what aspects of teaching does the instructor want feedback, such as teaching strategies, classroom climate, or student engagement? Is there a particular problem or difficulty?

Agree on how the observer will be portrayed to the students.

- It is often sufficient to give students a straightforward announcement that a visitor is present at the instructor's invitation, but the decision really depends on what the instructor is comfortable with.

Step 2: The Observation

This step focuses on the collection of information that will facilitate a productive conversation between the peer reviewer and the instructor. Some helpful strategies for the observer include:

Distinguish between observation, interpretation, and evaluation.

- The phenomena that occur in one's teaching can be observed, interpreted, and evaluated. Separate out these three strategies in order to apply them effectively.
- *Observations* are discrete, observable phenomena and patterns that occur in the class. In many cases, offering an observation will allow the instructor to draw their own interpretations and evaluations.
- *Interpretations* are thoughts regarding what an observation might mean. Consider as many interpretations as possible for each observation, as the first interpretation may not be best.
- *Evaluations* are judgments drawn from both observations and interpretations. Offering observations before evaluations allows the instructor to dialogue with the peer reviewer about what is taking place within the class.

Take descriptive notes of what you observe.

- Descriptions should focus on concrete elements, actions, and behaviors noticed by the reviewer.
- Avoid overtly evaluative language. For example, a reviewer may note that "students spoke to each other and to the instructor about the discussion topic" *rather than* "students responded well to the discussion."
- Avoid interpretive comments. For example, a reviewer may note that "the instructor gestures with both hands while standing in front of the class" *as opposed to* "the instructor gestures nervously to gain student attention."
- Keep evaluative and interpretive language out of your observation notes so that your descriptive feedback can be interpreted by the instructor themself.

Focus on the elements requested by the instructor.

- These aspects of the class or teaching should form the basis of your conversation later.

Observe both students and the instructor.

- Document observations about all members of the class.

Step 3: The Post-Observation Meeting

The post-observation meeting should occur as soon as possible after the observation, while impressions are still fresh, but with sufficient time for the reviewer to examine their notes and prepare for the meeting. Timely feedback will help the instructor reflect on and decide whether to implement changes. Use these guidelines to maximize the meeting's effectiveness:

Invite the instructor to comment first.

- Offer an open-ended question that solicits the instructor's perceptions and allows the reviewer to gain additional information to inform the conversation. For example, the reviewer may ask "Was this session typical for this class?" or "Did the session go as you expected?"

Offer comments that initiate discussion.

- Descriptive comments provide easy transitions to the instructor's perception of the class. For instance: "It was a very lively class."

Share observations.

- Describe what was observed related to the instructor's goals and use observation notes taken during step 2. Sharing observations, such as "I noticed you invited student questions during the final 10 minutes of class," allows the instructor to explain whether the behavior was a conscious choice or something they were unaware of.

Be selective.

- Focus on a few key points, rather than a long list of comments and suggestions that may overwhelm the instructor. Provide a balance of praise and constructive critique.

Relate discussion points to instructor goals.

- Encourage the instructor to relate the observations, events, etc., to the goals that were discussed in step 1.

If requested, offer suggestions and alternatives.

- At the instructor's request, share ideas that could be used in place of the instructor's existing strategies.