Peer Review of Teaching White Paper – July 2014

Following release of the 2013 UT System mandate, the Provost Teaching Fellows, in collaboration with the Center for Teaching and Learning, accepted responsibility for guiding the campus discussion and for developing this resource, based partly on the fact that several Fellows had initiatives focused on peer observation and mentoring, and several Senior Fellows had a long-standing interest in this as an essential component of faculty development. Two guiding assumptions guided our deliberations:

- the focus of any peer observation process should be, first and foremost, a process aligned with faculty development; and
- the University would not mandate a 'one size fits all', single process. Rather, departments would be charged to deliberate and develop their own procedures (within boundaries) that allow them to consider their local 'cultures' and needs.

Two campus conversations were conducted in Spring-2014 to assess the scope of what was being done (and not being done) in regards to peer observation, and to identify the issues that needed to be addressed going forward in meeting the System mandate. It was very clear from the discussion that many departments/schools/colleges want to move forward in developing systematic methods for peer observation (or modifying existing processes), but want to explore the experiences of others on campus, share best practices, and use a "grass roots" (faculty) process to develop their own, local (departmental) approach. To that end, under the sponsorship of the Provost Fellows and the CTL, a campus-wide *"Learning Community on Peer Observation"* was initiated in late spring-2014 to support these shared interests.

Three meetings were held over summer-2014 (with extensive iteration between meetings) to develop the resource represented by this web portal. Our approach is, by design, *not* prescriptive. Rather, the intent is to provide principles, questions and suggestions to help guide departmental deliberations as they develop their own systematic approach to peer observation, with a primary focus on faculty development. The Learning Community is not done with its work; it is expected that it will continue to be a focal point for campus conversations on peer observation going forward. This resource was developed to help guide departments in the design of their own peer observation process.

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Good teachers continually learn and develop. Peer Review, which combines the examination of course materials with in-class observations and collegial discussion, helps prompt this learning among faculty. Ideally, these interactions and conversations can create opportunities for us as colleagues to reflect on and adapt our teaching practices in order to become better teachers and increase student learning.

This document aims to assist each department in developing a customized system of Peer Review appropriate to its particular discipline. We envision the following steps in developing this customized system:

1. *Framing Departmental Discussions*: The academic department addresses key questions and decisions about core purposes, terms, and practices associated with its specific peer review process.
2. *Implementing Peer Observation of Teaching*: Peer observation, a vital part of peer review, generally consists of pre-observation, observation, and post-observation and may include a reflective summary.

We offer a series of questions and reflections to help the department frame and stimulate the necessary departmental discussions.

Background: Teaching is complex, in part because its goal is to create opportunities for students to master facts and procedures *and* develop conceptual and disciplinary understandings. As a result, instructors always have room for learning—regardless of years of experience, rank, successes, and professional recognitions. This learning can occur in collegial relationships that push us to develop our visions of teaching and encounter perspectives different from our own. Peer review of teaching can offer opportunities to engage in this kind of learning (Schoenfeld, 2013).

Creating a system for peer review is not simply adopting a checklist, tool, instrument, or technique that others have devised. We envision departments constructing a customized tool for ongoing development that builds on what its instructors know and need to support their own as well as their students' learning. This task requires initial and ongoing involvement of administrators and faculty in a series of departmental decisions and discussions about what they want to achieve though peer review and how they will realize those goals. These discussions allow a department to create common understandings, generate buy-in, and tailor peer review of teaching to the unique and specific culture, needs, and traditions of department and discipline.

This document discusses decisions that departments may face as they build their peer review system and then focuses on the core elements of peer observation. It offers sets of questions that departments can use and adapt to support the discussions necessary to develop this process. The purpose of this guide is not to prescribe and impose a single approach to teaching or tell anyone how to teach. Instead, its purpose is to foster a process of working together and "watching to learn" in order to improve teaching and increase learning.

STEP 1: FRAMING DEPARTMENTAL DISCUSSIONS

The UT system cites two purposes for peer review of teaching: 1) *formative peer review of teaching* to help instructors *enhance teaching and learning* in their courses, and 2) *summative peer review of teaching* to *evaluate and assess* as part of a formal reward system used in merit, promotion, and tenure decisions. These two purposes are discrete but complementary. *Formative peer review* gives instructors opportunities to consider, modify, and reexamine their teaching with the support of their colleagues by using a shared understanding of good teaching; *summative peer review* uses the same understanding of good teaching as a criterion for making required decisions about compensation and promotion. Further, frequent formative peer review naturally provides an ongoing process that can contribute meaningfully to summative peer review by demonstrating a trajectory of improvement in teaching over time. Development of a peer review of teaching process can begin with a series of extended conversations within the department about what its goals and purposes for the peer review of teaching are and what it needs to realize those goals. The following questions can help shape these conversations:

- What do we want our peer review of teaching system to accomplish?
- How do we view the relationship between formative and summative peer review?

Additional questions for departmental discussion are included below:

What is good teaching?

We recognize that there are many ways to be an effective instructor and many approaches to creating opportunities for students to learn. There are several lists of teaching approaches and strategies that are seen as good teaching, but there is no universal and definitive list. Research on how students learn has provided us with information on teaching practices that can generate significant student learning across disciplines. The University of Texas Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) staff have discussed and synthesized the components of good teaching that appear repeatedly in the research into a set of principles that can provide a possible starting point for departments.

It is important to remember that these principles are not about getting everyone to teach the same way. Good teaching is a highly individualized, context-dependent activity that occurs within a discipline with specific habits of mind and traditions of teaching, or *signature pedagogies*. These principles are about increasing student learning and helping individuals and departments to reflect on, consider, and discuss their own approach to teaching and learning according to a common definition of good teaching.

Departments that are building a peer review system should have robust dialogue among their members to develop their working definition of good teaching and use the results of that conversation as a reference point to develop their system. The goal of these discussions is to establish criteria for good teaching that recognize and respect the diverse instructional styles and approaches instructors use to help students learn.

- What do we mean by good teaching in our discipline, department, school, or college?
- What are the benchmarks of good teaching in our discipline? How do they relate to student learning outcomes?
- What do we believe to be the relationship between teaching and learning?

- 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 policies and practices might we implement to support our department’s peer review of teaching?
Two areas can be defined and shared across the unit in order to guide participants. The first is a *peer review policy* that includes a statement about its major purpose, who it is for (rank requirements, tenured/non-tenured), its frequency, selection and qualifications of peer observers, preparation/training for this role, components of and process for the review, and the documentation that participants are expected to generate, as well as what will be done with it. The second includes *defining the practices for implementing these policies*. Constructing these plans is a context-based process that is subject to revision based on experiences and new learning as the department implements its peer review. Departments can define and discuss the following at the outset:

- *Process*: What structures will comprise this department’s peer review of teaching system?
- *Personnel*: Who will facilitate developing and sustaining this process, who will participate, and in what way?
- *Documentation*: How will we document our work, what reports will we require, and who will have access to the results?
- *Frequency*: How often and when will peer observations take place?
- *Scope*: How will we address different formats and methods (labs, field placements, classrooms, online, etc.)?
- *Preparation:* What do observers and instructors need to know, and how might we develop the necessary knowledge and skills?
- *Resources*: What is needed to support this design and its implementation?
- *Assessment*: How might we periodically review and revise this process to meet our needs?

The following are examples of possible approaches that other faculty teams have designed for peer review that can be adapted to departmental needs:

- Mentoring systems that pair a new instructor with an assigned senior partner to support the mentee’s adjustment to the faculty teaching role.
- Reciprocal peer observation of teaching by pairs, triads or teams (self-selected or formed by an administrator) that creates a system of what are called *critical friends*. Peers work together observing each other’s lessons at set times against a background of agreed upon criteria, reflecting on the learning about teaching that emerged, discussing areas of mutual interest, and planning future strategies.
- More formalized pool of peers designated by the instructor or chair and available for annual formative peer review and periodic summative evaluation.
- Peer review conducted prior to promotion and tenure decisions or other appraisal by a senior faculty member assigned by the department chair or designee to meet institutional requirements.
- An ongoing, longitudinal peer review process (formative) that allows faculty members to develop their own summative narrative and encompasses peer observations, student evaluations, reflections, and course artifacts.

Who is a peer?
The academic unit—whether college or department—decides what they mean by the term “peer.” In peer review of teaching,that term may refer to faculty members of higher, equal, or lower rank or may even be drawn from different departments. Departmental decisions about who should be involved as peer reviewer are driven by its decisions about goals and purposes, its culture and traditions, and official policies regarding personnel. Questions for possible discussion include:

- Is a peer anyone who teaches in a department?
- Is a peer only those with the same rank as the instructor being observed?
- What is the value of a less experienced teaching peer observing a more seasoned teacher?
- Does a peer observer require content expertise in relation to the class being observed?
- Does the peer observer need to be recognized as a good teacher? As a teaching award winner?
- Should there be variety in observers over time to provide different perspectives and feedback?
- Does a peer need to have expertise in the teaching methodology and techniques being observed?
- Should different people serve as peer observers for different venues (e.g., labs, field placements, classroom, online?

STEP 2: IMPLEMENTING PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

Pre-Observation → **Observation** → **Post-Observation** → **Reflective Summary**

PRE-OBSERVATION

What is it? Pre-observation is a two-part process consisting of 1) closely examining the syllabus, assessments, online resources, and other materials that an instructor has organized to support student learning, and 2) engaging in purposeful conversation with the instructor to discuss class expectations and context and target possible college, school, or departmental criteria for good teaching that will be the focus of the observation.

How can we examine course materials? Syllabi and other course materials are important sources of information about teaching and learning in the class. Access to these materials, including online resources or the learning management system, would need to be arranged ahead of time with the instructor. The observer reviews these materials to understand the course and provide a context for the pre-observation conversation and classroom observation in three key areas: intended goals, student learning, and teaching. These include what an instructor sees as the purpose of the course, what he/she expects of students, how the learning environment is structured, how students engage in learning, and what the roles of teacher and student are. Depending on departmental goals, an observer can choose from or adapt the sample guiding questions or create others that will facilitate the conversation with the instructor in the second part of the process, particularly where clarification is needed.

- Where does this course fit in the overall program of study?
- What's the relationship between course structure and course outcomes? Course outcomes and assessments?
- How does the instructor structure opportunities for interaction with students outside the classroom?
- How does the syllabus/course reflect current knowledge in the field?
- What expectations are set regarding classroom participation and behavior? How is this done?
- What levels of learning are targeted in class activities? Assignments?
- What skills and knowledge does the material or resource require of students?
- What activities give students opportunities to practice skills and knowledge before final assessment?
- Are there opportunities to develop and practice them?
- How do materials align with our criteria for good teaching? How do they support stated goals and outcomes?
- How are the students assessed and how do these assessments relate to course content and outcomes ?

How can we structure the pre-observation conversation? With the information collected in the examination of course materials, the observer can develop questions about intended goals, student learning, and teaching approaches to explore in the second part of this process, the *pre-observation conversation.* The observer can explore the instructor's more general views about teaching and learning and specific intentions for this course, as well as areas of particular interest. Additionally, he or she can ask questions about the specific context of the class. Possible areas to explore include targeted student learning outcomes, knowledge of students, teaching approaches, materials and activities that students will engage in prior to the class, homework or practice activities required after class assessments to determine what students are learning, context of the course and program within which this class is embedded, and self-perceived strengths and areas for growth. This discussion can set a collegial tone and establish the rapport, mutual trust, and respect between observer and instructor that can enrich peer observation. Furthermore, the observer can ask the instructor questions that may have arisen from the review of course materials. The discussion will typically flow from the 'big picture' issues to more detailed discussion of the learning event that will be observed.

Depending on departmental goals, the sample guiding questions below can be used:

- What do you consider the ideal outcome for student learning in this course?
- How do you want students to engage with the learning during this class?
- What do you see as the student's role and responsibility in doing that?
- What strategies/methods will you use to help students reach your goals?
- How will you know if your students achieve the desired goal?
- Is there anything I should I know about the context of the class? Where does it fit in the course?
- Is there anything I should know about the students so I can understand what is going on in class?
- How are students expected to prepare for this class?

- What do you want students to take-away from the course?
- What do you want to happen in this lesson? How does that fit in the broader course outcomes?
- Any specific areas of interest, questions, or concerns about student learning you'd like me to focus on?
- How would you like to introduce me to the class, if at all?
- What have you learned from previous peer observations? What would you like to learn from this peer observation experience?

Pre-Observation → **Observation** → **Post-Observation** → **Reflective Summary**

OBSERVATION

What is it? *A focused and purposeful inquiry into observable individual and group behaviors in a specific class to help instructor and observer think about teaching and learning from a different perspective*. Observation requires a high degree of observer awareness; its focus is what actually happens in the classroom between teacher, students, and course materials and content.

We emphasize the need to focus observations because classrooms are complex and marked by simultaneous interactions and activities of students, instructors, and knowledge—all set within university, college, school, and departmental policies and requirements. *No one can see everything in a classroom*. The observation views teaching and learning through the lens of shared criteria for good teaching and learning that the department has determined. More specifically, it highlights specific criteria that the instructor has identified as areas of particular interest in the pre-observation conversation. The observer helps the instructor by gathering more and richer information on these areas than he or she can obtain while teaching.

How can we structure the observation? The observation provides an opportunity to capture concrete and specific information and data about what is happening in the classroom in order to provide useful and effective feedback to the instructor. The observer arrives before class begins to record the physical environment, including the configuration of seats and students. Once the class begins, it is also helpful to write the beginning and end times of various activities. A class is often composed of *episodes*, that is, a series of learning opportunities or activities that take place during a class. Recording times can help organize initial notes to create a picture of these episodes and provide information on time spent on particular work or the number of times a specific action occurs. Notes can be taken to capture specific evidence of what happens in the class in regard to the following, as well as any specific areas noted by the instructor:

- What are students doing and learning?
- How does the instructor know what students are learning?
- What is the teacher doing?

- How are teacher, student, content, course materials interacting?
- What is the general climate of the classroom?

What can we do with the various forms of information? A short time after the in-class observation, the observer can organize the rough notes and look more closely for any teaching and learning patterns. This review provides an opportunity to create a narrative of what happened during the class using specific information captured during note-taking. The observer can also review the various information collected during the observation process to deepen understandings of teaching and learning in the class and to inform the post-observation conversation between instructor and observer. This synthesis allows the observer to make connections among the various pieces of information collected up to this point in the peer review process. Departmental criteria for good teaching and learning, particularly those identified by the instructor as of particular interest, provide a useful frame for organizing this part of the process. Depending on departmental policies and purposes, this review should result in a written report that summarizes the observation process.

- What does the evidence say about what's happening in the class in regard to our good teaching criteria?
- How has the instructor achieved his ideal student learning outcome?
- What does the evidence and feedback say in terms of what needs improvement, what is being done well, and what is truly exemplary?
- How does this information apply to the instructor's areas of interest?
- How does what I read, saw, and heard fit together?
- What doesn't fit? What unanswered questions about teaching and student learning emerge?
- What do we still need to learn in order to understand teaching and learning in this class?
- What do I think is happening here? What questions do I have?
- How can I shape a post-observation conversation to elicit the instructor's perspectives about teaching and learning and explore those concerns?

Pre-Observation → **Observation** → **Post-Observation** → **Reflective Summary**

POST-OBSERVATION

What is it? The post-observation is *a follow-up meeting of the observer and instructor to bring impressions from the materials review and observation together in a focused conversation about teaching and learning, particularly in regard to the areas of special interest to the instructor, with a focus on enhancing practice.*

The post-observation conversation focuses on helping instructors explore and develop their teaching. It is not an opportunity to judge, criticize, or tell instructors what they should have done or what the observer would have done. It is an opportunity to "sit beside" the instructor and discuss what happened in class in terms of concrete and specific data. During the conversation, it is important to refer to real events and real evidence and to explore, when appropriate, what and how students learned. That focus on learning can be explored through questions about whether the learning outcomes were met, what specific evidence led to this conclusion, and what the instructor did to modify the instructional approach given this feedback. Depending on departmental policy, the observer's written observation report may be shared with the instructor in advance of the post-observation meeting.

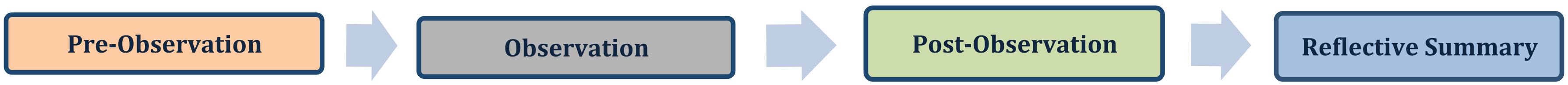
How can we shape the post-observation conversation? Observers often begin this conversation by asking instructors how they think the class "worked." The remainder of the conversation varies depending on responses, actual events in the classroom, and targeted questions about teaching and learning. It is important to refer to real events and real evidence and to explore, when appropriate, what and how students learned. That focus on learning can be explored through questions about whether the learning outcomes were met, what specific evidence led to this conclusion, and what the instructor did to modify the instructional approach given this feedback.

This conversation occurs in a dedicated time and appropriate place. It involves dialogue between colleagues rather than monologue or lecture and depends on active listening by the observer. Careful questioning by the observer can expand the conversation and prompt analysis of and reflection on teaching. The observer avoids authoritarian, judgmental language and refers to specific evidence and concrete details and focuses on what instructor wanted to learn from observation. It is helpful to include plans for future experimentation and growth.

This conversation cannot be fully scripted in advance, but the observer can use the synthesis of information in the final observation report to help shape possible areas to explore in the conversation. Questions tend to be open-ended and can be used to create opportunities for the instructor to reflect on his or her instructional practice and student learning. These initial questions often lead to follow-up questions to clarify and deepen responses. A list of possible questions is included below.

- We talked earlier about what you wanted to accomplish in this class. How do you think it went?
- What worked well? What didn't work well?
- What specific evidence did you receive about how well students grasped the content of the class?
- Do you think students learned what you wanted them to learn? What brings you to this conclusion?
- How did you find yourself modifying your instruction based on what was happening in real time in the class?
- I noticed X and wonder what was going on for you in this part of the class?
- I am puzzled about something I noticed. [Mention a specific example]. Can you explain this for me?
- What areas do you want to improve? How might you do that?
- I have some suggestions about what you might try in the future. Are you open to my sharing them?
- What do you think would happen if you [describe strategy]?
- What do you take from this experience that might support your teaching in the future?

- What did you learn about teaching from this class? About student learning?
- Given what we discussed about [area of interest], how might you use that information in your teaching?
- Did anything in this class reinforce or contradict your beliefs about teaching and learning?
- Would it be beneficial for you to view the recording of your lecture (if available)?



REFLECTIVE SUMMARY

What is the reflective summary in peer review of teaching? A reflective summary is *a brief, written analysis by the instructor and possibly the peer observer of what was learned about teaching and student learning, what actions were taken as a result, how the peer observation process is working for them, and how the process might be adapted or changed.* The reflective summary can provide valuable feedback that can be used in subsequent peer observations, in developing the faculty member's longitudinal statement about development as a teacher, and to adjust the peer review of teaching system to meet faculty's needs. Importantly, it is an opportunity to turn experience into learning. Depending on department policy, it may be included as an attachment to the observation summary report.

- What is your take-away about your teaching? About student learning?
- What questions about teaching and learning have emerged from this process?
- What changes might make our peer observation process more helpful?