

One Size Does Not Fit All:
Incorporating Peer Review of Teaching in Departmental Assessment Programs

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Presented at the 4th annual American Political Science Association
Teaching and Learning Conference
Charlotte, North Carolina
February 9-11, 2007

Political science departments concerned with assessing student learning outcomes should incorporate plans for assessing faculty teaching performance. Many departments use peer review as a method of assessing teaching, but conduct peer review in unsystematic ways. The purpose of this paper is to encourage political science departments to develop peer review plans that suit the needs of the respective program and its faculty and that relate to the ability of the faculty to promote desired student learning.

Background

Assessment of student learning in higher education serves the goals of accountability and educational improvement. Assessment efforts “demonstrate the worth of our programs to external constituents and...inform our understanding of the effectiveness of our teaching strategies” (Suskie, 2007).

While pressure from elected officials, the public, and accreditation agencies for colleges and universities to show real results still generates controversy in the academy, many institutions have discovered that assessment can have a positive impact on instruction (Banta, et. al., 1995). The results of assessment can be used to improve the educational quality of departments and programs, enhance the effectiveness of individual instructors, and boost the learning of desired knowledge, values and skills by individual students.

The focus of this paper is on how assessment can improve the performance of individual faculty members, and the role of peer review of teaching in that process.

Discussions of the process of assessment begin and end, as they should, with student learning. According to the “ideal-type” model, institutions should: (1) develop clearly articulated written statements, expressed in observable terms, of key learning outcomes, i.e. what students are expected to know, value and be able to do; (2) design courses, programs and experiences that provide opportunities for students to achieve those outcomes; (3) assess student achievement of those key outcomes; and (4) use the results of these assessments to improve teaching and learning (MSCHE, 2006).

Obvious as it is to say, faculty members play a central role in promoting student learning, and their involvement and support are critical to the success of assessment efforts. Assessment, in turn, “is a tool for faculty members to use as they do their very best to teach their students well” (MSCHE, 2003, p. 81). For assessment to succeed in enhancing student learning, faculty must dedicate themselves to teaching improvement.

Traditionally, teaching improvement efforts were hampered by a focus on summative evaluation, or judgments about teaching that are used in decisions regarding reappointment, promotion, tenure and compensation. Though emphasis on such extrinsic rewards may positively affect the teaching of some individuals, Keig and Waggoner

(1994) argue that summative evaluation reinforces, not improves, performance and reduces faculty motivation to improve.

In the last 15 years, colleges and universities have established processes of formative evaluation – assessment specifically designed to improve teaching – that are separated from summative evaluation activities (Hutchings, 1995). Peer review of teaching has emerged as a primary method of formative appraisal for several reasons. First, faculty members have come to realize that it is their responsibility to monitor themselves. Student evaluations and administrative judgments furnish an incomplete picture of teaching performance, at best (Chism, 1999).

Second, teaching is a complex activity. Faculty members have “knowledge of subject matter, teaching and learning, students, institutional culture, and their colleagues’ teaching that is uniquely theirs, apart from information administrators, students and teaching consultants can provide” (Keig and Waggoner, 1994, p. iv).

Third, advocates for the scholarship of teaching and learning argue that teaching should be evaluated on the same basis as research, as a communal enterprise of public examination, debate and engagement where successes and discoveries are shared (Boyer, 1990). Shulman (2004) goes on to say that academic disciplines should be the locus of teaching scholarship. Otherwise, teaching improvement efforts will be viewed as technical, generic, and not real scholarship. Therefore, peer review systems should be, at least in part, discipline-based.

Many of the above reasons were reflected in the process by which Elizabethtown College adopted a system of peer review of teaching. Guidelines for the implementation of the program permitted academic departments, including political science, to develop their own peer review systems as appropriate to their discipline and departmental composition.

The Process of Securing Faculty Approval of Peer Review¹

The catalysts for establishing peer review of teaching at Elizabethtown were a re-accreditation self-study for the Middle States Association and the formulation of a strategic plan for the College in 1998-99. Among the issues identified for immediate action by the Elizabethtown College Strategic Plan were: (1) the establishment of a post-tenure review system that aimed at improving the teaching performance of senior faculty; and (2) the development of a “broadly based faculty evaluation system, including assessment of student learning, peer evaluations and student evaluations in order to insure high quality instruction at all levels....”

¹ Elizabethtown College is a private, residential college with an enrollment of 1950 full-time students and 128 full-time faculty members, located in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. With a majority of its students majoring in business, education, communications, biology and occupational therapy, Elizabethtown has been ranked among the top three Northern comprehensive colleges by U.S. News and World Report over the last decade.

An informal division of labor took place in fall 1998, whereby the Provost's Office addressed assessment, a Teacher Evaluation Committee examined the perpetual issue of student evaluations, and the faculty Professional Development Committee (PDC) investigated peer review of teaching.² The first step taken by a PDC subcommittee was to survey academic departments in November 1998 about the extent to which peer review was practiced.

The survey revealed that one-half of the College's 20 academic departments had peer evaluation programs for monitoring the teaching performance of junior faculty, and only one department regularly reviewed teaching by tenured faculty. Furthermore, although some departments had well-developed systems of formative assessment, most departments either had summative evaluation programs or no program of teaching review at all.

It was apparent, therefore, that further measures were needed to promote discussion of teaching improvement at the departmental level, especially among senior faculty. The Institutional Self-Study, prepared for the Middle States Association as part of the re-accreditation process, submitted in February 1999, reinforced the subcommittee's finding that no formative system of peer review existed at the College.

In June 1999 the PDC issued a report to the College on improving teaching performance, recommending that all academic departments establish peer review systems in which all faculty members are involved in the review of each other's teaching. These peer review systems should be primarily formative in purpose, the PDC stated. The report stressed that departments develop peer review plans appropriate to their respective members and disciplines. Separate plans for reviewing the performance of junior and senior faculty could be prepared. Moreover, departments should recognize that many methods of peer review exist, not just classroom observation (Hutchings, 1995).

Following the Personnel Council's endorsement of the PDC's recommendations in the spring of 2000, the Faculty Assembly approved the following resolution on April 26, 2000:

All academic departments will establish peer review systems. These peer review systems should be primarily formative, providing all faculty members with support to improve their teaching. Academic departments will produce a plan for a comprehensive, ongoing system of peer review of teaching by May 2001. A separate plan for peer review of adjunct faculty will be prepared by October 2001. Departments in related disciplines may submit a joint plan. All plans will be submitted to the Professional development Committee for review and feedback and approved by the Provost/Dean of the Faculty. Implementation of peer review for tenured and untenured faculty in all departments will begin by no later than January 1, 2002.

² Serving as Associate Dean of Faculty, I chaired the PDC from fall 1998 to spring 2001. I became chair of the Department of Political Science in fall 2001, serving in that capacity until January 2007.

Like many faculty members at other colleges and universities, Elizabethtown faculty supported peer review of teaching as a supplement to or replacement for student evaluations. During the process of formulating the College's strategic plan, faculty tended to support peer review as a primary means of assessing teaching, while students favored student evaluations, especially as part of a meaningful post-tenure review system. Pressured by Middle States, the College's administrators advocated greater attention to the question of assessing what students are actually learning. All three constituencies found their concerns represented in the strategic plan's mandate to improve faculty teaching performance.

Implementation of Peer Review at Elizabethtown

Responding to requests from department chairs in fall 2000, the PDC issued guidelines for the development of peer review plans in early 2001. In formulating the guidelines, the committee recognized that a program's expectations for student learning should serve as criteria for evaluating teaching effectiveness. Therefore, peer review was directly tied to outcomes assessment.

According to the PDC guidelines, each department's peer review plan should be comprehensive, ongoing, formative, purposeful, and consistent. More specifically:

1. Comprehensive. The plan should involve all full-time faculty members as subjects of and participants in peer review. Differences in the frequency of peer review of junior and senior faculty are permitted.
2. Ongoing. The plan should integrate the peer review process into the department's regular activities, and conduct peer review of each faculty member at regular intervals.
3. Formative. The plan should aim at improving the teaching performance of each faculty member. Opportunities must be provided for faculty members to receive feedback on their teaching philosophies, strategies, methods and/or materials, reflect on their teaching and act on suggestions for improvement.
4. Purposeful. The plan should provide criteria for assessing faculty teaching performance. Criteria should be derived from departmental expectations for student learning. A department should show that it has given thought to what each graduate should know, value and be able to do, what responsibility each faculty member has in the curriculum for promoting desired knowledge, values and skills, and how it will assess the progress students have made in achieving desired learning objectives. Successful teaching performance should be defined, at least in part, in terms of the extent to which the faculty member under review has promoted desired student learning.
5. Consistent. The plan should specify that the department will systematically use one or more of the following method(s) of peer review:
 - Classroom Observation. If classroom observation is part of a department's plan, faculty members should conduct pre-visit and post-visit conferences with the member being observed. Observers should follow a standard rubric or checklist in conducting the observation. There should

be at least two classroom visits by a peer in a semester, timed so that the professor under review has an opportunity to work on suggestions for improvement arising from the first visit.

- Teaching Seminars. Teaching Seminars involve ongoing, regular departmental conversations about issues of teaching and learning in the department or discipline. Issues could be general in scope, such as departmental goals for student learning, or more specific topics such as how to promote discussion in class or how much reading should be required in courses.
- Pedagogical Colloquia. A Pedagogical Colloquium refers to a formal or informal discussion of a faculty member's teaching philosophy, strategies or methods. This could serve as a starting point for departmental conversation about teaching and learning. For example, a department member's syllabus could prompt discussion of the content and sequencing of a department's curriculum. Or, a member could discuss how she or he might teach a particular book, series of books or a methodological debate in the discipline, sparking departmental discussion of both pedagogy and "substance."
- Teaching or Course Portfolios. A Teaching Portfolio is a cumulative project in which a faculty member collects samples of teaching materials from several courses over a number of semesters, showing how his or her teaching philosophy and methodology have evolved. A Course Portfolio is a collection of materials from a particular course, focusing on the unfolding of a course from concept to results.
- External Peer Review. Forms of external review include having faculty from outside the department or institution review teaching materials, assessments of student learning and/or course evaluations. Also, departments or individual members could arrange on-line discussion groups that focus on issues of teaching and learning in the discipline.
- Mentoring. Mentoring activities should involve regular meetings between the mentor(s) and the partner, and should focus on teaching improvement. Mentoring could also involve tutorial arrangements where pairs or small groups of faculty tutor each other on subjects outside the members' areas of expertise.
- Collaborative Teaching. Forms of collaborative teaching include team-teaching and "teaching teams" [arrangements where faculty do not actually co-teach the same class but work together around multiple-section courses or linked experiences for which they have a shared responsibility (such as linked courses in a Freshman Interest Group)].
- Collaborative Assessments of Learning or Pedagogical Scholarship. This refers to classroom research activities in which faculty cooperate to assess student learning. For example, colleagues could interview each other's students in particular courses at midterm to ascertain what adjustments need to be made to accommodate student learning, or conduct research to assess the impact of a teaching method on student learning.

By the end of 2002, all departments submitted peer review plans for full-time faculty. The contents of departmental plans were fairly similar when directed toward pre-tenured faculty, but varied considerably in regard to senior faculty. All departments stated they will observe junior faculty in the classroom annually, and most will conduct observation each semester. Depending on the department, individual faculty, teams or the entire department will observe junior members. In addition to classroom observation, most departments planned to have pre-tenured faculty prepare teaching or course portfolios, which will be reviewed annually by departmental faculty.

Departments planned to use multiple methods of peer review for post-tenured faculty as well as for junior faculty, but at different intervals for senior faculty. Almost all departments will conduct classroom observation of senior faculty, but most planned to do so every two or three years. It is more likely that a single faculty member, rather than a team or the full department, will observe senior faculty in class. About one-third of departments will assess teaching or course portfolios of post-tenured faculty annually, another third will review portfolios at two, three or four-year intervals, and the remaining third will not use portfolios at all.

Around one-half of departments intended to conduct teaching seminars or pedagogical colloquia, in which faculty will discuss a teaching topic of general concern. Some departments planned to have individual faculty give a presentation (pedagogical colloquium), while other departments will conduct a general workshop on teaching (teaching seminar). A couple of departments found the teaching seminar or colloquium to be a useful way of involving otherwise recalcitrant senior faculty in the peer review process.

Implementation of Peer Review in Political Science at Elizabethtown

It is the argument of this paper that the development of a peer review process should be sensitive to the discipline and the characteristics of specific departments. With six full-time members, four of them tenured with over 20 years of service to the institution on the average, the Department of Political Science adopted a combination of methods (Appendix I).³

All members are expected to participate in classroom observation. Untenured faculty are observed every semester by at least one member of the department, while tenured members are observed one semester every two years. For each class observation, the department required the observer(s) and observed to meet before and after the class to discuss the expectations and outcomes of the class. Observations are guided by a rubric or checklist. The completed checklist and supplemental written comments go directly to the faculty member under review (Appendix II).

In addition, each member of the department is required to compile a teaching or course portfolio. Once a semester the department meets to discuss the contents of one

³ When the peer review plan was first developed, there were five full-time members, four of them tenured. The department received a new position in 2006-07.

member's portfolio. Junior members have their portfolios reviewed once a year, senior faculty portfolios are discussed once every three years.

The department's peer review plan was developed as part of a two-year process of program assessment in 2001-02 (McClellan, 2005). We established mission and vision statements for our program, revised our curriculum, wrote student learning outcome statements, revised standard professional expectations for faculty, and devised rubrics for assessing departmental and individual student progress in critical thinking and writing. We also created a sophomore/junior assessment and enhanced our capstone seminar. Thus, our peer review standards were explicitly linked to our assessment program.

Since 2002 the actual process of peer review has unfolded somewhat differently than expected. Classroom observation has proceeded as planned, but the department has held fewer portfolio review sessions, especially for senior faculty. Instead, two senior members were involved in team-teaching new courses with faculty from other departments. A third faculty member taught a new course that was audited by a non-political science faculty colleague. As recognized methods of peer review, these experiences were allowed to substitute for portfolio development. The lesson here is to be flexible.

Peer review of teaching has had a positive affect on our program. Frequent meetings to discuss teaching, whether involving pairs or the entire department, have helped provide a common interest and sense of community among our group, which may be small but is quite diverse personally, methodologically and ideologically. Observing teaching has increased our respect for each other as knowledgeable professionals. By observing us observing each other, students pick up this feeling that the department is concerned about their learning. Individually, peer review has not resulted in wholesale changes of pedagogy, but has served largely to confirm department members' choices in the classroom. What often happens is that after class, conversation turns from pedagogy to discussion of the lecture topic.

Peer Review of Teaching in Political Science

At Elizabethtown, the kind of peer review programs adopted by an academic department depended on several factors, including the discipline, the size of the department, the mission of the program, and the proportion of tenured and untenured members. When generalizing the process to other institutions, the size and mission of the institution may play a larger role. Thus, small, teaching-oriented departments may choose a combination of classroom observation and teaching portfolios. Large, research-focused departments may establish a series of teaching seminars or pedagogical colloquia.

The question for political science is whether our discipline has unique characteristics that would affect the choice of peer review methods. Does it make a difference that political science covers many subfields and approaches to understanding? Is there variation among political science programs as to the learning that is expected of

students and, if so, does this affect how peer review is conducted? For example, to the extent that political scientists promote civic engagement as a learning outcome for students, what is the impact, if any, on peer review? Does our discipline fully embrace peer review of teaching, and if so, do we have a distinctive approach?

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**Appendix I: Peer Review of Teaching Plan for Full-Time Members of the
Elizabethtown College Department of Political Science**

Plan for Full-time Members

Pursuant to the action of the Faculty Assembly on April 26, 2000, all full-time members of the Department of Political Science, tenured and non-tenured, shall participate in a regular, ongoing and formative program of peer review of teaching. The extent and timing of peer review shall vary for tenured and non-tenured members. Though multiple measures may be used to assess individual teaching performance, the primary criterion shall be the extent to which the teaching of the faculty member under review, in terms of content and pedagogy, promotes the mission, vision and student learning outcomes of the Department of Political Science.

The primary methods of peer review shall be classroom observation, teaching or course portfolios and a departmental seminar. Use of these forms of peer review shall promote: (1) departmental discussion of its mission, vision, student learning outcomes, and its teaching and learning strategies for achieving departmental goals; (2) improvement of individual teaching performance within the context of departmental goals; (3) integration of the department's curriculum; and (4) departmental monitoring of the effects of curriculum and instruction on student learning.

A. The Peer Review Process

1. Classroom Observation

Selection of Participants and Frequency of Review: Classroom observation of all full-time members shall take place on a regular basis. Classroom observation of non-tenured members shall occur each semester. Tenured members shall have classes observed at least every fourth semester, according to a rotation established by the Department. At the beginning of the semester, the member under review shall ask at least one faculty member, who may be a member of the Department of Political Science at Elizabethtown College or a member of another department or institution, to observe teaching in at least one course. If asked, members of the Department of Political Science are expected to agree to observe the colleague's teaching.

Responsibility of the Chair: It is the Chair's responsibility to oversee the integrity of the peer review process. As soon as arrangements for peer review are made by the member under review, the member shall inform the Chair of the Department of Political Science of the faculty member(s) who will conduct classroom observation for the particular semester (If asked, the Chair may serve as a peer reviewer.). The Chair shall inform the member under review and the peer reviewers of the process by which classroom observation shall be conducted. The Chair shall give peer reviewers from outside the Department of Political Science a copy of the Department's mission, vision and student learning objectives. It is the responsibility of the member under review to insure that the agreed-upon

classroom observation sessions take place, and to inform the Chair when the sessions for the semester have concluded.

The Observation Process:

Pre-Visit Conference: Prior to each observation session, the member under review and peer reviewer should conduct a pre-visit conference, in which the learning objectives for the session and the methods for promoting those objectives should be discussed. The member under review may suggest items pertaining to teaching performance and/or student response that the peer reviewer should look for.

Classroom Observation: During the classroom session, peer reviewers should follow a standard rubric or checklist in conducting the observation. The rubric or checklist may be furnished by the member under review or by the Chair.

Post-Visit Conference and Suggestions for Improvement: Soon after the session, the member under review and the peer reviewer should arrange a post-visit conference, in which they should discuss the extent to which the content and pedagogy of the session promoted specific learning objectives. Also at the post-visit conference, the peer reviewer should give the member under review concrete suggestions for improving teaching performance. Peer reviewer comments may be delivered orally or, at the request of the person under review, in writing. Unless authorized by the member under review, no other person shall be informed of the contents of the exchange between the member and the peer reviewer.

Subsequent Classroom Sessions: The member under review and the peer reviewer should arrange at least one more classroom observation visit during the semester, timed so that the member under review has an opportunity to work on suggestions for improvement arising from the previous visit. The process for conducting the second or subsequent observation session should be the same as that described above.

2. Teaching or Course Portfolios and Departmental Seminar

Requirements: All full-time members shall prepare either a teaching or course portfolio, which shall be reviewed on a regular basis by members of the Department. The decision on whether to prepare a teaching or a course portfolio shall be made by the member under review, in consultation with the Chair. Both kinds of portfolios shall be assembled as cumulative projects, revised and updated continuously.

Portfolio Development: Department members preparing a *teaching portfolio* shall collect samples of teaching materials from several courses over a number of semesters, showing how his or her teaching philosophy and methodology have evolved. Those members assembling *course portfolios* shall collect materials from a particular course, focusing on how the course unfolded from concept to results. Department members teaching

the same course may collaborate on a course portfolio. Portfolio materials may include syllabi, class assignments, lecture and discussion materials, assessments of student learning and/or course evaluations.

Departmental Seminar: Each semester the Department will meet to discuss at least one teaching or course portfolio. Departmental review shall focus on how and to what extent the instructor or course contributes to the realization of the mission, vision and student learning outcomes of the Department. The Department shall establish the schedule for portfolio review, insuring that the portfolio of each member undergoes departmental review at least once during a three-year cycle.

External Review: In addition to departmental review, members may ask faculty members from outside the department or institution to examine their respective portfolios. Unless authorized by the member under review, no other person shall be informed of the contents of the exchange between the member and the peer reviewer.

3. Other Methods of Peer Review

Department members may also participate in other forms of peer review, such as mentoring or tutorial arrangements with other faculty, team-teaching, or collaborative classroom research. Members may substitute such methods for the peer review activities described above, in consultation with the Chair.

Appendix II: Peer Review of Teaching – Classroom Observation Form

Elizabethtown College
Department of Political Science
Date _____

Instructor _____
Class _____
Observer _____

1 = Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3 = Neither agree nor disagree, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly agree N/A = Not applicable or cannot evaluate

Subject Matter

Depth and breadth of material is appropriate for course level and students. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Course appears to be intellectually rigorous. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Instructor emphasizes a conceptual grasp of the material. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Instructor incorporates current events and connects subject to the “real-world” 1 2 3 4 5 N/A

Instruction

Method of teaching seems appropriate for the material. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Presentation of material is well organized. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Material is up-to-date and reflects current knowledge in the field. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Methods of teaching encourage higher-order learning and critical thinking. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
Presentation appeals to a variety of learning styles. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A

Style

Instructor:
appears to be enthusiastic about teaching. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
 appears to be enthusiastic about subject matter. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
 interacts with students in a manner conducive to learning. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
 shows interest in students and their learning. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
 responds effectively to student questions. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
 encourages student involvement. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
 is open to students’ viewpoints and opinions. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
 communicates effectively. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A

Students:
 appear attentive and engaged. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A
 appear comfortable asking questions and offering comments. 1 2 3 4 5 N/A

Comments (Use additional pages if necessary.)
