

# PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

## PERCEPTIONS OF THE OBSERVER AND THE OBSERVED

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**Abstract.** While peer observation of teaching is regarded as an important part of a faculty member's promotion and tenure portfolio, little has been reported on its usefulness. Results from this study indicate that both observers and observees value the peer observation process, are neutral about the adequacy of observer training, use a variety of observation instruments but favor the written narrative, and believe their peer observation instruments are an effective measure of teaching. Although observers feel more stress about peer observations than observees, both groups experience minimal stress in participating in observations. Both groups also believe that peer observation reports are valid and useful.

Teaching is considered to be of primary importance at many institutions of higher education, and it is therefore a major element of faculty evaluation. Yet the evaluation of teaching effectiveness is wrought with controversy. For decades, faculty evaluation has been conducted largely to make judgments about reapp-

ointment, promotion, tenure, and compensation (Cross 1986). Despite the claim that faculty evaluation also contributes to improved teaching, little evidence exists to support this contention (Cross 1986; Glas-sick, Huber, and Maeroff 1997; Pew Higher Education Program 1989). Even with the substantial body of literature on the evaluation of teaching, there appears to be little agreement on how to define and measure effective teaching in colleges and universities. Indeed, many faculty believe that it is far easier to evaluate the quality of research than of teaching associated with research because of the established public

forum, the external validation associated with research, and the existing peer review process. Some argue that the definition and measurement of effective teaching are ambiguous and subjective (Cavanagh 1996; Dilts 1980; Kumaravadelu 1995; Richlin and Manning 1996), and that the evaluation is unsystematic (Seldin 1984). Others believe that once clearly identified goals, expectations, and criteria are established, the evaluation of effective teaching is possible (Braskamp and Ory 1994; Cashin 1996; Gray, Adam, Froh, and Yonai 1994; Peterson 2000).

Although faculty are largely internally motivated and become more self-referenced in their careers (Maehr and Braskamp 1994), they still need the support and feedback of their colleagues to develop as scholars. Only collectively do faculty have the experience and standards that are both credible and useful to individual faculty. Thus, peer evaluation needs to be an essential element in any faculty evaluation system. Palmer (1997) argues that professionals need shared practice and an honest dialogue among people in the profession. As Centra argued,

Unless faculty members are willing to leave the evaluation of teaching to students, who possess only a limited view, or to administrators, who often don't have the time or necessary background, then they must be willing to invest their time in efforts in peer evaluation of teaching. (1986, 1)

Evidence of effective teaching is essential to a faculty member's promotion and

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tenure portfolio to be reviewed by peers. However, as Magin (1998), Braskamp and Ory (1994), and Edgerton (1993) have observed, teachers have little experience collecting and presenting evidence about their teaching. To present a comprehensive picture, the teaching section of the portfolio usually includes several "artifacts of teaching" (Edgerton, Hutchings, and Quinlan 1991, 9). These artifacts may include course syllabi, teaching materials, teacher-developed tests, student journals or diaries, videotapes of teaching, peer observation reports, samples of student work, and student course evaluations. Additional evidence of teaching effectiveness may include a statement of one's teaching philosophy and narratives that help interpret the artifacts.

Colleagues are apparently better able to judge the research productivity of fellow faculty than evaluations of teaching or service. Kremer (1990) reported that evaluations of teaching had lower reliability when colleagues said they were less confident about the basis for the evaluation. Many scholars have insisted that certain aspects of teaching can be assessed only by classroom observation (Hart 1987) or analysis of videotapes (Perlberg 1983; Smith, Hausken, Kovacevich, and McGuire 1988). However, peer observation usually involves faculty peers that review an instructor's performance through classroom observation as well as examination of instructional materials and course design. Observations of classroom behavior are intended for reviewing the teaching process and its possible relationship to learning. The focus is generally on verbal and non-verbal behaviors of both the instructor and the students in the classroom.

While peer observation of teaching is common in the British higher education system as a means of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Fullerton 1999; Wankat and Oreovicz 1993), peer observation in the United States has not enjoyed such prominence. As Hutchings (1996) observed, however, there is now a growing body of practice related to the peer review of teaching, a powerful set of players, a growing literature on the subject, and a sense that this is indeed an idea whose time has come. A number of studies have linked peer observation of teaching to enhancing professional practice

(Beaty 1998; Race 2001). Considering its importance as evidence of effective teaching, it is critical that the peer observation process be valid and reliable. Thus, the processes of observation and evaluation require a very high degree of professional ethics and objectivity, and training in observational and analytical skills.

The literature available is helpful as a source of recommendations for developing a peer observation process (Braskamp and Ory 1994; Dilts, Haber, and Bialik 1994; Mento and Giampetro-Meyer 2000; Ory 2000; Peterson, Kelly, and Caskey 2002). Suggestions include involving multiple observers; having multiple classroom visits; offering extensive training for observers; following professional ethical guidelines; and using a process characterized by planning, open communication, feedback, and trust. Yet we know little about how those faculty members most intimately involved in peer observation perceive the process—the observers and those faculty members who are required to be observed. This study follows an earlier examination of the perceptions of peer reviewers—deans, chairs, and peer review committee members—who are involved in high-stakes decision making (Yon, Burnap, and Kohut 2002). In this article, we examine the attitudes of the individuals who were observed and those who conducted classroom observations.

The main goals of this study were to compare the perceptions of observers and those observed regarding the process of peer observation, the reporting of peer observations, the usefulness of peer observation as an evaluation tool, and whether either group feels that the process improves teaching effectiveness. When combined with our earlier data, we compared the importance that Reappointment/Promotion/Tenure (RPT) committees (including administrators) and those observed place on peer observation reports as well as other documents or artifacts that may be presented as evidence of effective teaching.

## Method

### *Sample and Procedure*

The research was conducted at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, an institution that has increased its enrollment from 10,000 to about 20,000 stu-

dents within the past twenty years. There has also been a greater emphasis placed on research at the university: UNC Charlotte has been reclassified as a Research II educational institution by the Carnegie Foundation and now offers nine doctoral programs in addition to baccalaureate and master's programs in its seven colleges. The growth and reclassification of the university have placed new demands on its faculty. Research is now the primary focus within the university, but teaching is still a priority.

Peer observation has become an integral part of the evaluation of untenured faculty in the UNC system. In 1994, the North Carolina General Assembly required that classroom observations of untenured faculty be used as part of the evidence presented for reappointment, tenure, and promotion decisions. At UNC Charlotte, each college or department was given the freedom to develop its own peer observation process within a set of broad guidelines. These guidelines generally require a pre-observation meeting, a classroom observation, and a post-observation meeting. The process itself requires exchange and feedback between observer and observee.

We developed two surveys for this study. One was mailed to every untenured or newly tenured faculty member whose classroom was observed as part of the promotion and tenure; this group included 163 individuals and, for brevity, will be referred to as *observees*. The second survey was sent to all 343 tenured faculty members who may have conducted peer observations and will be referred to as *observers*. The surveys were similar, but not identical. In particular, untenured faculty were asked about the usefulness of documents occasionally included in an individual's teaching portfolio; these questions were not appropriate for tenured faculty members who were conducting peer observations. The results will be reported and compared with RPT committee opinions in a later study.

In this study, survey data was used to examine the perceptions of those individuals being observed (*observees*) and of those conducting the observations (*observers*). Specifically, the objectives of this study were to ascertain whether observers and observees:

- View pre- and post-observation as being useful parts of the peer observation process
- Feel that adequate training has been provided to conduct peer observations
- Experience stress through their participation in the peer observation process
- View the peer observation reports as effective, valid, reliable, and valuable or useful measures of teaching

Additional objectives sought to understand whether observers:

- Tend to be more comfortable making constructive rather than critical comments in peer observation reports
- Include suggestions for improvement in peer observation reports
- View the peer observation process as improving their own teaching and the teaching of observees

Still other objectives attempted to understand whether observees:

- Perceive that only positive comments are in their peer observation reports
- View the suggestions for improvement, if any, as helpful
- View the peer observation process as improving their own teaching

## Results

We received eighty responses from untenured faculty (a 49.1 percent response rate) and 143 responses from tenured faculty (a 41.7 percent response rate). Table 1 shows how these responses were divided among the various colleges of the university. We note that the large percentage of responses from arts and sciences is consistent with the relative size of this college compared to the other colleges in the university.

Because the peer observation process plays a role in RPT decisions, we asked both tenured observers and untenured observees to rate the importance of teaching, research, and service in making such decisions. Responses were coded on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (*very important*) to 5 (*not important*). Not surprisingly, results indicate that both observers and observees regard research as most important (observer mean = 1.33; observee mean = 1.37), followed by teaching (observer mean = 2.46; observee

**TABLE 1. Responses from Untenured and Tenured Faculty**

College	Frequency	%
<i>Untenured (Observees)</i>		
Architecture	3	3.8
Arts and Sciences	37	46.3
Business	7	8.1
Education	16	20.0
Engineering	6	7.5
Information Technology	3	3.8
Nursing and Health	5	6.3
Missing	3	3.8
Total	80	≅100.0
<i>Tenured (Observers)</i>		
Architecture	3	2.1
Arts and Sciences	82	57.3
Business	22	15.4
Education	16	11.2
Engineering	7	4.9
Information Technology	2	1.4
Nursing and Health	4	2.8
Missing	7	4.9
Total	143	100.0

mean = 2.15) and service (observer mean = 3.44; observee mean = 3.44). In our first paper cited earlier, a survey of administrators and RPT committees reflected similar results.

To expedite the analysis of survey items, we grouped them into three categories: (1) those that pertain to the process of observation, (2) the peer observation reports themselves, and (3) the impact of peer observation on teaching effectiveness. We are aware that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and some questions could be placed in more than one group or moved from one group to another.

## Peer Observation Process

In each survey, we asked several questions about the process employed in classroom observation. For example, each group was asked about the type of instrument used in its academic unit. As the results indicate in table 2, both observers and observees reported that the written narrative (observer = 60.5 percent; observee = 52.1 percent) was the predominant instrument employed in their academic units, followed by checklists and narratives (for observers) and

narratives, video, and self-analysis (for observees). The combination of narrative, videotapes, and self-analysis was most prevalent in the College of Education.

At UNC Charlotte, colleges have adopted an observation process that includes pre-observation and post-observation interviews. Research has identified the importance of these meetings in the peer observation process (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004; Hogston 1995; Martin and Double 1998). The pre-observation interview allows the observer to put the observed class into a broader context, while the post-observation interview allows an exchange of ideas between observer and observee. The observers were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements. Responses were coded on a five-point scale, with 1 representing strong agreement and 5 representing strong disagreement. The observees were asked to agree or disagree with the statements using the same scale.

Findings reported in table 3 suggest that observers have a broad range of feelings about being trained to engage in classroom observations. While many feel that they were adequately trained, roughly an equal number report the opposite senti-

**TABLE 2. Observation Instruments Employed in Academic Units**

Type	Observers (%)	Observees (%)
Checklist/Rating Form	4.0	5.6
Written Narrative	60.5	52.1
Self report/Self-analysis	1.6	1.4
Other	0.8	2.8
Checklist and Narrative	18.5	5.6
Narrative, Video, and Self-analysis	6.5	19.7
Other combinations of the above	8.1	12.8

**TABLE 3. Observer Feedback**

	Strongly Agree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Disagree 5	Mean
I have been appropriately trained to conduct peer observations.	18.9%	18.0%	24.6%	17.2%	21.3%	3.04
When I conduct a peer observation, I follow the peer observation guidelines.	36.8%	37.6%	17.1%	8.5%	0	1.97
Pre-observation meetings are a useful part of the peer observation process.	30.0%	32.5%	18.3%	10.0%	9.2%	2.36
Post-observation meetings are a useful part of the peer observation process.	36.7%	35.0%	14.2%	6.70%	7.5%	2.13
I am comfortable making constructive comments in the reports I write.	41.1%	37.9%	11.3%	4.8%	4.8%	1.94
I am comfortable making critical comments in the reports I write.	22.4%	29.6%	18.4%	20.8%	8.8%	2.64
Conducting peer observations is stressful for me.	1.6%	19.2%	27.2%	29.6%	22.4%	3.52

ment (mean = 3.04; neutral = 3). Observers reported that they follow the established guidelines for classroom observation defined by their academic unit (mean = 1.97). They believe that both pre-observation (mean = 2.36) and post-observation meetings (mean = 2.13) are useful to the classroom observation process. Observers also felt more comfortable making constructive comments in

observation reports (mean = 1.94), but felt less so in making critical comments (mean = 2.64). Finally, observers felt that conducting peer observations was minimally stressful (mean = 3.52).

Single-sample *t*-tests show that each of these results, with the exception of the question on adequate training, is significantly different from neutral (mean = 3.00) at a 95 percent confidence level. A

paired-sample *t*-test showed that the difference in content level between constructive and critical comments was also significant.

As indicated in table 4, observees believe that their observed classes were representative of their teaching (mean = 1.63). They also believe that peer observers were adequately trained (mean = 2.74) and that both pre-observation (mean = 2.62) and post-observation meetings (mean = 1.97) are useful parts of the classroom observation process. All of these results were different from neutral at a 95 percent confidence level. Observees were more nearly neutral about whether peer observers included only positive comments in their observation reports (mean = 3.2). Finally, observees felt that having their classes observed was minimally stressful (mean = 3.38).

#### *Peer Observation Reports*

In each survey, we asked several questions about the usefulness of peer observation reports in the reappointment or tenure and promotion process. Recall that a valid report accurately reports data, while a reliable report is consistent across observers. The means of responses (1 = strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree) for various statements are reported in table 5.

Both observers (mean = 2.77) and observees (mean = 2.56) felt that their peer observation instrument was an effective measure of teaching and that the peer observation reports are valid (observer mean = 2.84; observee mean = 2.62; significance at 0.114). It is interesting to note that observers were more pessimistic about the reliability of their reports (mean = 3.56)—although they are not really in a position to know—than were the observees (mean = 2.73). Finally, both observers (mean = 2.71) and observees (mean = 2.33) believed that peer observation reports were both valuable and useful. All of the results were significant.

#### *Perceptions of Teaching Improvement*

As part of the evaluative process required in reappointment, promotion, and tenure decisions, the North Carolina General Assembly mandated classroom observation. Researchers have pointed to the value of such observations as addi-

**TABLE 4. Observee Feedback**

	Strongly Agree 1	2	3	4	Strongly Disagree 5	Mean
The observed classes were representative of my teaching.	54.2%	31.9%	11.1%	2.8%	0	1.63
Peer observers have adequate training.	11.4%	27.1%	42.8%	12.9%	5.7%	2.74
Pre-observation meetings are a useful part of the peer observation process.	21.7%	30.4%	21.7%	15.9%	10.1%	2.62
Post-observation meetings are a useful part of the peer observation process.	37.7%	36.2%	18.8%	5.8%	1.4%	1.97
Peer observers tend to include only positive comments in their reports.	5.7%	20.0%	34.3%	28.6%	11.4%	3.2
Having my classes observed was stressful.	11.3%	14.1%	21.1%	32.4%	21.1%	3.38

**TABLE 5. Usefulness of Peer Observation Reports**

	Observers (Mean)	Observees (Mean)
Peer Observation Instrument is an effective measure of teaching.	2.77	2.56
Peer Observation Reports are valid.	2.84	2.62
Peer Observation Reports are reliable.	3.56	2.73
Peer Observation Reports are valuable/useful.	2.71	2.33

Note. Valid = accurate; reliable = consistent. Neutral would be 3. Numbers less than 3 show agreement.

tional evidence of teaching effectiveness (Bell 2002; Braskamp and Ory 1994; French-Lazovik 1981; Martin and Double 1998; Millis 1987; Morehead and Shedd 1997). This process is unavoidably summative in nature. That is, classroom observation was used in making personnel decisions. We were interested in determining whether it also had a formative aspect. Formative evaluation is designed to improve teaching performance. To this end, our survey included several questions to investigate if the peer

observation process was perceived as improving teaching.

Observers and observees were each asked if suggestions for improvement or alternate teaching methods were given. Approximately three-quarters of respondents (observers = 77.2 percent; observees = 72.9 percent) indicated that such suggestions were given. Next, those who reported that suggestions were given were then asked how these suggestions were made. With respect to observers, 21 percent indicated that comments were

written and 14 percent indicated they were oral; approximately 21 percent of observees indicated that comments were written and 6 percent indicated they were oral. These results indicate that participants in the peer observation process may find it easier to communicate comments in writing because it appears to be less direct and less challenging.

The observees were then asked if suggestions were helpful and if the peer observation process helped improve their teaching. Observees reported that the suggestions for improvement were helpful (mean = 2.40) and that their own teaching improved as a result of these suggestions (mean = 2.89).

The observers were then asked if the peer observation process improved their own teaching and the teaching skills of those observed. Interestingly, the observers felt stronger about the peer observation process improving their own teaching (mean = 2.75) than they did about improving the teaching of the observees (mean = 2.93). Although the difference between these two means is relatively small, a paired-sample *t*-test gives a two-tailed significance of 0.071 to this difference. (With 93 percent confidence, this difference is statistically significant.)

## Discussion

As the debate about the validity of colleagues' evaluations of classroom teaching for personnel decisions continues, more insight is needed concerning the relative value of peer observations in making personnel decisions and improving teaching. Rinehart (1993) reminds us that such "performance appraisals" can serve as demotivators, resulting in stifled initiative, little innovation, and reduced teamwork. At its beginning, teaching evaluation was driven by administrative rather than faculty and student needs. In recent years, however, several new demands for teaching evaluation have emerged: public demand for greater accountability in higher education, a resurgence of national interest in the improvement of undergraduate education, and a desire to make teaching evaluation fairer, more accurate, and factored into collegiate reward structures.

Findings in this investigation are grouped under three areas: the peer obser-

vation process, peer observation reports, and perceptions of teaching improvement. First, within the process, respondents were asked about the instruments currently being used in their departments and their perceptions concerning the value of the process. With all the possible combinations of teaching styles and effective teaching characteristics, university teaching is clearly a complex activity that requires a flexible, cogent system of evaluation. Results of this study support this assertion by noting that varied types of peer observation instruments were being used. Clearly, although the narrative form is the most preferred, it is frequently combined with other forms such as video, checklists, and self-analysis. This finding suggests a need for instruments to be flexible to accommodate various teaching styles.

Interestingly, both observers and observees reported that they valued the peer observation process and the pre- and post-observation meetings, and followed the established guidelines. This may be due in large part to faculty participating in the process and creating guidelines in their respective academic units. Such participation is clearly advocated in the available literature (Bernstein, Jonson, and Smith 2000; Braskamp and Ory 1994; Travis 1997).

This investigation also found varied responses to the training of observers. Such a finding may point to the need to more explicitly train faculty in classroom observation techniques. Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004), Manning (1986), and Hogston (1995) all point to the benefits of training observers. Faculty who are trained in observation techniques or have experience in observing and offering feedback to faculty generally are more competent (Centra 1993, 1975) and may become more accurate observers of their colleagues and more insightful of their own abilities as teachers (Keig and Waggoner 1994). However, such training is not often provided because of the lack of institutional support, faculty time, and interest. Furthermore, observees may not know whether faculty members have been trained.

It is likely that the peer observation process will influence how teaching is regarded in personnel decisions. Trust and credibility, as Braskamp and Ory

(1994) have posited, are vital concerns in the process. The results of our study support the work that suggests colleagues who trust and respect each other can be valuable in helping improve each other's teaching (Austin 1992a and 1992b; Bernstein, Jonson, and Smith 2000; Centra 1986; Rice and Cheldelin 1989; Woolwine 1988). In the development of peer observation reports, respondents were asked about the validity, reliability, and usefulness of such reports. The results of our study indicate that faculty expressed trust in the process, as evidenced by their willingness to offer both constructive and critical comments in peer observation reports and through their positive perceptions of validity and reliability of the peer observation reports. Logic suggests that if the appraisal of teaching is to be effective, it must employ data that is perceived to be both valid and reliable by observees, observers, and peer reviewers, and this should exist in some systematic way (such as in peer observation reports).

Both observers and observees noted that suggestions for improvement or alternate teaching methods were given and that most of the information was given orally and in writing to the faculty member. This flexibility may point to the difficulty some faculty have when communicating constructive information in writing.

Clearly, faculty and administrators must shift from defining effective teaching as that which is based on demonstrated competence to that which is based on documented achievement. The documentation of effective teaching is viewed as encompassing a wide range of activities that contribute to the quality of teaching and learning in an educational institution. With no universal set of agreed-upon activities, one goal of a peer observation process should be to develop a clear understanding of what is required to document achievements. In this study, both observers and observees noted that conducting or participating in peer observation was not very stressful, and both groups noted that their own teaching improved as a result of their participation in the process. Perhaps clear communication and expectations as well as participation from the outset ameliorated the effects of stress and helped participants see the value of observation.

Bernstein and Edwards (2001) have argued that peer review of teaching has not made much progress into the routine of academic life because some faculty believe the process takes inordinate amounts of time, provoking skepticism that such efforts will get noticed or rewarded, given the dominant role of student evaluations in assessing teaching performance. These arguments have been supported in this and other studies. One way to overcome such problems and give peer review the credibility it deserves is by developing a network of shared experiences among academic institutions and understanding both the breadth and depth of the process (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004). Also, peer observation needs to be linked to faculty reward structures. Finally, multicampus conversations on peer review could significantly increase our understanding of what constitutes excellent teaching and how to measure it.

*Key words:* classroom observation, faculty observation, peer review

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