Guiding Principles for Quality Peer Review of Teaching

Center for Educational Excellence in Pharmacy
UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy

Overview

The following guide was developed to assist in the peer-review of teaching. The main focus of this process is on formative feedback – that is – the assessment of teaching performance to improve teaching. In formative assessment there is no final judgment on whether someone defines the teaching expectations according to School standards (see Appendix 1 for standards). The intention is to make known to the instructor what they are currently doing well and what areas they are can improve in. In summative peer-evaluation a final judgment is made on whether this person is demonstrating the desired qualities of teaching by the institution; summative assessment is typically reserved for promotion and tenure decisions.

Peer review of teaching can include a variety of tasks but there are certain general principles to consider. These include the following:

- **Be patient.** Those being reviewed need time to adjust to the idea and the process.
- **Peer review takes time.** The process is often more time consuming than what many faculty are currently doing.
- **Knowing and understanding a subject does not mean you can teach it well.** Good teachers are made, not born.
- **Do no harm.** Peer review can be anxiety producing and difficult for both reviewer and reviewee.
- **Good peer review involves being tough on the issues, but tender on the person.**
- **Peer review includes a focus on the thinking behind the work.** Teachers need to give thought to their approaches to teaching.
- **Peer review should focus on specific teaching behaviors.**
- **Discourse should be based on reasoned opinions,** not personal biases or judgments.
- **Build on strengths.** It is easy to determine what needs work. First identify what went well and only then offer feedback on what needs work, to allow the faculty member to teach even better.
- **Feedback must be provided in a timely and thoughtful manner.** The reviewer should meet with the instructor being reviewed to provide this feedback. This conversation should be followed by written feedback.

Things to Avoid

- **The ‘Halo’ Effect:** Allowing one positive factor to outweigh all other aspects of the assessment.
- **The ‘I Don’t Like Your Face’ Effect:** Allowing one negative factor to outweigh all others.
- **Leniency:** Being uncritical in order to avoid controversy.
- **Central Tendency:** Evaluating everyone as ‘average’ because it is less trouble.
- **Tunnel Vision:** Focusing on only one pail of the performance rather than the whole picture.
- **Going Through The Motions:** Not taking the evaluation seriously, or making up your mind in advance.
- **The Expert:** Using your own teaching performance as criteria for judgment rather than agreed-upon evaluation standards.
- **Gotcha:** Using the evaluation for political purposes or personal revenge.
One problem that surfaces consistently in the early stages of peer reviewers is the difficulty in keeping an open mind about teaching styles and methods different from our own. One should be very cautious about absolute statements such as ‘you should never use overhead transparencies that way,’ or ‘case studies should only be conducted this way.’ Our task as observers is to ascertain if the method being used seems to be effective, not whether it conforms to notions of teaching derived from our own experience. There are many ways to be effective.

**Things to do during class**

1. **Arrive at class ahead of time**. Note the physical arrangement of the room, student to-student interactions, what happens when the instructor arrives, and interactions before class between instructor and students. Listening to students before class often gives clues to their expectations and attitudes concerning the class and instruction.
2. **Record as much of what is said and done as possible**, creating a “log” of the class session. Record comments verbatim.
3. **Write impressions or questions about the teaching in the margins or in parentheses**. Separate them from observations.
4. **Describe verbal and non-verbal behavior**, emphasizing what happened rather than interpretations of events. “Student looking at clock 9:30, 9:34, 9:38” is preferable to “student appears anxious for class to end,” or “Instructor talking to board 9-9:15” rather than “instructor mannerism is distracting.”
5. **Wear a watch when observing a class**. Every few minutes note the time in the margin so that the class structure can be put in context.
6. **Diagram instructor and student positions and interactions** are helpful for illustrating the degree of student participation, who participates in class and how often.
7. **Stay through an entire class session**. If you must leave, make sure the instructor knows beforehand.
8. **Observe from a position that is minimally distracting to students and the instructor** and to have another vantage point of students from that of the instructor-unless he or she requests otherwise.
9. **Don’t intervene in the teaching during the observation**. As exception, only intervene by explicit prior agreement with the instructor.

**Providing Feedback to the Instructor**

The peer-review process is meant to help the instructor become a better teacher thus providing constructive criticism is important. Here are some important elements in offering feedback:

1. **Positive phrasing** — provides a positive framework for the message.
2. **Concreteness** — is grounded in specific, observable behavior.
3. **Action-orientation** — gives the individual a specific plan of action to follow.
4. **Focus** — provides feedback on behavior that the individual can change.

When providing feedback to the teacher, it is important to follow the principles of constructive criticism. Constructive criticism is descriptive and specific; it focuses on the behavior rather than on the person and it is directed toward behavior that a person can change. Constructive criticism also is affirming in the sense that achievements and efforts toward change should be acknowledged, and suggestions for change should be made in a positive way. When giving constructive criticism one should always check to insure clear communication — verify that the receiver understands exactly what you are talking about.

The examples below exemplify various aspects of constructive feedback.
1. ‘The time and energy you devoted to the preparation of the class discussion questions is clearly well-received by the students; they do the work and are clearly interested in the subject. This is a definite plus. However, you might find that many of the detailed, fact based questions that you asked in class might be given to the students ahead of time to self-test their comprehension, and emphasize higher-order, integrating questions in class discussion. This tactic would allow you to delve more deeply into the issues with the students.’

2. ‘The case study discussion seemed to be very productive and most of the students participated with meaningful comments and good answers to your questions. Unfortunately, there didn’t seem to be enough time for closure, and I sensed that the students needed to have some resolution of at least the major issues in the case, especially since their mid-term is coming up soon. Since you are trying to keep to your schedule, it is probably impractical to resume the discussion in the next class, but one solution might be to prepare a handout to tie up some of the loose ends that you can give to the students next time.’

3. ‘Your opening points of the lecture were very interesting and I could see how they were related to the day’s topic, but during the lecture the students seemed a bit confused about the connections. Perhaps you could write these points on the board or prepare them ahead of time on an overhead transparency so you could refer to them again during the remainder of the lecture.’

Written and verbal feedback should contain positive reinforcement of good teaching practices as well as suggest constructive changes. When offering suggestions for modifications or changes, the wording should indicate your interest in the recipient teacher’s effectiveness in the classroom and should be sensitive to the fact that the written comments could be used in the personnel process.

- Be as descriptive and specific as possible when writing the ‘strengths’ and ‘recommendations’ portions of the peer review forms as well as the narrative portions.
- The observation forms should be marked and written with care.
- Do not use jargon or vague words.
- Use active voice rather than passive voice.
- Look at the subject, verb, and object or complement for each sentence. Those three words should convey the sense of the sentence.
- Be careful about the adjectives and modifying phrases which you use.
- Be descriptive (rather than evaluative) and specific (rather than general) when writing the ‘strengths,’ ‘recommendations,’ and the summary portions of the peer classroom/lab review forms. This will help those who will read your comments to gain an accurate picture of the class or lab.
- Place your comments in context. This will help both the instructor and others clearly understand your meaning.
- Use examples to support general statements.
- Make your comments collegial and professional.
- Phrase your comments in a positive manner whether they are compliments or suggestions for change.
- Begin the discussion and the written summary with a statement of ‘what went well’ or the ‘teaching strengths.’
- Be careful when using adjectives or linking words or phrases (...but,... on the other hand) as the latter increase the ambiguity of statements.
- Be sensitive to different teaching styles. Make recommendations appropriate for the teaching style.
- Direct your suggestions or recommendations toward behavior the teacher can do something about. Suggestions that require resources or support which are not available, that require complete revisions of courses or major departures from the individual’s teaching style are likely to be neither helpful nor doable.
- Be balanced and unbiased in your comments and recording of what occurred.
Using the School of Pharmacy Forms

The Center in collaboration with the Curriculum Committee has developed a set of forms to assist in the peer-review of teaching process. The forms are based on five areas: effective communication, organization, knowledge and enthusiasm, environment, and instructional effectiveness. Each section contains individual items that contributed to the overall area and can help guide you in what you should be looking for during the process.

The forms themselves do not necessarily get submitted to the reviewee but serve as a guide for you as the reviewer. The information from the form should be converted into a narrative according to the suggestions within this document (see Appendix 2 for an example).

As this is a new form, we would appreciate any feedback such as:

- are there redundant items?
- Does an item seem to be in the wrong section?
- Are their items missing from each section?

We know the current form is a bit burdensome in its length but the detail is needed to ensure consistency in review and to help relatively inexperienced reviewers (and reviewees) to know what are the major items during the peer-review process. Please send comments to Adam Persky (Apersky@unc.edu)
## PEER EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTION

Name of Colleague Being Observed  
Course:  
Date(s) Observed:  
Setting:  
Class Size  
Names of observer(s):  

Please provide as many constructive written comments as possible. Use the following rating scale to indicate your *overall rating* for each component on the form:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 = poor</th>
<th>2 = fair</th>
<th>3 = good</th>
<th>4 = very good</th>
<th>5 = excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

### EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

**Criteria**
- The instructor established the relevance of information.
- Instructor clearly communicated expectations for the session (e.g., stated learning objectives).
- Instructor spoke audibly and clearly.
- The session was well paced.
- Distracting mannerisms or expressions were NOT apparent.
- Instructor communicated concepts effectively.
- The instructor phrased questions clearly.
- The instructor positively restated student questions or comments for the benefit of the class.
- The instructor listened and responded effectively to student comments and questions.
- Where applicable, links to and coordination with other courses are specified.

**Strengths:**

**Suggestions for improvement:**

### ORGANIZATION

**Criteria**
- The instructor was well prepared.
- Concepts were presented in a logical, organized way.
- The session focused on key information and concepts.
- The instructor summarized major points of the lesson.
- Time was used effectively, with the session beginning and ending at the scheduled time.

**Strengths:**

**Suggestions for improvement:**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KNOWLEDGE AND ENTHUSIASM FOR THE SUBJECT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The content adequately addressed the stated session goals/objectives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The material was appropriate for the level of the course and the students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The instructor incorporated recent developments, ideas, or approaches to the subject.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Breadth of material appropriate for the amount of time dedicated to this topic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clear distinction between fact and opinion/practice experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergent opinions or conflicting views presented when appropriate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggested for improvement:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ENVIRONMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Criteria</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor encouraged student questions and discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor encouraged students to answer difficult questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor provided positive feedback for student discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor was courteous and respectful when interacting with students (i.e., acted in a professional manner)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor creates a classroom atmosphere conducive to learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor treats students impartially and respectfully</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor provided positive feedback for student discussion and questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor reacts to student professional behavior issues appropriately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor demonstrates flexibility in responding to student concerns or interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggested for improvement:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Criteria

- The instructional methods used were appropriate to / effective in communicating the content
- The instructor effectively balanced presentation and discussion
- The class time was creative, varied, and interesting
- The instructor encouraged critical thinking by modeling/explaining how to think/work through problems
- The instructor used questions to determine if student’s understood the concepts
- Preparatory or in-class learning activities were clearly described and relevant to stated objectives
- Instructor provided periodic summaries of the most important ideas and ties things together throughout the class
- The instructor effectively used in class activities and outside assignments to gauge student progress
- The instructor provides examples or practices on application of content
- The instructor encouraged student involvement / participation
- The instructor effectively used audio/visual/learning aids to accompany verbal presentation
- Handouts were organized and clear; facilitated note taking

### Strengths:

### Suggestions for improvement:
Appendix 1: Defining Teaching Expectations

All teaching faculty at the UNC Eshelman School of Pharmacy are expected to meet basic teaching competencies. Assessment of these competencies includes consideration of (1) student activity and achievement, (2) instructor attributes, (3) instructor-student interactions, and (4) instructional methods and materials (Palmer and Collins, 2006; Chickering and Gamson 1987), with evidence drawn from a variety of sources (e.g. self, student and peer review and evaluation). The process of defining, documenting and assessing whether faculty meet basic teaching expectations should be developmental to the individual instructor, viewed as continuous progression (i.e., formative assessment of teaching), and judged according to explicit and agreed upon indicators and sources of evidence, including self, student and peer review and evaluation of instruction and instructional materials.

Student activity and achievement: As a result of effective teaching and learning practices, students should:

- Be actively engaged in the learning process and responding to learning experience (demonstrating positive anticipation, interacting, completing tasks, concentrating)
- Achieve defined learning outcomes, including discipline-specific and general education outcomes (e.g. critical thinking, communication, ethical decision-making, self-learning, social and contextual awareness and responsibility)
- Provide feedback regarding their learning

Instructor attributes and instructor-student interactions. Instructors should:

- Be enthusiastic for the subject
- Be approachable
- Possess and apply good organizational and administrative skills to their teaching
- Keep abreast of their subject discipline
- Articulate clear expectations to students
- Actively engage students in the learning process
- Utilize teaching methods that address multiple learning styles and preferences
- Encourage student effort and achievement
- Provide students constructive feedback
- Commit extra support to less able students
- Reflect on and change practice

Teaching methods: Instructional design, methods and materials should:

- Provide students with explicit, challenging but achievable, and positive learning goals
- Be ‘pitched’ at the appropriate level, based on assessment of students’ prior learning (knowledge and abilities)
- Be well aligned with defined learning outcomes
- Focus attention on key learning points / concepts
- Organize information in ways that are meaningful to students and relate new knowledge and concepts to prior knowledge
- Provide learners with opportunities to practice and receive constructive feedback
- Use teaching environments (in- and out-of-class time) to maximize student learning opportunities (i.e., interaction with the material, other students, instructors, etc)
Appendix 2: Sample Narrative for a Formative Assessment

RE: Formative Assessment of Dr. Peyton Mitchell

NOTE: This should not be used for purposes of promotion and tenure to demonstrate teaching competence. This is a formative assessment to help the instructor improve.

Dear Dr. Mitchell,

I observed you on October 23 and 30, 2009, teaching two classes: anticoagulation pharmacotherapy and basic hematology in PHCY 013. Overall, I thought your performance in these two classes was very good. Your teaching exemplified the techniques for promoting critical thinking and it was clear to me that the students enjoyed both the challenge and the engagement.

You used a combination of large group discussion and small group work, based on problems and case studies (often with humorous titles) that provided real-life situations that the students had to resolve. Students had prepared for these lessons by studying modules related to the subject matter, so they were ready to try and apply their knowledge to the problems posed in class.

The lesson objectives were not only displayed on PowerPoint slides, but he discussed them with the students at the beginning of the lessons. You were obviously well prepared for these classes, since you provided outlines of the sessions to the observer beforehand. You handled student questions well and always directed the discussion back to the students, giving relevant examples where necessary and moving the students toward a deeper understanding of the concepts by demonstrating your thinking about how to solve the problems.

Although you followed best practice in leading these discussions, you can improve on these discussions by encouraging students to reach for answers even when they were unsure. There were times when students appeared unsure of the question being asked - rephrasing questions when necessary can be helpful in facilitating discussion.

Overall, I thought the classes I observed went very well. You have a calm demeanor and communicated with students professionally and at an appropriate level.

Sincerely,

Neal Edwardson, Ph.D.
Professor
School of Pharmacy