Collaborative Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education: Best Practices Review and Recommendations

RICHARD D. KOCUR
Grove City College

ABSTRACT: One of the most commonly used approaches for faculty development in higher education is collaborative peer observation. The collaborative model has been widely studied and, as such, has produced well documented best practices. These best practices will be summarized as a framework for institutions interested in launching a collaborative peer observation program as well as used as a basis for recommending enhancements to existing programs.

KEYWORDS: collaborative peer observation, higher education, best practices

INTRODUCTION

"As iron is sharpened by iron; one person sharpens another" Proverbs 27:17 (NABRE). Teaching in higher education is not a static profession. Times change, students change, subject matter changes, and educational techniques change. Given everything that changes, both inside and outside the classroom, what must remain constant is the pursuit of improving one's craft. The purpose of this article is to identify and summarize best practices of collaborative peer observation of teaching in higher education. For institutions considering the launch of a collaborative peer observation program, the summation of best practices can offer a road map for a consistent and well-structured program. For institutions with an existing collaborative program, the program enhancements outlined can demonstrate how to take a current program even further. The benefits of a collaborative peer observation program will ultimately allow faculty members who take part to be sharpened by the skills and abilities of others.

PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING

Peer observation of teaching is widely promoted as an effective mechanism for developing and improving teaching practice (Fletcher, 2018). The extant literature supports this method of individual development through numerous documented benefits (Beaty & McGill, 1995; Chism, 2007; MacKinnon, 2001). Peer observation of teaching in higher education is utilized for a variety of reasons and across a spectrum of formal and informal processes (Golparian et al., 2015). Institutions use it for individual development needs, feedback on specific teaching practices, as a part of the onboarding process, and in the evaluation of tenure or promotion. Participation can be voluntary or mandatory, depending on the goal of the process.

There are three widely accepted models of peer observation of teaching in higher education. These models are an evaluative model, a developmental model, and a collaborative model (Gosling, 2002). Each of the models carries specific definitions and are utilized for varying purposes and objectives.

The Evaluative Model

An evaluative model, also known as a management model, involves observation of professors by administrative staff or direct supervisors, such as department chairs or deans. The primary purpose of an evaluative model is to evaluate teaching quality and to ensure compliance with a predefined set of teaching standards (Yiend et al., 2014). In this model,

the reviewee is being judged against specific criteria, such as administrative standards for evaluating sub-par performance, metrics for tenure or promotion decisions, and specifications for overall quality assurance within an institution. A key tenant of the evaluative model is the relationship between the reviewer and the reviewee. Given the circumstances necessitating the use of the evaluative model, this relationship is based on the power and authority of the reviewer. There are positives to the evaluative model, including quality assurance, compliance, and adherence to standards, but there are also negatives with this model, such as faculty resistance, alienation, and isolation (Gosling, 2002).

The Developmental Model

A developmental model involves observation by educational developers or expert teachers. The purpose of a developmental model is to observe and give feedback on specific, pre-defined development needs (Yiend et al., 2014). The usual focus of the developmental model is developing good teaching practices focusing on the process and the mechanics of teaching (Fletcher, 2018). This focus can encompass lecturing styles, course design, development of learning materials, or other areas both inside and outside of the classroom. Given its broad approach, the developmental model is perhaps the most widely applicable of the three review models (Fletcher, 2018). Unlike the evaluation model of peer observation, the developmental model is less judgmental. The expert reviewers lend an air of credibility and authority to developmental needs. Often the feedback in the developmental model is only between the reviewer and reviewee, lessening the degree of judgment involved. In addition, the developmental model can help to enhance teaching practice by encouraging critical self-reflection based on the feedback provided (Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014). The downsides of the development model, however, include a potential lack of impact as the actionable response to developmental feedback is owned by the reviewee. Thus, there may not be a mechanism to ensure feedback is implemented or the actions taken demonstrate an observable improvement.

The Collaborative Model

The collaborative model is one in which teachers observe teachers with the goal focused on the improvement of teaching quality through dialogue as well as self and mutual reflection (Blackmore, 2005; Gosling, 2002). Unlike the evaluative and developmental models, the collaborative model is based on equality and mutuality between the reviewer and the reviewee. These are colleagues helping colleagues without any notion of judgmental dialogue; any feedback given is framed as constructive. Benefits of the collaborative model include increased collegiality among participants, a non-judgmental approach to gaining feedback, and interestingly, mutual benefit for the reviewer and the reviewee. Literature and anecdotal evidence suggests that while the reviewee is the primary target for benefits as a result of being observed, the reviewer also gains from simply having observed a colleague practice their craft (Kohut et al., 2007; Thomas et al., 2014). There are negatives to the collaborative approach, however, including a lack of adoption given its strictly voluntary nature, varied interpretations of what teaching quality looks like, and potential fear of being critical of one's colleagues (Georgiou et al., 2018).

An overview of the models of peer observation, adapted from Gosling (2002) and Fletcher (2018), are summarized in Table 1.

Each of these models has its place in higher education based on specific situational goals. The collaborative peer observation model, however, has been the subject of much discussion due to its self-directed nature, its relative ease to implement, its flexibility, and the developmental benefits it provides (Bell & Thompson, 2018). Subsequent discussion of peer observation in higher education in this analysis will be centered on the collaborative model and will seek to identify common best practices as well as provide a set of recommendations for an existing collaborative program.

BEST PRACTICES IN COLLABORATIVE PEER OBSERVATION

Collaborative peer observation in higher education has garnered attention as a tool to improve one's skill in teaching as a result of its collegial interaction and constructive support (Golparian et al., 2015). This model of peer observation has also been extended into the online classroom (Murphy & Stover, 2016). Whether the process of collaborative peer observation takes place in the physical or the online classroom, there are several key components necessary to ensure success. These components are broadly captured in the process of the collaborative model proposed by Gosling in 2002 and further refined by the same author in 2014 (Gosling, 2002; Gosling, 2014). While not a comprehensive list reflecting all possible components of a collaborative model, the following process elements are consistent with much of the existing literature in terms of recommended components (Fletcher, 2018; Thomas et al., 2014).

Reviewee Focused

At the center of a collaborative peer observation effort are the needs of the reviewee. The initial best practice approach is to keep the process reviewee-focused. Since

Table 1: Models of Peer Review

	Evaluative	Developmental	Collaborative
Participants	Senior staff	Educational developers	Peers / colleagues
Intent	Appraisal, promotion, tenure, quality assurance	Improvement or demonstration of competencies	Improve teaching
Result	Judgment	Feedback, plan of action	Reflection, improvement of teaching
Relationship	Power	Expertise	Equality
Confidentiality	Between manager and reviewee	Between reviewer and reviewee; may include manager	Between reviewer and reviewee
Inclusion	Select faculty	Select faculty	All faculty
Verdict	Quality assessment	Feedback on improvement	Non-judgmental, constructive feedback
Items Reviewed	Teaching performance, other sources of performance / evaluation	Teaching performance, course design, materials	Any aspect chosen by the reviewee
Benefits	Institutional, departmental	Reviewee	Both peers

Note: Adapted from Gosling (2002) and Fletcher (2018)

the process is designed to sharpen one's skills through the collaborative, non-judgmental feedback of a colleague, the reviewee must be the driver of both identifying the desired development goal and the one responsible for implementing suggested improvements. It would not be recommended that a reviewee ask for feedback without a clear development goal or specific improvement area identified (Chism, 2007). It's difficult for a reviewer to participate in observation without knowing what to focus on. In that situation, feedback may be too general to have an impact or may not be what the reviewee is concerned with. Clear objectives, the fewer the better, must be provided by the reviewee as a starting point.

The next item on the best practices list is more of an overarching item that has relevance to multiple steps in the process: the use of a template to capture information important to the reviewee and the reviewer.

Collaborative Peer Observation Form

A templated approach to information gathering during the peer observation process helps to capture the goals and objectives of the reviewee while providing some structure for the reviewer to note observations and provide feedback (Bell & Cooper, 2014). Some authors recommend three distinct forms (pre-observation, observation, and post-observation) while others combine the templates into one form used throughout the process (Bell & Cooper, 2014). In either case, the best practice concerning capturing information

regarding development goals, observation notes, and post-observation feedback is that all steps should be templated. Of note is the best practice recommendation that any form(s) or notes captured during the process become the property of the reviewee after the observation session so they have time to think about the feedback before the post-observation meeting (Fletcher, 2018).

Reviewee and Reviewer Interaction

The interaction of the reviewer and reviewee takes place over three sessions. First, is the pre-observation meeting. This meeting is driven by the reviewee to outline focused and specific developmental goals. The reviewee should also provide the reviewer with basic background on the course, content covered to date, learning outcomes for the content to be covered during the observation, and any other relevant points. This ensures the reviewer has the appropriate context for the observation.

Second is the interaction during the observation event. During this time, the reviewee follows through with their planned learning activity, and the reviewer captures notes specific to the criteria agreed upon during the pre-observation meeting. Martin and Double (1998) note the important role of the reviewer in this stage, stating, "Peer review is most useful as a formative process: recognizing strengths and suggesting possible areas for attention or alternative approaches, rather than simply judging" (p. 164). Additional recommendations for the reviewer include using a systematic

approach to taking notes, observing both the teacher and the students, noting their engagement and interaction, and resisting the urge to act as an expert. This means resisting the temptation to project what you, the reviewer, would do in a given situation (Martin & Double, 1998).

Last is the interaction between the reviewer and the reviewee during a post-observation meeting. This is the time when the two parties come back together to debrief. A post-observation meeting should be driven by the reviewer and occur as soon as possible following the observation. For this meeting to be productive, the discussion needs to be truthful and constructive (Fletcher, 2018). This means the reviewer should be prepared to deliver feedback on points of strong performance, as well as areas of opportunity to improve. Feedback should be based on specific examples that were observed. It is best practice to limit feedback to a handful of points and ensure they are aligned to the developmental goals of the reviewee (Fletcher, 2018). The three-step process of pre-observation meeting, observation, and a post-observation meeting is a widely accepted approach to collaborative peer observation of teaching in higher education (Fletcher, 2018; Golparian et al., 2015; Martin & Double, 1998; Thomas et al., 2014).

Selection of a Reviewer

Of critical importance to the success of the collaborative peer observation process is the selection of a reviewer (Shortland, 2004). The process is one that relies on the collegiality and respect of the participants. As such, the reviewer should enjoy good working relationships with colleagues. In addition, while some literature suggests that interdepartmental colleagues should be paired given a shared knowledge base, other authors note that working too close may be a deterrent to participation and recommend a cross-departmental approach (Thomas et al., 2014). Regardless of the academic background of the reviewer, their selection should be grounded on experience in the classroom, the ability to give constructive feedback, a reputation for collegiality, and a skill set aligned to the developmental objective of the reviewee (Shortland, 2004).

Other Considerations

In addition to the above noted best practices, it is also noteworthy to consider the following aspects of a collaborative peer observation program (Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004). This does not represent a complete list but captures an approach generally considered best practice outside of the process-related items listed previously.
1) Participation in the program should be voluntary.
2) All interactions between the reviewer and the reviewee should be confidential.

3) The session to be observed should be agreed upon in advance.
4) The observer should remain discrete during the observation session.
5) The post-observation meeting should occur as soon as possible.

If an institution is interested in improving overall teaching quality, the implementation of a collaborative peer observation model should be given serious consideration. The above-noted best practices can help serve as a guide in the construction and implementation of a collaborative peer observation program. But what if an institution has a collaborative program already in place? Is there an opportunity to enhance such a program, making it even stronger? The answer to this question is most definitely yes. Even if an institution currently has a collaborative peer observation program in place, there is still an opportunity for further enhancement of the program and a greater impact on faculty development.

COLLABORATIVE PEER OBSERVATION PROGRAM ENHANCEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

A Christian liberal arts college has had an active collaborative peer observation program for the past seven years. Details regarding the program were gathered via a personal interview, conducted by this author, with the program's supervisor. The college has had moderate success using the program to help develop the teaching skills of faculty members across departments in both the liberal arts and STEM schools. On average, between six and twenty faculty members participate in this voluntary program each semester, representing approximately 4% to 13% of full-time faculty. Some faculty members have participated on multiple occasions while others have engaged with the program only once. Consistent with the findings across much of the literature on collaborative peer observation programs, the college faces participation challenges in their program related to the time commitment involved in participation, the view of instructor autonomy in the classroom, confidentiality concerns, a low comfort level with delivering (or receiving) feedback, and the single point-in-time nature of observation.

The college follows many of the established best practices regarding collaborative peer observation. Participation is voluntary, participants follow the three-meeting framework, and the program's goals are focused on improving teaching through dialogue and mutual reflection. Despite the adherence to best practices, there is still room for improvement. The following recommendations are designed to augment

the college's existing program in order to increase awareness, participation, and to further the overall objectives of the program.

Recommendation 1

The current program is promoted via email and announced at the first faculty meeting of the new academic year. To increase interest and participation in the program, it is also recommended that a description of the program, and in particular the program's goals and benefits, be discussed in departmental meetings at multiple points throughout the semester. These meetings are smaller gatherings that occur more frequently and lend themselves to re-enforcement of the program. A brief promotional piece (e.g., a brochure or Powerpoint slide) could also be created for this setting.

Recommendation 2

The collaborative model is based on peer-to-peer interaction and confidentiality. Despite the re-enforcement of this message within the college's program, there is likely some concern about whether participation in the program or feedback results may be used for evaluative purposes. Currently, the point person for the collaborative program serves in an administrative role. To help remove any doubt about the program's intention, it is recommended that the program be led by a respected faculty member with no administrative responsibilities. If the program is genuinely based on peer-to-peer interaction, the leadership of the program should also reflect that approach. This recommendation may serve to alleviate the concerns of some faculty and drive greater participation.

Recommendation 3

Outlining one's developmental goals is necessary for the reviewee to gain benefits from participation. Capturing and delivering feedback is an essential duty of the reviewer. Without capturing specific goals and objectives and then documenting specific observable instances, the process becomes superficial and the benefits may be lost. The college's current program has a template for use by the reviewee and reviewer; however, the use of the form is optional. While it is unclear as to how many participants do not use the templated form, it is recommended that a basic form focused on capturing one to three developmental objectives of the reviewee and with plenty of space for reviewer note-taking be utilized as required. In addition, alternative methods for observation including audio and video recording should be an option for use based on the needs of the reviewee.

Recommendation 4

Much of the literature on collaborative peer observation cites the benefits of participating for the reviewee *and* the reviewer (Bell & Thompson, 2018; Fletcher, 2018; Golparian et al., 2015). While being observed in the classroom can be beneficial, the observation of a teacher who exhibits the type of skill one wishes to develop would also be beneficial. With that notion in mind, it is recommended that the program incorporate a new element: the element of observation by the prospective reviewee before being observed themselves. For example, if a faculty member wishes to develop classroom facilitation skills, that faculty member could first observe a class where a strong facilitator teaches. Observing the skill in practice may lead the prospective reviewee to incorporate certain techniques into their observation event thus enabling feedback to be more relevant and timely.

CONCLUSION

Collaborative peer observation of teaching is widely promoted as an effective mechanism for developing and improving teaching practice through supportive feedback as well as self and mutual reflection (Fletcher, 2018). The benefits of this approach to individual development have been well documented, but its widespread use has also been hindered by elements such as time, confidentiality, and a lack of knowledge about feedback delivery (Beaty & McGill, 1995; Chism, 2007; MacKinnon, 2001).

Given the focus on the collaborative model, best practices in terms of participation, the process of peer-to-peer interaction, and managing desired outcomes are well documented (Bell & Thompson, 2018; Fletcher, 2018; Golparian et al., 2015). These best practices can provide any institution interested in starting a collaborative peer observation program with a proven framework.

Institutions with well established collaborative peer observation programs also face challenges that limit the potential impact of the program. In order to further develop existing programs, enhancements may be necessary. Administrators and faculty leaders must constantly evaluate opportunities to improve existing programs through the type of enhancement recommendations outlined in this analysis.

Among all the methods of sharpening the skills and abilities of faculty members, none hold greater potential than collaborative peer observation. This approach can drive faculty development, support student learning, and raise the game of all involved. It is a worthwhile investment in time and effort and one which should continually be evaluated for opportunities for improvement.

REFERENCES

Beaty, L., & McGill, I. (1995). *Developing reflective practice: observing teaching as a component of professional development.* Brighton: University of Brighton.

Bell, A., & Thompson, K. (2018). Supporting peer observation of teaching: Collegiality, conversations, and autonomy. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International,* 276-284.

Bell, M., & Cooper, P. (2014). Implementing departmental peer observation and feedback for academic teaching development. In J. Sachs, & M. Parsell, *Peer review of learning and teaching in higher education* (pp. 151-164). New York: Springer.

Blackmore, J. (2005). A critical evaluation of peer review via teaching observation within higher education. *International Journal of Educational Management,* 218-232.

Carroll, C., & O'Loughlin, D. (2014). Peer observation of teaching: Enhancing academic engagement for new participants. Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 446-456.

Chism, N. (2007). *Peer review of teaching: A sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Bolton, MA: Anker.

Fletcher, J. A. (2018). Peer observation of teaching: A practical tool in higher education. *The Journal of Faculty Development*, 1-14.

Georgiou, H., Sharma, M., & Amanda, L. (2018). Peer review of teaching: What features matter? *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 190-200.

Golparian, S., Chan, J., & Cassidy, A. (2015). Peer review of teaching: Sharing best practices. *Collected Essays in Learning and Teaching,* 211-217.

Gosling, D. (2002). *Models of peer observation in teaching.* York: Learning and Teaching Support Network.

Gosling, D. (2014). Collaborative peer-supported review of teaching. In J. Sachs, & M. Parsell, *Peer review of learning and teaching in higher education* (pp. 13-31). New York: Springer.

Kohut, G., Burnap, C., & Yon, M. (2007). Peer observation of teaching: Perceptions of the observer and the observed. *College Teaching*, 19-25.

MacKinnon, M. (2001). Using observational feedback to promoted academic development. *The International Journal for Academic Development,* 21-28.

Martin, G., & Double, J. (1998). Developing higher education teaching skills through peer observation and collaborative reflection. *Innovations in Education and Training International*, 161-170.

Murphy, C., & Stover, E. (2016). A peer observation of teaching process for faculty who teach online. *Journal of Applied Education and Policy Research*, 3-11.

Shortland, S. (2004). Peer observation: a tool for staff development or compliance? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 219-228.

Thomas, S., Abraham, M., Raj, S., & Beh, L. (2014). A qualitative review of literature on peer review of teaching in higher education: An application of the SWOT framework. *Review of Educational Research*, 112-159.

Whitlock, W., & Rumpus, A. (2004). *Peer observation: Collaborative teaching quality enhancement.* London: University of Westminster.

Yiend, J., Weller, S., & Kinchin, I. (2014). Peer observation in teaching: The interaction between peer review and developmental models of practice. *Journal of Further and Higher Education,* 465-484.