"A little help from our friends…": Improving Teaching with Peer Reviews

Albert Ingram
Kent State University
aingram@kent.edu

David M. Dees
Kent State University Salem Campus
ddees@kent.edu

Rochester Institute of Technology

Peer Review of Teaching: A Transactional Process

Peer review of faculty teaching (Berk, 2006; Berk, Naumann, & Appling, 2004; Berstein, Jonson, & Smith, 2000; Blackmore, 2005; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005; Hutchings, 1995, 1996; Millis, 2005; Wagenaar, 2005; Waggoner & Keig, 1995) is becoming increasingly prominent at many institutions of higher education as they seek ways to understand and assess teaching competence and effectiveness. This presentation focuses on a peer review system that has been utilized over the past two years at Kent State University. Developed from the (T/LT) transactional model of college teaching (Dees, Ingram, Kovalik, Allen-Huffman, McClelland, & Justice, In Press), this system encourages reviewers to appreciate the complexity of teaching and learning.

The T/LT model encourages teacher reflection and research that view teaching as a holistic experience. Developed from the perspective that inquiry needs to appreciate the complexity of human learning, this model posits teaching as a transactive process in which all of the elements involved in the teaching event interrelate, connect, and influence the classroom experience (Dewey, 1933, 1938; Dewey & Bentley 1949; Eisner, 1994). The model promotes holistic inquiry into classroom occurrences. It challenges reflection that focuses on specific aspects of the art of teaching, and encourages inquiry that analyzes teaching from a more complex perspective that includes thoughts and observations before, during, and after the event.

The Elements

As depicted in the diagram, the T/LT model contains seven primary elements. These include: teacher, environment, content, learner, assessment, mode, and style.

- The "teacher" element of the model includes the personal history, expectations, and beliefs of the individual teacher. This element is the self-reflective and autobiographical piece of the model. The teacher's beliefs are a primary element in any instructional transaction.

- The "environment" element identifies the issues of the space involved in the experience. The environment includes a host of factors that may exist in the physical, social, or even virtual environment in which the learning and teaching is taking place. In the physical environment we may find factors such as the seating arrangements (does the room allow the students to be grouped and arranged in a variety of ways or is it more rigid?), the technology available (teacher's station with projector, Internet access, and so forth as well as, nowadays, wireless access and power supplies for student laptops), or basic human comforts such as good heating, cooling, or lighting. The social environment may be affected by the size of the class, its composition, and the relationships that develop among students and between students and instructor. When a course goes online, that does not remove the environment as a factor, but it does change it. The virtual environment may consist of the software used to enable students to gather information and communicate. Different systems may work in very different ways and likely have effects on how a specific instructional transaction takes place. An example might be the difference between holding an online discussion through various systems, such as chat rooms, graphical chat rooms, and asynchronous discussion boards.

- The "content" section of the model addresses the pedagogical issues associated with the given content that is being taught. The content element includes both the actual content of what is being taught, including knowledge, information, skills, and other factors. It also

includes the specific pedagogical issues associated with that content. Most disciplines in higher education have traditions and knowledge about how they are best taught. In addition, educational research points to the fact that different kind of goals and objectives should be taught in different ways. Basic concepts, for example, may be best learned differently from advanced problem solving in a field.

- o The "learner" aspect of the model identifies issues of learning style and student expectations. The learners themselves are a central part of the instructional transactions. They bring to a situation a set of styles, abilities, expectations, and attitudes that surely affect how the transaction proceeds. Any teacher with more than minimal experience has found that what worked in a class in the morning can lead to pedagogical disaster in a section of the same course in the afternoon. A different set of students may react completely differently to our most carefully laid plans.

- o The "assessment" component of the model clarifies how the identification of student knowing impacts the teaching experience. We are all familiar with assessment in courses. It is important, however, not to fall into the trap of separating it too distinctly from the teaching/learning transaction. There are several reasons for this. First, student expectations of how they will be assessed and on what knowledge and skills is a critical factor in determining how they approach the learning process. Second, a good assessment can be the place where students learn the most, especially if it is well integrated into the instructional transaction. In addition, how the teacher chooses to find out about student knowledge and learning can have profound effects on how he/she approaches the transaction itself, both in the planning and in the moment.

- o The "mode" element identifies how the implementation of the content affects the teaching experience. By mode we mean how the teacher translates the content and other factors into strategies, activities, and other elements of teaching. Lecture mode may be far different from discussion mode or a problem based learning mode. As teachers, we have a growing arsenal of teaching methods available to us. We must find them, learn how to use them effectively, and implement them. Although such instructional strategies are of critical importance to an instructional transaction, it is important to note that their ultimate effectiveness still depends on their interaction with the other elements of the teaching/learning transaction.

- o Finally, the "style" component of the model identifies the impact that a teacher's personality can have on the teaching/learning experience. This, in many ways, is the classroom manifestation of the teacher element. Teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and philosophies are revealed in our classroom transactions with students. This component of the model challenges us to examine our humanness as witnessed in our classroom attitudes towards the students, content, and education in general.

It is important to note that each model component contains guiding questions. These questions are designed to encourage an inquiry process that is sensitive to a transactional perspective. These guiding questions should be viewed as suggested starting points for teacher reflection and peer review. Participants are encouraged to develop their own relevant questions within each area of the T/LT model in an effort to frame the professional focus of the peer review.

A primary focus of this peer review system is to enable faculty in any field to develop a rich description of one another's teaching based on more than merely observing a single class in person or on video. Before and after the observations, participants engage in interviews in which

they discuss the individual's teaching philosophy, course syllabus, assessments, and other issues. In order to develop a rich description of the teaching, reviewers are challenged to think of themselves as educational critics, adopting attitudes similar to those of film, art, or theatre critics. The role of an educational critic is to capture and document the qualities of the teaching transaction so that a reader of the documentation is able to gain a sense of the holistic experience of the classroom. As Eisner (1991) notes, "The task of the critic is to perform a mysterious feat well: to transform the qualities of a painting, play, novel, poem, classroom or school, or act of teaching and learning into a public form that illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experienced" (p. 86). The description produced should allow the reader to understand how an individual faculty member approaches the overall teaching process. Primarily, the description should be useful to the faculty member for improving her or his own reflective process on teaching as well as her or his teaching itself.

The goal of this peer review system is not primarily evaluative. Evaluating and judging teaching is the job of various groups and individuals at the university; faculty members are more concerned with understanding and improving teaching. Both participating in the system and choosing to include the results in a reappointment, tenure, and promotion file are entirely voluntary. Individual faculty members are the people who should make these decisions.

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Using the Peer Review System

As a Reviewer

As you are performing the peer assessment, think of yourself as a film, art, or theatre critic. The role of an educational critic is to capture the qualities of the teaching transaction in a way that allows the reader to experience the classroom as much as possible. As Eisner (1991) notes, "The task of the critic is to perform a mysterious feat well: to transform the qualities of a painting, play, novel, poem, classroom or school, or act of teaching and learning into a public form that illuminates, interprets, and appraises the qualities that have been experience" (p. 86). Use the categories here to guide you in presenting a rich description of the classroom that allows the reader to comprehend the teaching event. This narrative and qualitative format allows for a deeper understanding of the teaching/learning transaction.

To use this system to review a fellow faculty member's teaching, we recommend that you follow these steps:

1. *Review the process and the form.*
   Ensure that you understand all the elements and the questions you are trying to answer. Plan the things that you will do to answer those questions.
2. *Obtain key course documents from the faculty member.*
   Observing what goes on the classroom is important for understanding the teaching/learning transaction, but there are many other elements that cannot necessarily be directly observed there. Much of teaching takes place before and after the teacher and student meet in the classroom, even assuming that meeting takes place in today's blended and online courses. One way to gain a deeper understanding of a colleague's teaching is through reviewing the documents that he or she produces for students, including
   a. Syllabus
   b. Assignments
   c. Assessments (e.g. tests)
   d. Student information (e.g. if the faculty gathers information about the nature of her/his students, what does that information tell you?)
   e. Sample of student products (tests, papers, projects)
3. *Hold a conversation with the faculty member.*
   Before observing a classes, you should discuss the process and their teaching with your colleagues. The goal of this conversation is to prepare you to observe the class more effectively because you can put your observations into a context. You should try to gain insight into the faculty member's teaching philosophy and approaches, as well as other key points. A more detailed list of questions is found in the following instrument.
   a. During this conversation, you should explore many of the questions listed in the first phase of the instrument and take notes on what is said. For example, what is your colleague's teaching philosophy? How does he or she view students?
   b. If you have any questions that were raised by your review of course documents, this is the time to raise them.
   c. Part of the purpose of the conversation is to reveal what elements of your colleague's teaching you do not understand yet. These will help guide your later observations.
   d. You can also ask the person being reviewed whether he or she has specific questions and concerns that need to be addressed in your review.
4. *Visit the classroom or review the online course materials and elements (the "virtual classroom")*

A central part of this system of peer review is observing how the person actually interacts with students, presents information, and so forth. There is no substitute for seeing a teacher in action, either in the classroom or online. With the document review and preliminary conversation behind you can observe more knowledgeably and effectively. The review instrument includes questions that you may want to concentrate on during your observations. Important issues include

    a. What is the teacher's style?
    b. How does the teacher interact with students?
    c. What are students doing during the class and how do they react?
    d. What about the environment helps and hinders the teaching/learning transaction?
    e. What follow-up questions do you have?

5. *Follow-up with your colleague after the observation.*
After you spend time in the classroom or with the online materials, you will likely have more questions. A follow-up session can help you answer them as well as gain more information as noted by the review instrument. You should also answer any questions that your colleague may have.

6. *Write a report based on your observations.*
The final step is to write your observations and conclusions for your colleague. Remember that your goal is to give a rich description of that colleague's teaching, while including information about what is especially good and what might benefit from improvement. The faculty member can then decide what to do with your report. We suggest that the report include the following elements:

    a. An introductory paragraph
    Set the stage by describing how and when you reviewed this person's teaching.
    b. A paragraph (minimum) on each of seven areas
    For each of the seven areas in this model of teaching—teacher, student, content, mode, environment, style, and assessment—describe in neutral, non-evaluative language whatever you can about this person's teaching. We suggest at least a paragraph on each area, although the descriptions could easily be longer.
    c. A paragraph on what is best about this person's teaching
    Everyone has areas in which he or she is strongest. Write a description of what you believe this person's major strengths are as a teacher, based on your observations and descriptions above.
    d. A paragraph on what should be improved
    Similarly, none of us is a perfect teacher. This is where you can make suggestions for how your colleague could improve. The most useful suggestions tend to be the most specific ones and the ones that fit well with other aspects of the person's teaching.

As the one being reviewed

This system is intended to make the review process transparent for those of who are being reviewed. To make sure that you are not surprised, you should examine it so you know what your reviewer is looking for and why. To be prepared, you can

1. Review the process and form
Get an idea of what questions the reviewer is trying to answer and reflect on those issues yourself before talking with her or him.
2. Gather the information that your reviewer will need, such as copies of course documents, data you have on student characteristics, and so on.

3. Be ready to be open and honest about your teaching, the good parts and the parts that haven't worked so well. It would be good if we all had an underlying goal of being able to discuss our teaching openly and non-judgmentally with our colleagues.
4. Throughout the process, and not just when you get the report from the reviewer, look for formative information, information that you can use to improve your teaching and your courses.

For those developing a teaching portfolio

The system described here can be used by individual faculty members as a way to organize a teaching portfolio. Such a portfolio can be helpful to peer reviewers, to members of Reappointment, Tenure, and Promotion committees, and to the professor her or himself. Using this way to organize your portfolio can help you ensure that you have reflected on multiple elements of your teaching and not just a few of them.

Faculty Peer Review Instrument

Faculty members reviewing a colleague's teaching are asked to complete this instrument in preparation for writing their review and conclusions. There are many elements that enter into any teaching/learning transaction, and this instrument touches on most of them.

Planning and Preparation—Syllabus, Documents, and Conversation

Overall Approach to Teaching
- What does the syllabus tell you about this faculty member's overall approach to or philosophy of teaching?
- What are the goals and objectives of the course and how well are they communicated to the students?
- What questions about do you have after reading the syllabus?
- Should those questions have been answered in the syllabus?
- What do the course assessments tell you about what the instructor values in student learning?
- **How is the faculty member taking the learners into account in the class?**

Instructional Strategies (Modes)
- What does the course syllabus tell you about the teaching/learning strategies used in the class?
- **What instructional strategies are used in this course? (Examples: Lecture/discussion; Problem Based Learning, Service Learning, etc.)**
- Why are those strategies used?
- What is the relationship between the goals and objectives of the course and the strategies begin used?

Environment
- How does the physical or virtual environment affect the teaching/learning transaction in this class?
- Has (and can) the instructor done anything to modify the space?
- How does the time of day (or the asynchronous nature of an online class) impact the teaching/learning transaction?

Teacher
- **What educational theories or beliefs ground this faculty member's perspective toward education?**

Content
- Has the faculty member reflected on the place of this course within the curriculum of her/his program and the traditions of her/his field?
- Does the course reflect these considerations?
- How does the course content fit in with the educational programs of which it is a part?
- How does the course content create personal meaning in my students' lives?
- How does the course content area develop a global perspective or awareness in my students' lives?

Style
- How does the teacher describe his/her teaching style?
- Why does the educator believe he/she has developed this style?

Assessment
- What types of assessment are used?
- Why are these assessments used?
- How are assessment results used?
- How is the assessment tied to the overall goals of a program or accrediting body?

Learners
- **What types of learners does the instructor believe are in the classroom?**

In-Class Observations

Instructional Strategies (Modes)
- **What instructional strategy was used during this class session? (Examples: Lecture/discussion; Problem Based Learning, Service Learning, etc.)**
- Why are those strategies used for this content?
- What is the relationship between the goals and objectives of the course and the strategies begin used?

Environment
- What is the physical or virtual environment of this class?
- How does the physical or virtual environment affect the teaching/learning transaction in this class?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of this environment for teaching and learning?
- Has (and can) the instructor done anything to modify the space?
- How does the time of day (or the asynchronous nature of an online class) impact the teaching/learning transaction?
- How are technologies being used to further the aims of this class?

Teacher
- **How was the teachers educational philosophy, theories or beliefs exhibited in this session?**

Content
- Does the teaching reflected on the place of this course within the curriculum of her/his program and the traditions of her/his field discussed previously?

Style
- How does the teacher actively promote a positive emotional climate in the class?
- How does the teacher exhibit passion for the teaching/learning process?
- Do students feel safe (physiologically and psychologically) in the class?

Assessment
- Is the content explored during this session connected to the course assessment?
- Is there a connection between the content explored in this session to the overall goals and objectives of the course?

Learners
- What types of learners appear to be present in this classroom?
- What learning styles are represented among these learners?
- What are student expectations, motivations, and attitudes toward this class?
- What developmental characteristics of adult learning are represented in these students?
- **How is the faculty member taking the learners into account in the class?**

Follow-up and Assessment

Overall Approach to Teaching
- Was the teacher's philosophy and approach to teaching reflected in their practice and interactions with students on that day?
- Did the teaching aim at attaining the results found in the goals, objectives, and assessments?

Instructional Strategy (Modes)
- Did the teacher feel this mode was successful approach during this session?
- **What, if anything, would he/she have done differently?**

Environment
- How did the teacher feel the physical or virtual environment affect the teaching/learning transaction in this class?

Teacher
- **How did the teacher feel his/her educational philosophy, theories or beliefs exhibited in this session?**
- **Did the teacher's interactions with students reflect the teacher's attitudes and beliefs about teaching?**

Content
- How did the teacher feel this session was a reflection of this course within the curriculum of her/his program and the traditions of her/his field?

Style
- Did the teacher believe the students felt safe (physiologically and psychologically) in the class?

Assessment
- Are the assessments of students' knowledge and skills directly tied to goals or objectives?
- What types of assessment are used?
- Why are these assessments used?
- How are assessment results used?
- How is the assessment tied to the overall goals of a program or accrediting body?

Learners
- Did the teacher believe that all learning styles were addressed in this session?
- **Did the teacher believe that the students were engaged in the learning process?**
  - **Why or Why not?**