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Nancy Van Note Chism  
*Indiana University*

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# Essays on Teaching Excellence

## *Toward the Best in the Academy*

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## Making Sure That Peer Review of Teaching Works for You

**Nancy Van Note Chism, *Indiana University School of Education, Indianapolis***

*Peer review of teaching: A hastily arranged visit to the classroom of a faculty member in desperate need of quick testimony on teaching effectiveness, resulting in a bland letter stating that the class is interesting and students seem engaged.*

Given this prevailing practice in peer review of teaching, no wonder most faculty members fail to see its inherent usefulness. To many, this limited view and practice have rendered it a necessary evil, only to be used under duress. This essay seeks to expand both definition and practice. Let's begin with another definition:

*Peer review of teaching: Collegial efforts to understand and describe teaching performance for the purposes of making improvements and/or fair decisions.*

Who's against "improvement"? What's not to like about "fair"? Viewed in this light, peer review presents more attractive possibilities.

### **The Formative-Summative Distinction**

On the formative side, when the main interest is in improvement, peer review of teaching can describe any interchange between colleagues that is focused on the quality or impact of teaching assumptions and actions of either or both. Summative peer review of teaching includes processes leading to decisions on hiring, merit pay, teaching awards,

promotion and tenure, or post-tenure review. Peer review of teaching happens routinely in the daily lives of faculty members. When academics claim that they don't have peer review of teaching at their campus, they are likely saying that they don't have *intentionally-developed* processes of peer review.

### **Intentional Peer Review of Teaching**

As with other forms of development and evaluation, good process demands careful thought about criteria, evidence, and standards. A truly intentional system of peer review of teaching articulates processes that address the goals of the system, provide resources and preparation for both reviewers and those being reviewed, and include regular monitoring and revision. These ideal systems are rarely in place. How can a faculty member work with peer review of teaching under varying conditions? The remainder of this essay addresses this question.

### **Making Formative Peer Review Work for You**

Feedback is essential to learning. We tell this to our students all the time. And we believe it often,... except in our own cases. There are lots of reasons for our reluctance to invite a peer review: we may feel that the time commitment needed to provide a peer review would be a burden on a colleague; we may feel uncomfortable since our teaching seems so personal; we may doubt whether our colleagues know much more about teaching than we do, or feel that they will someday have to make or contribute to a personnel decision about us and will remember our struggles rather than our accomplishments.

Situating teaching issues as "learning puzzles" is one helpful way to think differently about the benefits of peer review. How about a good conversation about why group work never seems to work for your students or why your tests don't produce the demonstrations of learning that you were hoping to see? Pursuing these opportunities is the logical route to improved satisfaction and better learning for your students. And it is formative peer review. How can you do this?

1. Be the initiator. Don't wait for a mentor to be assigned or an invitation to participate in a group. You should control your growth.

- a. Seek out colleagues who seem receptive and insightful and strike up the conversation.
  - b. Survey the organized teaching exchange vehicles on your campus for goodness of fit to the things you care about in teaching. If there aren't any, consider starting one.
2. Think carefully about whether working with an individual or peer exchange group would work best for you. Also think beyond your unit or even campus in seeking a review partner or group—the digital world has opened new possibilities.
  3. A good formative exchange involves a quest for deepening understanding by both parties. Be prepared to be both reviewer and one being reviewed. This may help address the discomfort as well.
  4. Approach the review with good information. Help your colleagues to know the context by pulling together materials that will inform them about your instructional design and student learning.
  5. Avoid using classroom visitation as the main mode of exchange. Course materials, exams, student work, or access to your class website can provide colleagues with much richer information. Mine the interchange for constructive ideas. Try to avoid being defensive or placing blame. Focus your thoughts forward.
  6. Keep a journal or notes. Cultivate reflective strategies and record your thoughts.
  7. View the time commitment as an opportunity rather than a chore. Getting your mind around this is essential.

### **Making Summative Review Work for You**

While many of the same strategies for formative review also apply to summative review, we often don't control the context or procedures for the latter, and the role of judgment, comparison, and action loom larger. You may be faced with a situation that is less than ideal—a peer review system that is rushed, without guidelines, secretive, or not aligned with your own concept of teaching effectiveness or that

of your campus. Or, you may be fortunately positioned in a unit with a thoughtful plan. In either case, you can take steps to increase the benefits you derive from the process. What are these?

1. Know the system. If your institution or academic unit has an established peer review system, read the documentation carefully.
  - a. Do you agree with criteria for effective performance? If not, discuss your reservations with your reviewer, explaining why you feel certain criteria are not consistent with your philosophy or applicable to your context. If no criteria are listed as part of the documentation, offer your list to the reviewer as a focus for the review. Sample criteria are listed in the sourcebook I prepared on peer review (Chism, 2006).
  - b. Look at the procedures. If there are worrisome procedures, such as an exclusive focus on classroom observation, or a random selection procedure for choosing a “typical” class, ask that the review be supplemented with some other procedures, such as review of materials. You might do this by simply offering extra documentation as “context materials” for the observation.
  - c. If the system excludes your voice from the procedure, try to insert it by inviting the reviewer to discuss findings informally with you before they are documented. Advocate for this as a chance to provide missing information and background information on your assumptions and conditions.
  - d. If there is no system, read about effective summative peer review and try to provide your reviewer with information on good approaches. (Again, see the sourcebook for literature references, examples, and templates.)
  
2. Know your reviewer.
  - a. Make efforts to talk with the reviewer beforehand. This should be couched as a chance to understand procedures rather than bias the review. If you know from past experience or from an introductory conversation that the reviewer’s views are incompatible with your own or that his or her knowledge of teaching and learning is shallow, you might try to seek a substitution. If this isn’t advisable or possible, use the introductory conversation to try to focus the review on the stated criteria (the system’s or your own).

- b. If you have choice of reviewer, try to recommend someone whom you feel is most knowledgeable about teaching and learning, sensitive to context and nuance, and growth-oriented in their own practice. If the system permits you to choose reviewers outside your unit or institution, your pool is even broader.
3. Provide good information. As with formative reviews, assemble key (not all!) materials that will help the reviewer understand not only your activities, but the thinking behind them. A short reflective statement with a few examples of how you implement your ideas in practice can influence the entire review. Make sure that your sample materials are organized, annotated with descriptions of the context, and packaged conveniently. Get these to the reviewer as quickly as possible so there is ample time for review.
4. If you are dissatisfied with a review, either during or afterward, use your system's procedures to voice your concerns. If no procedures are described, talk with your chair or the person responsible for peer reviews. You may be able to file a written reaction or provide supplementary information that addresses the inadequacies.

Used wisely, peer review of teaching provides an important supplement to other forms of evaluative information. It can be all the better if you make sure it works for you.

### **Reference**

Chism, N. V. N. (2006). *Peer review of teaching: A sourcebook* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

**Nancy Van Note Chism (Ph.D., The Ohio State University) is Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs at the Indiana University School of Education, Indianapolis.**

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Editor: Elizabeth O'Connor Chandler, Director  
Center for Teaching & Learning,

University of Chicago  
echandle@uchicago.edu