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By and for Us: The Development of a Program for Peer Review of Teaching by and for Pre-Tenure Librarians

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Abstract

Seven pre-tenure librarians at the University Library at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) created a peer review of teaching (PROT) group. This article provides an overview of the library literature on PROT and identifies the commonalities and variations found in PROT programs. The development, implementation, and benefits of the PROT program at IUPUI are discussed as well as outcomes pertaining to benefits for the observed, the observer, and for the PROT group as a whole. The authors also found that the implementation of a PROT program can enhance the sense of community among colleagues.

Author keywords: Peer review of teaching; PROT; Library instruction; Academic libraries

Introduction

Concerned about the effectiveness of our teaching, seven pre-tenure librarians at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) established our own peer review of teaching (PROT) program. This program was designed to improve teaching as well as create a forum for sharing effective and engaging instruction strategies. The process of class observation coupled with constructive feedback created a closer connection among participants and proved to be an effective community-building program. It is hoped that librarians elsewhere seeking to im-

prove teaching effectiveness could benefit by understanding and implementing this collaborative approach.

Although the PROT program launched at IUPUI shares some similarities with other peer review of teaching programs found in the literature, it is a unique adaptation. Like most of the cases described, the IUPUI program employed a three-part model (pre-observation, observation, and post-observation), and the purpose of the peer review was “formative” rather than “summative” (as defined below). Also, we identified a number of conditions necessary for success, for



example, the maintenance of confidentiality by those participating in the observations. We initiated this effort without the guidance of the administration, but enjoyed their support and interest.

The IUPUI program differed from those found in the library literature by encouraging flexibility: participants were granted the freedom to modify the process as needed in order to ensure that the program was beneficial for each participant. Perhaps most importantly, participation in the IUPUI program was limited to pre-tenure librarians. It was decided that this would be a project created by us, the pre-tenure librarians, for our own benefit.

This article discusses the rationale, development, implementation, and benefits of the PROT program and includes an account of relevant literature pertaining to the various aspects of the PROT program developed at IUPUI.

General Categories of PROT

Chism defines peer review of teaching (PROT) as “informed colleague judgment about faculty teaching for either fostering improvement or making personnel decisions.”¹ In academic libraries—as in all of higher education—PROT may be formative or summative. When it is formative, it is used to help improve teaching. When PROT is summative, it is used to assess the quality of teaching, and may be part of the tenure and promotion process.

Noting that instruction librarians were turning to their colleagues for help in improving their teaching skills, Levene and Frank report that some libraries have given structure to this process.² In describing this process, which they term “peer coaching,” Levene and Frank provide the foundation for librarians’ current understanding of PROT. Since the early nineties when this analysis was published, a number of case studies of peer review programs have appeared in the library literature.³ In one case, peer review is only one aspect of a program designed to evaluate library instruction; in another, it is one part of a professional development program for instruction librarians.⁴ In addition to describing a specific case, Snavely and

Dewald also include a comprehensive overview of PROT as practiced in academic libraries.⁵

A variety of terminology is used to describe PROT programs. Some authors employ the term *peer coaching*.⁶ Other terms or phrases in the literature include *peer observation*, *peer evaluation of instruction*, *peer observation and review*, and *peer review of teaching*.⁷ Snavely and Dewald employ both *peer evaluation* and *peer review*.⁸ In describing aspects of more comprehensive programs, Isbell and Kammerlocher utilize the phrase *informal, reciprocal colleague observations*, and Peacock uses *peer appraisal*.⁹ Despite the variety in terminology, it is clear that all of these authors discuss a very similar concept, albeit with variations in intention and/or implementation.

In addition to the print literature, it is worth noting that PROT has been a frequent topic at library conferences in the past several years, especially at those conferences that cater to academic librarians who deliver library instruction.¹⁰

Context

Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), founded in 1969 as a partnership between Indiana University and Purdue University, brought together all of the Indiana University and Purdue University schools then in existence in Indianapolis. The present University Library, completed in 1993, is IUPUI’s main library, and is a top student destination on campus for study, collaborative work, and access to information and technology. The University Library staff includes twenty-nine librarians, twenty-two of whom belong to the Teaching, Learning, and Research (TL&R) Group. These librarians serve as liaisons to various academic departments, providing reference, collection development, and instruction services.

In addition to being engaged in the delivery of a variety of traditional, discipline-specific information literacy instruction sessions, the TL&R librarians are members of an instructional team in IUPUI’s nationally-recognized “learning communities” and “first-year seminars.” The librarians are heavily engaged with courses supporting these programs, collaborating with

instructors, academic advisors, and student peer mentors, as well as leading several class sessions each semester. TL&R librarians spend a significant amount of time preparing for and teaching these sessions.

University Library does not have a library instruction coordinator, nor has it developed a formal infrastructure to support instruction. In the absence of an instruction training program, some of the pre-tenure librarians sought specialized guidance and support in the classroom. Our PROT program was developed in order to provide each of us with an opportunity to observe one another's teaching, learn from each other, and share strategies for success.

The pre-tenure librarians brought a variety of experience to the project. Four of the seven held a previous professional position in a library; six of the seven had delivered library instruction prior to coming to IUPUI; six of the seven librarians also had some type of formal training in education and/or pedagogy. However, only three of the seven had taught classes for credit (in any subject) before joining the library faculty at IUPUI. A few of the tenured librarians initially questioned the viability of a PROT program composed entirely of pre-tenure librarians. Our cohort, however, concluded that because of our previous experience and knowledge, as well as a genuine desire to help one another, we had the necessary tools to proceed.

Commonalities and Variations in Peer Review of Teaching Programs

A review of PROT case studies yields a number of commonalities among the programs, as well as several variations and differences. In this section, we discuss how our program is similar to what we found in the case studies and, perhaps more importantly, how the program at IUPUI differs from the others. We address the following themes: purpose of the program, formality and structure, process, observers, and participation. Additionally, we review several conditions for a successful PROT program.

Purpose

Most of the programs described in the literature acknowledge both formative and summative approaches to PROT; the literature suggests that the formative approach is more commonly used in libraries with two exceptions: the program at Oregon State University Libraries described by Middleton and the program at Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) described by Snavely and Dewald. Both are formative *and* summative.¹¹ In addition to enhancing teaching, the program at Oregon State was also used to satisfy tenure and promotion and requirements.¹² Similarly, Snavely and Dewald noted that the program at Penn State included both formative and summative assessments: "librarians could receive constructive feedback through which they might improve their teaching before receiving an evaluation that would affect their annual review and eventually their tenure and promotion."¹³

PROT programs, however, need not be connected to the tenure and promotion process. Programs that are formative, as are many described in the literature, emphasize individual development and improvement.¹⁴ Levene and Frank noted that "unlike the evaluation of teaching for promotion, tenure, and retention, peer coaching is a private matter based on self-assessment and self-determination."¹⁵

Our cohort chose to take a formative approach with its PROT program. As pre-tenure librarians, we were of course concerned with tenure and promotion requirements. However, because there was no formal assessment of instruction, we chose to focus on individual improvement. For this reason, we based our efforts largely on the peer-to-peer model described by Johnston, Mandeville, and Pow, which was focused on formative development.¹⁶ This approach enabled our PROT group members to experiment with new approaches or activities and get feedback from colleagues, knowing that successful efforts would be praised and less-than-stellar attempts would serve as learning experiences. The peer-to-peer approach enabled us to teach each other and to learn from each other at the same time.

Formality and Structure

The programs discussed in the literature varied as to level of formality and degree of structure. Some programs required training.¹⁷ A number of programs provided paper forms for the observer to record feedback.¹⁸ Another program included a letter documenting the class observation and the content of the discussions, but avoided numerical scores or letter ratings.¹⁹

Like the program at Pennsylvania State University described by Snively and Dewald, we chose not to use a checklist of characteristics or any form of numerical rating system to evaluate our peers.²⁰ We did, however, want some structure to aid the observation process, and so decided to use the observation protocol developed by Johnston, Mandeville, and Pow at the University of Alberta.²¹ This form provided us with a useful starting place that we then adapted and revised to suit our individual needs, focusing on some elements and disregarding other criteria as needed.

Individual librarians determined how many observations were beneficial, and each of us was responsible for selecting, inviting, and scheduling observers. Although it may have been useful to have feedback from several librarians as well as exposure to various viewpoints, not everyone needed or wanted multiple observations. Our approach to the program emphasized flexibility and ease of implementation—we wanted to keep the program from becoming burdensome.

Process

The process our group followed was modeled upon the most commonly described construct for PROT: a three-part scheme consisting of a pre-observation conference, the classroom observation, and a post-observation conference.²²

We found two exceptions to the three-part scheme in the literature. The first is the two-part “reflective peer coaching” process described by Vidmar that includes a planning conversation before the instructional session and a reflective conference after the instructional session. The session itself, however, is *not* observed.²³ The second, described by Snively and Dewald, in-

volves a fourth step—a written letter summarizing the classroom observation and the post-observation conference.²⁴

In most of the programs described in the library literature, pairs of librarians work with each other, providing one-on-one observation over an extended period of time. The program described by Brewerton, however, is distinct in that it involved “peer triads”—an approach in which staff were divided into groups of three.²⁵ The IUPUI peer group did not establish dedicated partners or triads; members were free to invite any other member to observe a class. In addition to accommodating the hectic schedules of seven librarians, this approach allowed us to observe a wide variety of classes, to be exposed to multiple instructional styles, and to receive feedback from several peers with different perspectives.

Observers

In the literature, the status of observer varied. In some programs the peer observer was someone of equal rank, while in others the observer was a supervisor (or of a rank higher than that of the librarian being reviewed). Within the cohort, there were concerns that if a librarian of a higher rank was involved, the focus of our program could shift from improving teaching to assessing individual performance. The added stress of being observed by a tenured librarian was not something that members of the peer group were interested in. Additionally, involving tenured librarians would have created an organizational dilemma: some pre-tenure librarians could be observed by their direct supervisors, conversely some of the tenured TL&R librarians would potentially be observing librarians for whom they had supervisory responsibility. It would have been difficult in these situations to ensure a formative approach to the process. The term *peer* in peer review of teaching is significant because it denotes an equal relationship among participants.²⁶ Unlike the other programs described in the literature, the IUPUI program was developed for the benefit of the pre-tenure faculty, and thus we decided to limit membership of the teaching group to only the pre-tenure librarians.

Participation

The literature also suggested that a PROT or peer coaching partnership is usually more effective when participation is voluntary rather than mandatory. As Levene and Frank noted, “librarians are more likely to accept and own the peer coaching process for themselves as well as their libraries if they can choose whether or not they wish to participate.”²⁷ Samson and McCrea—as well as Arbeeney and Hartman—also explicitly stated that their programs were voluntary.²⁸

Participation, however, can be required. While the programs described by Burnam, Norbury, and Brewerton do not use the term “mandatory,” their descriptions imply participation in the program was expected of those librarians with instruction responsibilities.²⁹ To comply with the University’s tenure and promotion guidelines, the PROT program at Oregon State University shifted from a voluntary process to a mandatory one.³⁰

Because the program at IUPUI began as a grassroots effort rather than an administrative initiative, it was natural that participation would be voluntary. This approach gave each librarian a sense of control over the process, a factor that further encouraged engagement.

Conditions for Success

Most of the case studies identified confidentiality and/or a respect for privacy as being a significant component of PROT.³¹ Confidentiality is essential as no one wants his or her instructional shortcomings to become common knowledge.

Some of the authors of the case studies noted that the presence of a “non-threatening environment” or “supportive environment” was essential for a successful PROT program.³² Our cohort developed a naturally supportive group dynamic since we were all facing similar challenges.

Several cases studied also indicated the importance of “administrative support.”³³ A PROT program launched without the support of the administration or without the support of key players involved in instruction may encounter

resistance that would impede its success. In our case, some of the tenured librarians—including the library’s dean—were interested in and supportive of the program.

Implementation at IUPUI

As a result of having attended a presentation on PROT, one of the pre-tenure librarians at IUPUI believed that she and her peers might benefit from a similar program. While the pre-tenure peers at IUPUI occasionally discussed instructional issues and concerns informally, there was no formal program to foster such dialogue. Establishing a PROT group would allow the pre-tenure peers not only to talk about strategies and approaches but also to see one another’s teaching in action. The IUPUI PROT group reviewed the practices and documentation and forms found in several other libraries’ PROT programs before adopting the general framework described by Johnston, Mandeville, and Pow.³⁴

Pre-Observation Meeting

In the pre-observation meeting, the librarian to be observed supplied information about the class, including course name, subject, academic level of students, topics to be covered, and learning objectives for the session. The librarian identified his or her goals for the observation, as well as potential challenges, and indicated what the observer should focus on, especially with regard to perceived strengths and weaknesses. The librarian to be observed also expressed specific concerns about his or her own teaching, such as classroom management, keeping students on task, or verifying the cohesion and logical progression of content. Other matters were also addressed during this meeting such as where the observer would sit and if he or she would be introduced. Prior to the observation, the librarian usually notified the course instructor that there would be an observer present during the upcoming session.

Classroom Observation

During the class session, the observer focused on the concerns identified in the pre-observation meeting. If the librarian being observed did not

specify a concern, the observer was encouraged to follow the form provided by the librarians at the University of Alberta, which included five categories: style, content, active learning strategies, visual aids, and rapport/interaction.³⁵ However, in keeping with our flexible approach (and because we were not comparing observation notes among participants) strict adherence to the form was not required. The degree of detail recorded during the observations varied among the observers. Some addressed only the issues introduced during the pre-observation conference, while others took detailed notes about the classroom layout, instructor actions, and student behaviors.

Only a few of us introduced the observer to the class/students. The liaison to the school of education not only introduced the observer, but also took the opportunity to explain our project and compared it to the teaching observations these students would encounter when they began student teaching later on. Typically, the observer sat in a place where their presence would be unobtrusive.

Post-Observation Meeting

After the observation—usually within a couple of days—the librarian and observer held a meeting to discuss the session. This post-observation meeting often began with the librarian who had been observed sharing general impressions of the session, noting what worked well and perhaps what might not have gone smoothly. In some cases, though, the observer opened the discussion. Regardless of how the individual meetings began, each discussion initially centered on the key goals identified in the pre-observation meeting. The post-observation discussion occasionally moved beyond discussing the session at hand and became a broader dialogue about teaching and learning.

Outcomes

The participants in the peer review project identified three types of outcomes: benefits accrued by the instructor being observed, lessons learned by the observer about his own teaching, and opportunities for both the observed and observer to talk about techniques and strategies to im-

prove student learning and engagement. As one member of the cohort had anticipated, the project also served as a community-building exercise for the pre-tenure librarians.

Benefits for the Observed

Most of us either had never been observed or had not been observed recently, and it was reassuring to hear that we were doing well. Some of us had concerns about practical details such as tone of voice, audibility, and clarity, as well as level of enthusiasm, pace of delivery, and movement about the classroom. Having received some feedback about issues such as whether or not students could hear us, we were able to shift our focus to pedagogical matters, such as addressing a variety of learning styles or using appropriate active learning exercises.

Our peer observers provided feedback about our strategies for engaging students and other instructional activities that can be difficult to assess ourselves. Sometimes the feedback simply confirmed something we suspected ourselves, such as moving through a search example too quickly, or failing to adequately explain a particular in-class activity. Other times, the feedback provided entirely new insights such as covering material not pertinent to a particular class.

Having an observer was especially helpful because he or she provided insight into what the instructional session might have looked like from the students' point of view. For example, one observer pointed out that a particular instructor had a tendency to stand in front of the projector while talking, thus blocking the view of the image on the screen. Regarding pedagogical matters, peer observers were able to help instructors determine which search examples, active learning activities, and anecdotes worked well—and which ones did not. For instance, one observer noticed that students of a particular age group were baffled by a dated reference (e.g., Milli Vanilli).

Some of us found that we were more explicit about our approach to teaching when we knew that we were going to be observed. Sharing instructional goals with the observer in the pre-

conference meeting necessitated that the instructor clearly define and articulate what he or she wanted to accomplish in a given session. Having to verbalize and share these goals with the observer during the pre-conference meeting reminded us to share the learning objectives with students at the beginning of the class session. For several of us, this led to implementing more consistently these and other instructional best practices.

Benefits for the Observer

The instructor was not the only the one who profited from the observation process. Several participants noted that they benefited from being an observer because it gave them a chance to see other librarians' ideas and approaches in action. For some observers, this led to a renewal of enthusiasm and/or a burst of creativity. Others were able to find solutions to their own classroom issues by seeing how a colleague dealt with similar challenges, such as the absence of the professor or instructor, malfunctioning technology, or lack of student engagement.

We recognized that exposure to the approaches of others would affect the observer's classroom performance. Some observers saw improvements they might make in their own teaching that they had not previously recognized as their own shortcomings. In other words, some had a realization of "I see that I need improvement there, too." Some observers also realized, "my teaching isn't so bad" – a personal acknowledgement that they were doing well and that their own teaching was quite similar to that of their peers. Watching others made it clear that "I'm on the right page" – the act of observing dispelled some individual negative perceptions about one's own performance.

Benefits for the Group

The post-observation meeting also provided an opportunity for both the observer and the observed to reflect on teaching: what worked well and what might need to be revised. For example, some participants discussed the value of opening an instructional session with a hands-on activity to help get students engaged immediately. Others discussed the use of scaffolding

in planning instruction sessions, such as drawing upon students' existing search skills when discussing database search techniques. One of the most significant benefits of the post-observation conversation was that it afforded the participants an opportunity to actually talk about teaching (and what works) – something instruction librarians rarely have the time to do.

Talking with colleagues about what goes on in the classroom helped us discover that neither the observed nor the observer was as alone as each of us might have initially felt. Most of us struggled with similar issues related to teaching and some of us tended to be excessively critical of our own teaching performance. The post-observation discussions helped lessen the feeling of isolation inherent in teaching and fostered a sense of shared experience.

This feeling of solidarity was further enhanced by the numerous informal meetings held by the pre-tenure librarians to discuss the PROT program. Before the peer review group's creation, there was little sense of community among the seven pre-tenure librarians. Housed in offices scattered throughout the library, many of the pre-tenure librarians did not see one another on a regular basis. When we met to discuss our PROT program, we often found ourselves discussing topics other than the peer review of teaching. This contributed to our small group developing into a distinct cohort. The willingness to be vulnerable by inviting a colleague into our classrooms and to discuss general observations with the entire group of pre-tenure peers necessitated a significant level of trust. This capacity to let one's guard down and be open resulted in cohesiveness and a camaraderie that extended well beyond work in the classroom.

For example, our work together on the PROT project resulted in additional collaborations, including conference presentations and publications. The group has also provided a critical support system as each of us navigates the annual review process and the requisite steps toward tenure and promotion.

Challenges

The PROT program was not without challenges. One major challenge, which was also mentioned

in the literature, was time constraints – it takes time to meet before an observation, it takes time to observe another’s class, and it takes time to meet after an observation.³⁶ Additionally, scheduling was often difficult, especially during peak instruction periods.

For some, acting as an observer was more difficult than imagined, especially for those of us who were inclined to focus on the subject matter rather than the teaching. While some participants were anxious about delivering critical feedback, others were challenged to be open to both praise and constructive criticism. The act of self-reflection was difficult for many of us.

Conclusion

The PROT program proved to be a worthwhile endeavor for the pre-tenure librarians at IUPUI largely because it served multiple purposes: providing a venue for individual improvement, allowing for cross-pollination of ideas, and fostering intentional, thoughtful discussions about teaching and learning. Because the process of developing such a program empowered participants, it also transformed a group of loosely-associated pre-tenure faculty into a supportive, cohesive group that has continued to help one another with teaching, writing, professional development, and the tenure process.

Our experience reflects what we found in the library literature describing PROT programs at other institutions: this practice of peer review benefits both the observed and the observer. The process of being observed allows librarians to get feedback on their teaching, while the act of observing allows librarians to encounter different approaches to delivering instruction. Additionally, involving participants in the implementation of a PROT program can enhance the connection and sense of community among colleagues.

While the development of a PROT program can benefit any group of instruction librarians, some may gain more than others. In particular, librarians who are new to the profession, new to teaching, or new to an institution may find the experience especially valuable.

Endnotes

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¹² Middleton, "Evolution of Peer Evaluation," 70.

¹³ Snavelly and Dewald, "Developing and Implementing," 346.

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¹⁵ Levene and Frank, "Peer Coaching," 36.

¹⁶ Johnston, Mandeville, and Pow, "Reconnect, Reflect, Recharge."

¹⁷ Norbury, "Peer Observation;" Middleton, "Evolution of Peer Evaluation;" Brewerton, "Triads."

¹⁸ Burnam, "Fine-Tuning;" Middleton, "Evolution of Peer Evaluation;" Brewerton, "Triads;" Samson and McCrea, "Using Peer Review;" Castle, "Peer Observation;" The paper form described by Burnam also included a numerical scale.

¹⁹ Snavelly and Dewald, "Developing and Implementing."

²⁰ Ibid.

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³⁶ Burnam, "Fine-Tuning," 46; Norbury "Peer Observation," 93.