

Peer Review of Teachers: Are They Useful?

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Abstract. Peer reviews of teachers are formal evaluations of faculty members performed by colleagues and peers in their college or university for promotion, tenure, and salary adjustment purposes. They are also used for development and improvement of teaching methods, techniques, and styles. However, little is known about their authenticity, practicality, and usefulness. This study aimed to learn more about methods and uses of information from peer reviews of teaching in Communication Sciences and Disorders programs. A national survey of 115 participants from 85 programs demonstrated that peer reviews were used in many programs with mostly positive results with varied use, format, and conduct of the reviews. Peer review results were meaningful to almost 80% of the respondents.

1. Introduction

The impetus for this study began with a discussion of peer reviews of teaching in the Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) doctoral seminar on University Teaching at Wichita State University. The discussion led to interest in peer teaching reviews related to their authenticity, practicality, and usefulness, specifically in CSD programs. Peer reviews of teachers are frequently used in higher education for summative and formative purposes; however, little is known about the authenticity, practicality, and usefulness of peer reviews of teaching (Chism, 1999).

Peer reviews in the literature, as well as in our study, have been defined as “formal evaluations of the efforts of a faculty member which are performed by the colleagues in his or her scholarly field, unit, school, or college” (Cavanagh, 1996, p. 236). Peer reviews have reportedly consisted of direct or indirect observations performed internally or externally by fellow teachers, administrators, or by teaching resource personnel (Morehead & Shedd, 1997). Summative reviews are conducted for assessment of teaching efforts, to compare or rank teachers within departments, and for personnel decisions such as appointments, promotions, tenure, or salary determinations. Formative reviews are conducted in an effort to develop and improve teaching methods, techniques, and styles (Smith & Tillema, 2007).

In general, peer reviews have drawn mixed reactions from university instructors for various reasons. They include issues focused on ever increasing accountability standards, increasing demands by administrators to perform, and the decreased amount of input regarding policies that affect teachers’ jobs and academic freedom. Manifestations of these include “suspicion, mistrust, and resistance” (Shortland, 2004, p. 220). Ultimately, this creates fear and conflicts in the review process (Conley & Glasman, 2008).

Little is known about the effectiveness or authenticity of peer reviews of teaching due to lack of evidence. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to learn more about methods and uses of information gained from peer reviews of teaching in CSD programs, which could assist faculty and administrators in determining if, when, and how to use peers as reviewers of faculty teaching. In addition, we hoped to learn more about the reliability and usefulness of the information gained from peer reviews.

2. Experiment, Results, Discussion, and Significance

An on-line survey of methods, findings, and uses of peer reviews of teaching in CSD was developed consisting of two sections. Section one was designed to collect straightforward demographic information. Section two was designed to collect information from faculty members regarding personal experiences of peer reviews and how the information was used at their institutions. Items included questions such as, “Do you think peer reviews regarding your teaching are authentic representations of your teaching skills, methods, and abilities?” and “Do you take peer reviews to heart and change or modify the way you teach based on the findings?” Once the survey was developed, it was sent online to individual faculty in approximately 200 CSD academic programs across the US. Target programs were identified from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association’s (ASHA) Council of Academic Programs (CAA) in CSD. From the 200 programs, 115 individuals (M=26, F=89) from 85 CSD programs participated. Data were transferred into Excel and coded and analyzed accordingly.

Demographic results showed that respondents included faculty members (58%), Chair or Program Directors (38%), Clinic supervisors (2%) and others (2%). Seventy-one percent of the respondents had more than 10 years teaching experience, and 93% of the respondents were of White/Non Hispanic ethnicity. Responses to questions about the mechanics of conducting peer reviews included who completed the reviews, the primary methods used to conduct the reviews and the format used.

Questions about the use of the reviews, attitudes toward them, and usefulness of peer reviews were answered not only by selecting appropriate choices on the survey but also by the respondents providing many comments. Peer reviews were completed by others in the same department as the reviewee (15%), by persons from outside the department (18%), administrators (48%) or teaching center professionals (7%), and by peers chosen by the reviewee (31%).

The primary methods of peer review were conducted by direct observation in the classroom, syllabus reviews, and teaching portfolios, although 9% reported the use of review through video samples. Narrative formats for the reviews were the most frequently used, but some respondents reported using Likert scales or a combination of scales and narratives. We learned that peer reviews are used for a variety of purposes including merit pay determination, tenure and promotion decisions, and year-end reports. Interestingly, 67% of the respondents reported that they used the peer review of their teaching for their own personal use – to modify and improve their teaching.

Attitudes about peer reviews were assessed by respondents' answers to the following questions:

- 1) Are the results of peer reviews meaningful to you?
- 2) Do you think you change your teaching style when you are directly observed for a peer review?
- 3) Do you take peer reviews to heart and change or modify the way you teach based on the findings?
- 4) Do you think peer reviews regarding your teaching are conducted authentically and genuinely reflect aspects of your teaching skills, methods, and abilities?
- 5) Have you ever changed or modified methods and strategies of teaching in your classes based on observation, findings, or suggestions when you conducted a peer review on a fellow teacher?

3. Conclusions

Nearly 80% of the respondents noted that the results of peer reviews were meaningful to them. The response rate to the survey (36%), and the individual responses and comments demonstrated an interest in the topic. Peer reviews are being used in many CSD programs with mostly positive results; and the use, format, methods, and conduct of peer reviews vary greatly among programs.

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