

12-29-2014

## Peer Review of Teaching: Best Practices for a Non-Programmatic Approach

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### Recommended Citation

Alabi, J., & Weare, Jr., W. H. (2014). Peer Review of Teaching: Best Practices for a Non-Programmatic Approach. *Communications in Information Literacy*, 8 (2), 180-191. <https://doi.org/10.15760/comminfolit.2014.8.2.171>

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# PEER REVIEW OF TEACHING

## Best practices for a non-programmatic approach

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Many academic librarians who provide library instruction have never received formal training in educational theory and methods. To bridge this gap and improve the teaching skills of instruction librarians, some academic libraries have established peer review of teaching programs. Despite the recognized benefits of peer review, it may not be feasible for every library to establish such a program. In an effort to aid those who are interested in peer review, but who may not be able to participate in a formal program, the authors identify the principles of peer review that can be applied on a non-programmatic basis. Six areas of best practice are described: establishing an environment of trust, respect, and confidentiality; selecting a suitable partner for the process; communicating with a peer reviewer; focusing on specific aspects of teaching where feedback is desired; making time for the process; and preparing oneself to accept criticism.

Communications in  
INFORMATION LITERACY

[PERSPECTIVES EDITED BY KIM LEEDER REED & SARAH E. NORTH]

## INTRODUCTION

Instructional duties have become a common expectation for librarians working in academic libraries. As Albrecht and Baron (2002) and Walter (2005) have noted, however, many library schools fail to adequately prepare librarians to deliver instruction. A lack of knowledge about basic pedagogical principles and strategies puts librarians at a disadvantage in the classroom. To address this perceived disadvantage, librarians at some institutions use peer review of teaching as a strategy for improving instruction.

Peer review of teaching is a collaborative effort in which colleagues observe one another's teaching and provide feedback. The library literature includes a number of cases that describe how academic librarians have established peer review of teaching programs at individual institutions. There are many commonalities among these programs, and a set of successful practices has emerged in the literature during the past two decades. Drawing from this literature—as well as from their own experience as participants in an informal peer review program—the authors provide recommendations for instruction librarians who wish to benefit from peer review of teaching without developing a formal program.

## DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Nancy Van Note Chism—author of *Peer Review of Teaching: A Sourcebook* (2007), the principal text outlining the process—defined peer review of teaching as “informed colleague judgment about faculty teaching for either fostering improvement or

making personnel decisions” (p. 3). The distinction highlighted by Chism between “fostering improvement” and “making personnel decisions” is significant; it demarcates two types of peer review: formative and summative. Chism explained that formative evaluation focuses on individual improvement in teaching, whereas summative evaluation is used for annual reviews or promotion and tenure decisions. Moreover, information garnered from formative evaluation of teachers is “intended for their personal use, rather than for public inspection, and thus is private and confidential,” while the information collected for summative evaluation is “for public inspection rather than for the individual faculty member” (Chism, 2007, p. 5). Hence, the term *peer review of teaching* may be used to describe two significantly different purposes. This paper focuses on the formative approach.

A wide variety of terminology has been used to describe peer review of teaching in the library literature: *informal, reciprocal colleague observation* (Isbell & Kammerlocher, 1994); *peer appraisal* (Peacock, 2001); *peer coaching* (Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008; Burnam, 1993; Levene & Frank, 1993; Sinkerson, 2011; Vidmar, 2006); *peer evaluation of instruction* (Middleton, 2002); *peer feedback* (Özek, Edgren, & Jandér, 2012); *peer observation* (Castle, 2009; Norbury, 2001); *peer observation and review* (Brewerton, 2004); and *peer review of teaching* (Alabi & Weare, in press; Alabi, et al., 2012; Aldridge, 2012; Samson & McCrea, 2008; Snavely & Dewald, 2011). Despite the variety of terminology, and variations in intention and/or implementation, all of these authors have essentially addressed the same

concept—the peer review of teaching.

## REVIEW OF THE LIBRARY LITERATURE

A search of the education literature for peer review of teaching shows a substantial and enduring interest in this method of evaluating teaching in higher education. Because the dominant paradigm in academic libraries is the one-shot instruction model, this study has focused on peer review of teaching as described in the library literature.

The authors identified twelve cases in the library literature; each one is a description of a peer review of teaching program at a particular institution. Noteworthy aspects of some of these cases will be highlighted in this literature review. Several other articles in the literature are cited, which — though not cases — are especially relevant to the non-programmatic focus of this paper.

Of particular note is the case by Levene and Frank (1993), which laid the groundwork for peer review of teaching in the library literature. In describing the program at Mankato State University, the authors reported that instruction librarians were turning to their colleagues for help in improving their teaching skills. Levene and Frank called this process *peer coaching*. The program consisted of three parts: a pre-observation conference between the instructor and the observer; the observed instruction session; and a post-observation conference. The authors of this case identified the critical distinction between a formative approach to peer review of teaching and a summative approach, emphasizing the importance of the pre-

observation meeting and post-observation discussion for a formative review. (Sometimes in a summative review model, teachers are only observed—there is no pre-observation meeting or post-observation discussion. These elements, however, are essential for formative peer review.) As the program described by Levene and Frank was not related to promotion or tenure, no one was required to participate. Librarians chose their own partners, and the relationship was reciprocal, as opposed to a mentor-protégé relationship. The authors also emphasized that confidentiality and respect for privacy were necessary for similar programs to be successful. Finally, Levene and Frank asserted that the process must have administrative support. Many components of this program can be seen in later cases, such as those by Alabi et al. (2012), Arbeeny and Hartman (2008), Middleton (2002), Samson and McCrea (2008), Sinkinson (2011), and Snaveley and Dewald (2011).

While Levene and Frank outlined many of the major facets of peer review of teaching, a number of other cases are worth noting for their additional contributions to the literature. Norbury (2001), describing the program at Aston University (UK), identified a number of preconditions for a successful peer observation program including a supportive environment, an organizational culture open to new ideas, and support from both senior management and from colleagues. While most programs described in the literature involved pairs of librarians, Brewerton (2004) noted that staff members at the Oxford Brookes University Library (UK) worked in groups of three, or *triads*. The program at Oregon State University (OSU) described by Middleton

(2002) revealed that a program's purpose can change; while the OSU program began as a formative process, it later became summative in order to bring librarians into compliance with the university's promotion and tenure guidelines. In this particular case, evaluators summarized the observation sessions, and those summaries became part of the tenure dossier. From its inception, the peer review program at Pennsylvania State University (PSU), described by Snaveley and Dewald (2011), was both formative and summative. Like the program at OSU, the program at PSU included a summary letter. The Snaveley and Dewald article also provided a comprehensive overview of the literature on peer review of teaching.

Although the majority of cases describe highly-structured programs, there are two in particular that detail comparatively informal approaches to peer observation. The program at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis described by Alabi et al. (2012) is significant for two reasons. First, the program was designed exclusively by and open only to pre-tenure librarians. Second, unlike most programs, the seven pre-tenure librarians who participated did not establish dedicated pairs or triads, but selected one of the other participants each time they wanted a class observed. This approach allowed the participants "to observe a wide variety of classes, to be exposed to multiple instructional styles, and to receive feedback from several peers with different perspectives" (Alabi et al., p. 168). Another less formal approach to peer observation was described by Özek, Edgren, and Jandér (2012), who used the term *critical friend* to emphasize the formative nature of the peer observation program at Lund University (Sweden). The critical

friend method, which entails "being a friend as well as having one . . . involves observing and giving friendly criticism on a colleague's teaching," and is similar to the peer coaching model described by Levene and Frank (1993). The process described in the Lund University case was relatively unstructured; the authors noted "it was up to the members of the individual critical friend pairs to decide how to observe each other's teaching" (p. 74).

Two articles in the literature address elements of the process rather than peer observation as a whole. First, rather than describe a case at a specific institution, Vidmar (2006) provided a theoretical approach to what he termed *reflective peer coaching*. In this scenario, there is no observation component, only one-on-one meetings between a teaching librarian and his coach before and after the teaching event. Second, in a paper presented at LOEX 2012, Alabi and Weare (in press) addressed only one aspect of the three-part peer review model: the conversation held between the teaching librarian and the observer after the class observation. As giving and receiving criticism can generate considerable anxiety, Alabi and Weare proposed a set of best practices to ease the process of providing constructive feedback to colleagues.

In addition to the information available in the journal literature, peer review of teaching has been a frequent topic at library conferences in recent years—especially those that cater to instruction librarians (Alabi & Weare, 2012; Alabi & Weare, 2013; Hensley, 2009; Johnston, Mandeville, & Pow, 2009; Judd, Jones, Samson, & Gilbert, 2011; and Snaveley, 2010). Two

groups of these presenters have also established websites to share their work with other librarians (Johnston et al., 2009; Judd et al., 2011). In addition to information about the peer review of teaching process, these sites also include evaluation forms or checklists.

## PEER REVIEW WITHOUT A PROGRAM

The literature shows that most peer review of teaching programs and similar initiatives (*peer appraisal, peer coaching, peer evaluation, peer observation, etc.*) can improve teaching for new librarians, rejuvenate instruction for experienced librarians, and provide all participants with a venue for engaging in broader discussions of teaching and learning. These benefits can be realized without launching a formal program. In the remainder of this paper, the authors draw from the literature—as well as their own experiences in an informal peer review group—to identify key components of peer review of teaching, and to propose best practices for applying these concepts to a non-programmatic approach.

### *Trust, Respect, and Confidentiality*

Best Practice 1. *When inviting someone into your classroom, be sure to choose someone you respect, whose motivations you trust, and who will maintain confidentiality.*

A successful peer review of teaching program takes place in an environment of trust, respect, and confidentiality. In the absence of a formal program, these same characteristics apply to the relationship between the observed and observer, rather than to the culture of the organization. Without the presence of these attributes, one

may be inclined to doubt, discount, or disregard feedback, negating the benefits of the exercise.

Trust between peer observation partners is critical: “without that element, neither participant will be willing to take risks or listen to the feedback that is offered” (Levene & Frank, 1993, p. 37). To build this trust, Levene and Frank encouraged librarians to pick their peer observation partners carefully, work with a partner for an extended period of time so that trust can grow, and offer feedback only on the areas identified by the observed librarian during the pre-observation meeting.

In addition to developing trust, there needs to be respect between colleagues observing one another’s classes. Özek, Edgren, and Jandér (2012), writing about the critical friend method, emphasized that a successful peer observation process needs to “include aspects such as the importance of mutual trust and respect between the members of the friend pair” (p. 77). If an instructor lacks respect for his observer, he will be unlikely to hear the feedback, even though his colleague’s criticism may be valid. Without mutual respect the observation process will be fruitless.

Confidentiality is widely cited in the literature as important for the successful implementation of peer review of teaching (Alabi et al., 2012; Alabi & Weare, in press; Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008; Brewerton, 2004; Burnam, 1993; Castle, 2009; Levene & Frank, 1993; Samson & McCrea, 2008; Sinkinson, 2011). Levene and Frank (1993) pointed out that maintaining confidentiality can help foster a trusting relationship; Alabi

et al. (2012) confirmed, “confidentiality is essential as no one wants his or her instructional shortcomings to become common knowledge” (p. 169). An assurance of confidentiality also allows participants to feel more comfortable taking risks and trying new approaches, which may result in a more dynamic classroom experience for both the instructor and the students.

### *Find a Suitable Partner*

Best Practice 2. *When choosing a suitable partner, consider colleagues with similar instructional responsibilities, but do not discount librarians in other departments, faculty in other academic units, and professionals from your center for teaching and learning.*

A willing colleague is also necessary for peer review of teaching, although who qualifies as a peer can vary. According to Arbeen and Hartman (2008), “the word ‘peer’ in peer coaching is significant because it distinguishes the practice from mentoring, emphasizing an equal relationship between two educators in which each party coaches the other” (p. 40). Alabi et al. (2012) and Levene and Frank (1993) encouraged the selection of observers from peers with equal rank and status. However, Middleton (2002) and Snavelly and Dewald (2011), describing summative rather than formative implementations of peer review, found that the process can be successful with either tenured or untenured faculty in the role of observers. While receiving feedback from a colleague of similar rank can reinforce the formative nature of the peer review process, a more seasoned colleague could offer insight based on years of experience. Both approaches would be beneficial.

A fellow instruction librarian is an obvious choice for an observer. However, suitable observers need not be limited to immediate colleagues. Good candidates might be located elsewhere within the library, such as in cataloging or acquisitions, or perhaps other areas in which teaching is not usually part of the assigned responsibilities. Someone who does not ordinarily teach can bring a fresh perspective by asking questions unlikely to be raised by those who do teach regularly. For example, a librarian may need to more clearly articulate his teaching philosophy for a non-teaching observer, something he might not have felt compelled to do when being observed by another teaching librarian.

Castle (2009) and Snavelly and Dewald (2011) suggested that observers could also be found outside the library. There are several reasons for this. Disciplinary faculty can contribute feedback from a distinct perspective. Also a librarian may be more comfortable receiving feedback from a colleague in another academic unit. In some cases, there may be too few library colleagues to serve as observers, and a disciplinary faculty member might be selected simply for convenience.

Opportunities for peer observation and feedback may be available through a campus unit such as a center for teaching and learning or faculty resource center. These units often include instructional designers and other education professionals who are trained in a variety of pedagogical approaches and may provide particularly useful insights, such as why certain approaches are more likely to produce particular outcomes.

Some colleagues may not be suitable partners for peer observation. For example, it is generally advisable to avoid having a direct supervisor observe one's teaching for formative peer review; the process may inadvertently turn into a summative evaluation. Also, one's friends—perhaps coworkers with whom one socializes outside of work—may not be particularly well-suited to peer review as they may not be able or willing to provide frank, critical feedback.

### *Communication is Crucial*

Best Practice 3. *When engaging in peer review of teaching, provide your observer with context for the session, goals for the observation, your teaching philosophy, and the degree of criticism you would like to receive.*

The cases cited in this literature review also showed the importance of communication between the observed and the observer. While effective communication is necessary throughout the peer review process, it is especially critical in the pre-observation and post-observation conferences.

The meeting before the observation serves as an opportunity for the teacher librarian to provide his observer with context for the upcoming class. At this time the librarian to be observed supplies basic information about the class including the course name, current standing of the students, and whether there is previous library experience with the class. He also provides details about the plan for this session, including information about the assignment, learning objectives and goals, and any special requests from the faculty member to address particular concerns (i.e., finding books via

the catalog, requesting resources via interlibrary loan, or citing sources appropriately and avoiding plagiarism).

Each participant's teaching philosophy should be communicated during the pre-observation meeting. Levene and Frank (1993) noted that this allows participants "to understand what they have in common and to recognize their dissimilarities" (p. 38). Because there are a variety of approaches to teaching, it is likely that participants will have different ideas about some aspects of instruction. Discussing these differences—as well as possible implications—prior to the observation will result in a more productive post-observation conversation.

The pre-observation meeting is also the time for the librarian being observed to convey the degree of criticism desired. As being observed is likely to cause anxiety, Levene and Frank (1993) suggested that "partners need to verbalize fears about the process and examine what boundaries each partner needs to observe during the class and post-observation conference" (p. 38). For instance, if a librarian is anxious about the process, he might ask his observer to provide feedback on only one concern. A more confident librarian, however, might request extensive critical feedback. Also, the librarian to be observed may opt to receive feedback in writing rather than verbally.

The post-observation session is not a one-sided meeting where the expert observer lectures the novice instructor; it is a discussion between two peers. In some of the cases, the observer started the conversation (Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008; Norbury, 2001; Snaveley & Dewald, 2011);



in other cases, it was the observed who initiated the discussion (Brewerton, 2004; Castle, 2009; Levene & Frank 1993; Samson & McCrea, 2008). No matter who starts the conversation, it should be precisely that—a conversation. The focus should be on the key goals identified during the pre-observation conference. Participants are encouraged to ask open-ended, probing questions that foster reflection; Vidmar (2006) explained that “as individuals reflect upon their experience in the classroom with a colleague, they discover important information about the intended results in comparison with the actual lesson” (pp. 138-139).

The post-observation discussion may move beyond talk of the session at hand and become a broader dialogue about teaching and learning. When the observer and librarian identify areas that could use improvement, both parties are encouraged to engage in brainstorming and problem-solving. Thus the post-observation meeting becomes an opportunity for librarians to discover shared instructional challenges and exchange ideas—a process many librarians do not typically have time for during a busy semester.

### *Determine Your Focus*

*Best Practice 4. Ask your observer to focus on an aspect of your teaching that you think you should address. Giving your observer a specific focus allows her to pay careful attention to what you are most interested in improving.*

In addition to the key areas for communication addressed above, the librarian to be observed should identify one or two areas of his teaching about which he

is most concerned. The observer can then focus her attention on the issues specified and provide targeted feedback. For example, the librarian to be observed might want to know whether a particular active learning exercise achieves its intended goal, or he might want to know how students respond to his attempts to engage them. If the librarian has any general concerns about teaching—such as classroom management issues or presentation skills—those can be brought to the observer’s attention at this time, too. While it may be tempting to ask an observer to provide feedback on every possible concern in a single session, that approach could be overwhelming for both parties. If peer review of teaching becomes a regular activity, concerns that are not addressed in one observation can be the focus of a subsequent session.

It is important to focus on observable behaviors rather than personal characteristics. Levene and Frank (1993) suggested that both participants should concentrate on “behaviors, not intrinsic qualities one wants in a librarian” (p. 38-39). Arbeeny and Hartman (2008) agreed, noting that such an approach “prompts the peer coach to discuss what the instructor did, rather than what the instructor could have done. In that way, the feedback remains positive and non-judgmental” (p. 42).

Once a focus has been identified, participants should decide how the observation will be documented. A number of cases mentioned the use of an evaluation form or checklist to guide note-taking during the observation. For example, Burnam (1993) used a five-point scale to rate 29 aspects of instruction. The

“Checklist for Observations” described by Middleton (2002) included a total of 28 phrases, and Brewerton (2004) included 39 questions with space for comments. The forms used in all three of these cases grouped statements into categories such as preparation, content, presentation skills, student/faculty engagement, and clarity.

In other peer review of teaching cases, however, checklists or forms were not used. Snaveley and Dewald (2011) explained that they “chose to avoid any numerical ratings or standard list of characteristics, allowing each librarian to fully express their own styles and methodology, without feeling they needed to conform to a particular set of questions” (p. 348). Likewise, Sinkinson (2011) stated, “rather than imposing a set of criteria for observation or supplying a check-list, the program intended to draw out individual teaching librarian concerns” (p. 14). Though Alabi et al. (2012) pointed to a template of guiding questions, they noted that strict adherence to a form was not required; instead “participants were granted the freedom to modify the process as needed in order to ensure that the program was beneficial for each participant” (p. 166).

Examples of documentation used in the peer review process are available from the articles and websites cited in this paper. Readers may find the worksheets from Judd et al. (2011) particularly useful: there is one for the pre-observation, one to be used during the observation, and one that the observer might use during the post-observation meeting. The framework provided by Johnston et al. (2009) includes “talking points” for the pre-observation and post-observation discussions, as well as a feedback form to guide the observation.

### *Make Time*

Best Practice 5. *When inviting a colleague to participate in peer review of teaching, make sure that you both set aside adequate time for the process: time for the pre-observation meeting, time for the observation itself, and perhaps most importantly, time for feedback and reflection during the post-observation discussion.*

In order to truly benefit from peer review of teaching, sufficient time must be allotted. The observation is only a small part of that process. The act of reflecting on teaching—devoting time and careful thought to what approaches were effective and which ones were not—ultimately leads to change and improvement. Arbeeny and Hartman (2008) noted that “the simple act of taking time to think about teaching in pre- and post-observation conferences promoted critical reflection” (p. 44).

The quality of critical reflection during the post-observation meeting will be enhanced if that meeting is scheduled shortly after the observation. Snaveley and Dewald (2011) recommended that the post-observation meeting “occur as soon after the class observation as possible so that events are clear and fresh in the minds of both the librarian and the observer” (p. 348). When the details of an observation become hazy, the observer’s feedback may be less specific and thus less useful. Not only should the meeting take place soon after the observation, but feedback will be most beneficial if it is delivered before another class is taught. Otherwise, it is too easy for what occurred in one class to become confused with a later session.

### *Be Ready*

Best Practice 6. *Before inviting a colleague to observe you teach, consider whether you are ready to accept criticism.*

Teaching is a personal act, and it can be very difficult to receive criticism—even when that feedback is constructive and delivered by a trusted colleague. If a librarian is not ready to engage in critical self-reflection or receive critical feedback, he will be unlikely to benefit from peer observation. Before embarking upon a peer review of teaching endeavor, the librarian to be observed must be prepared and willing to receive critical feedback on his teaching.

A librarian who feels anxious about peer review of teaching may prefer to begin with a lower-stakes approach to the process. For example, rather than inviting an observer to provide feedback on a particular class that a librarian knows could benefit from constructive criticism, he might begin by inviting a colleague to a class that he feels especially confident about—one that highlights his strengths as a teacher. Another less threatening approach would be to adopt the reflective peer coaching model proposed by Vidmar (2006), in which a colleague assists with planning and reflection but does not actually observe the class. The conversation after the class has occurred provides an opportunity for reflection and feedback without the stress of the classroom observation.

### CONCLUSION

The goal of a peer review of teaching program is to help librarians develop and hone their instruction skills by reflecting on and sharing their practices. While the

creation of a program is not feasible for every library, individual librarians can apply the basic principles of peer review. Some librarians may be able to implement all of the components outlined above; others, however, may find the process too demanding. Librarians should adopt the aspects of peer review of teaching that seem most feasible and useful. Some librarians may find it helpful simply to talk through a lesson plan with a colleague, while others might prefer a lengthier discussion and reflection session. Find the approach to peer review of teaching that will work for you.

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