USING PEER REVIEW FOR TEACHING IMPROVEMENT

PANEL DISCUSSION
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PANELISTS

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Peer Review of Instruction

Most departments at UMR presently use only student evaluations of teaching (SETs) to assess faculty members’ instructional performance, although a few supplement those numbers with other limited information. A comprehensive approach to evaluation of teaching might include input from some or all of the following **general** elements:

- Information from students
- Feedback from peers
- Self reflection/evaluation
- Chair observation and feedback
- Feedback from other relevant administrators

The **specific** aspects involved in the evaluation process might include some or all of the following:

- Student ratings of courses and/or instructors
- Interviews with current students
- Interviews with former students
- Interviews with alumni
- Audiotape or videotape recording and subsequent review of the recordings
- Classroom observation by peers or other “experts”
- Review of materials and lesson plans prior to their implementation*
- Review of materials and lesson plans during their implementation*
- Review of materials and lesson plans post-implementation for subsequent modification*

*Such reviews are typically done by peers

- Student performance data (e.g., grades, classroom assessment data)

So, a number of possibilities exist to help faculty to further develop their skills in the classroom. Most of these can be utilized to varying degrees, which will determine the amount of time needed to implement a particular approach. Not surprisingly, the greater the investment, the greater the possible benefits. However, peer review methods that are relatively modest can yield substantial gains in the quality of information available to faculty for improvement. Given time constraints now faced by faculty, I would not suggest a highly ambitious (i.e. complex and time-consuming) approach to implementing peer review.
Summative versus Formative Evaluation

An important distinction must be drawn between **summative** and **formative** evaluation. We are familiar with summative evaluation, whether in the form of grades given by faculty to students or SET scores given by students to faculty. We tend to be less familiar with formative evaluation, usually defined as information gathered during a process (such as a college course) for the purpose of improvement. Formative evaluation is usually more helpful as an improvement tool (indeed, that is its purpose). Summative evaluation leans more toward assigning worth or value to an activity.

Peer review of instruction is usually classified as a formative evaluation mechanism. For our purposes, it may be helpful to emphasize the formative aspect and to de-emphasize the evaluation aspect. Although peer review can be a tool to use in the promotion and tenure process, I am suggesting this mechanism as part of an improvement process. I would like to see us look for ways to help faculty improve in their teaching (and other duties) rather than look for additional ways to evaluate their work in a summative fashion.

Ideally, peer review will be used as part of a more comprehensive improvement and evaluation program that entails other components, such as review of lesson plans, materials, and instructional processes, feedback from current and former students, etc. For now, however, any additional information used to assist faculty in their efforts is likely to be an improvement.

You will likely find today in listening to our panelists that they have not used peer review in identical fashion; indeed, much of the purpose of today’s session is to disseminate ideas which can form the basis of an ongoing discussion about instructional improvement. It is hoped that this session will help to prompt additional sharing of ideas and collaborative efforts among departments in an effort to improve student learning outcomes.
Larry Gragg

He does classroom visits himself
He arrives early to see how the instructor relates to the students
The primary initial question to ask, from the student-as-customer perspective: “Is there a purpose to this class?”

He doesn’t typically have content expertise in observing classes, focusing on process issues instead
After class, is there informal interaction with the instructor?
The primary summation question afterward: “Did it matter?”

Feedback to the instructor:
Start with strengths
He provides a written assessment that the instructor can use as he/she wishes (only informal usage, vs. possible inclusion for P&T purposes)

A primary recommendation, esp. for new faculty: Work with a master teacher in your department, following an apprentice model

Judy Raper

Her experience is “imported” from Sydney. They began focusing on teaching quality several years ago, with some of the budget dependent on teaching quality.
Various measures used to determine quality, including student evaluations of teaching (SETs), peer assessment, and grants and publications in teaching.
Developed an Institute for Teaching and Learning through which one can earn a certificate in teaching. The department is rewarded in the funding model for every faculty member who has this certificate. This is repeated every year.
Peer observation used extensively as an assessment mechanism for these purposes
The basic goal is to increase instructors’ reflection on their own work to promote improvement efforts
Educational research is central in this model, with a focus on trying to increase funding

Dan St. Clair

The more systematic approach to teaching improvement in CS began a couple of years ago, starting with a dialogue within the department about the department’s goals. This conversation continues on a periodic basis. Weighted values were assigned to various functions within the department (including teaching).
As a result of these discussions, faculty buy-in increased over time (much more effective than top-down mandates).
SETs are the only “official” metric, which Dan would like to correct
Lower-performing instructors (based on SET scores) are encouraged to invite higher-scoring instructors into their classes to observe and offer feedback, and to visit the classes of faculty who do well consistently on student evaluation (GTAs also so encouraged). Instructors scoring above 3.0 have names (not scores) posted in the department; highest-scoring faculty member and GTA get a special mention.

At this point, these processes “are becoming part of the department culture”, with offers to help one another becoming more the norm.

There seems to be some change in the culture among students as well (fewer angry remarks about instructors), as effects of these changes start to filter down.

Future Directions

It was generally agreed that this sort of conversation should be only a starting point, with future opportunities to be scheduled. Monthly brown bag lunches are one possibility; someone could briefly present on an educational topic of interest, which could serve as the jumping-off point for a discussion.

All the panelists and the facilitator are willing to sit down with chairs who might be interested in implementing a peer review process to discuss options and hammer out logistics. Such processes can be very simple and non-time-consuming, and they can range upward toward fairly comprehensive and more time-consuming approaches. The former are recommended over the latter, at least as a starting place.