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Peer Review of Teaching Project: Overview Newsletter

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The Peer Review of Teaching Project

Making Visible the Intellectual Work of Teaching

Capturing the Intellectual Work of Teaching

Faculty in higher education are increasingly asked to document, assess, and make public their teaching practices. Yet even faculty who value and support excellence in teaching have articulated difficulties in capturing the intellectual work of teaching:

My teaching is private. How can it be represented publicly? What does excellent teaching look like? How can I show the intellectual work of teaching that takes place outside my classroom? How can I investigate and analyze student learning? How can I communicate the intellectual work of my teaching to campus or disciplinary conversations?

In conceptualizing how the scholarly work of teaching might be made visible, many have critiqued the long-standing mechanism for evaluating faculty teaching: the student course evaluation. Although student evaluations are useful for inquiring about what occurred during a course, other aspects related to the intellectual work of teaching are not always as visible to students. For instance, does the course have an acceptable level of academic rigor? Are objectives and topics appropriate to the course? What evidence illustrates students' understanding of key concepts? In short, capturing the scholarly work of teaching combines inquiry into the intellectual work in a course with a careful investigation of the quality of student understanding and performance—and makes this work available for use and review by colleagues.

UNL's Peer Review of Teaching Project offers strategies to help faculty engage in this type of work. Over the past five years, UNL has led a consortium of five research one institutions (Indiana University, Kansas State University, Texas A&M University, University of Michigan) to develop campus communities that explore and apply peer review for documenting, promoting, and valuing the intellectual work of teaching.

"The project required me to be very conscious about how I was designing a syllabus, how I was evaluating students, and how I was approaching my teaching. It serves as a foundation on which my colleagues and I often start discussions about teaching and learning."

Patrice McMahon
Assistant Professor
Political Science

"Using the discipline and structure of Peer Review, I was able to identify problems within one of my courses and develop working strategies for correcting them by working with my peer group. I would strongly encourage any faculty member to explore the impact peer review can have in your classroom."

Tim Wentz
Interim Department Chair and
Associate Professor
Construction Management

"Each of the functions of a great public land–grant research university—teaching, research and scholarship, and outreach—is organized around a shared commitment to inquiry and the communication of the knowledge resulting from that inquiry."

UNL Blue Sky Report, March 2003

"I've always been somewhat unnerved by the role that student evaluations play in promotion and tenure in our department. In the absence of something else to provide another perspective or another piece of information, in many ways tenure decisions are being made by 18, 19, and 20-year olds. The peer review of teaching project offers a valuable and useful component to supplement the student voice in evaluating teaching."

John Comer
Chair and Professor
Political Science

UNL's Peer Review of Teaching Project

Peer Review of Teaching is a faculty-driven initiative that provides faculty with a structured and practical model for documenting and reflecting on both the quantity and quality of student learning in their courses. Faculty are encouraged to explore not only what students learn, but also to assess how they learn.

At UNL, peer review teams consisting of 2-5 faculty members from a department or program participate in a year-long (August to May) fellowship program where they write three reflective memos on different course components (intellectual content, teaching practices, and student understanding). Throughout the year, faculty meet with other project participants to share and discuss issues emerging from one another's investigations and from assigned readings on teaching-related issues. At the end of the year, faculty link the three interaction memos together, integrating examples and analysis of student work into a course portfolio that represents their teaching and their students' learning.

Faculty post their portfolios on an electronic website for peer sharing and discussion of curricular and programmatic issues. Additionally, faculty may invite readers from academic institutions outside UNL to review their portfolios for purposes such as merit review, promotion and tenure, and teaching award materials.

"In addition to providing formative assessments of their own teaching, faculty have used their project-generated course portfolios for

annual reviews, teaching award applications, promotion and tenure portfolios, accreditation reviews, and curriculum reforms."

Paul Savory
Co-Coordinator, UNL Peer Review of
Teaching Project
Associate Professor, Industrial Engineering

"The PRTP seeks to develop mechanisms for making visible the serious intellectual work of teaching and for rewarding faculty who engage in such work."

Amy Goodburn
Co-Coordinator, UNL Peer Review of
Teaching Project
Associate Professor, English

Peer Review Fellowship and Advanced Programs

For UNL's Peer Review fellowship program, faculty write a **benchmark** portfolio which represents a snapshot of students' learning within a particular course. The portfolio enables faculty to generate questions that they would like to investigate about their teaching. As faculty create their portfolios, they reflect on their course syllabi and their goals for students, consider the particulars of instructional practice and how teaching methods are helping students meet their goals, and document and analyze student learning.

Once faculty complete UNL's fellowship program, they can continue investigating issues in their teaching through the advanced team program. In the advanced program, faculty work in interdisciplinary teams of 4-5 over the course of a year. Drawing upon Randy Bass's notion of seeing in one's teaching "a set of problems worth pursuing as an ongoing intellectual focus," advanced team participants identify an issue they want to systematically investigate through writing an **inquiry** portfolio. The advanced program provides faculty with opportunities to document improvement in their teaching over time and to assess the long-term impact of teaching changes, the success of teaching approaches, and the accomplishment of student learning.

Examples of faculty course portfolios and details about the Peer Review Project can be found on the Project Website: **http://www.unl.edu/peerrev/**

Faculty Outcomes from Peer Review

Peer Review of Teaching promotes educational reform at three different levels—by assisting faculty in evaluating and improving their students' learning, by building interdisciplinary campus communities that support and refine this inquiry into student learning, and by introducing faculty to new ways of thinking about teaching.

"My participation in the project has given me a fundamental understanding of how to determine my course goals and outcomes before developing the actual syllabus. I have been able to develop an excellent design for the course I was working on and, more importantly, I have been inspired to work with my department colleagues to create goals and outcomes for all our courses."

Stuart Bernstein
Assistant Professor
Construction Systems Technology

"Through my participation, I was amazed and embarrassed to discover that I had course objectives I never taught, I had course objectives I taught but never assessed, I had course objectives I assessed and never taught, and I had material I taught and assessed but never listed as a course objective. By reorganizing the goals of my course, developing rubrics for evaluating student work, and assessing my classroom activities, I now have a focused approach for linking my teaching to my students' learning."

Christine Marvin
Associate Professor
Special Education and Communication Disorders

"During my participation, my three department colleagues and I each examined a course that was integral to our new major. In addition to what we learned about our individual courses—which was considerable—we were able to reflect collectively on our curriculum. This project helped me both to teach and to document my teaching more effectively."

Chris Gallagher
Associate Professor
English

"As a new faculty member with no formal teaching experience, this project has helped me to become much more focused and efficient as an educator. I now feel confident in my capabilities and have a solid base from which to monitor my own progress and my students' learning."

Sloane Signal
Assistant Professor
Advertising

"As a result of my participation in this project and my interactions with peers, the biggest impact on my teaching has been for me to refocus my thoughts concerning course development. Instead of developing presentation materials first and then creating assessments to see if the students mastered the issues, I now look towards the end of the course and focus on what it is that I want students to learn and then structure the presentations to achieve these goals. As such, instead of blindly hoping to achieve my course goals, I now aim directly at them."

Bruce Fischer
Assistant Professor
Construction Management

Peer Review of Teaching combines

- inquiry into the intellectual work of a course
- careful investigation of student understanding and performance
- faculty reflection on their teaching effectiveness

"By participating in the project, I have added lectures, discussions, and activities that are directly tied to course objectives, and I better monitor student groups. In addition, I have created grading rubrics that force me to clarify my expectations – this has allowed my students to understand what is expected of them."

Larkin Powell, Assistant Professor,
School of Natural Resources

"Producing an Inquiry Portfolio gave me a framework in which to refine my course. Although the methods I used seemed at first too scientific for a subjective area like art, the "Hypothesis, Data, Conclusion" structure allowed me to be more objective about my teaching. Participating in the project has helped me to write better curricula and more fairly evaluate student learning. The reflective writing process used in the project was so useful that it inspired me to assign my students to reflect in writing on their drawing process and progress. Among other things, this written component helps me to better understand their perceptions of the course and helps students to see their progress more clearly."

Dana Fritz, Associate Professor
Art and Art History

Campus Participation in the Project

The following colleges and departments have faculty who have written course portfolios as participants in UNL's Peer Review of Teaching Project:

COLLEGE of ARTS and SCIENCE
Psychology, Anthropology, English, History, Mathematics, Political Science, Communication Studies

COLLEGE of BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION
Accountancy, Economics

HIXSON-LIED COLLEGE OF FINE AND PERFORMING ARTS
Art and Art History

COLLEGE of ENGINEERING and TECHNOLOGY
Industrial & Management Systems, Electrical Engineering, Architectural Engineering, Civil Engineering, Construction Management, Computer Science, Construction System Technology

COLLEGE of EDUCATION AND HUMAN SCIENCES
Educational Psychology, Distance Education, Curriculum and Instruction

COLLEGE of HUMAN RESOURCES and FAMILY SCIENCES
Nutrition and Dietetics, Family and Consumer Sciences, Textile Clothing and Design

COLLEGE of JOURNALISM and MASS COMMUNICATIONS
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INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES AND NATURAL RESOURCES: Agronomy, School of Natural Resources

"This project has forced me to develop clear-cut goals and objectives that have now been defined in such a way that I can measure them. Along with teaching me how to self-evaluate my teaching, the project has also helped to improve my teaching."

D'Andra Orey, Assistant Professor
Political Science

For more information

For additional information about the Peer Review of Teaching project at UNL, please contact one of the co-coordinators:

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- Amy Burnett [aburnett1@unl.edu]

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