

Criticism is not a four-letter word:

Best practices for constructive feedback in the peer review of teaching

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Introduction

Suppose a colleague has asked you to observe a library instruction session and provide feedback. You have agreed. Unfortunately, your colleague was poorly prepared, technical difficulties forced her to improvise, and the students did not pay attention—much less participate. In essence, things went wrong. Your colleague has asked for your opinion, but you are not sure how to respond. Should you tell her what you really think? What obligation do you have to her? Can you provide honest feedback without causing her to become defensive or hurt?

The education literature is rich with information about the peer review of teaching, and there have been a growing number of articles on the topic in the literature of library and information science (LIS). Since both giving and receiving criticism generates anxiety, this paper proposes a set of best practices that will ease the process for providing constructive feedback to fellow instruction librarians.

The Peer Review of Teaching

The Peer Review of Teaching—also described as peer appraisal, peer coaching, peer evaluation, or peer observation—generally refers to a situation in which a faculty member observes another faculty member teach a class and then provides feedback. More specifically, Chism (2007) has defined the peer review of teaching as “informed colleague judgment about faculty teaching for either fostering improvement or making personnel decisions” (p. 3). As in all of higher education, the peer review of teaching in academic libraries may be formative or summative. When peer review of teaching is formative, it is used to develop teaching skills and enhance learning. When it is summative, it is used to assess the quality of teaching, and may be part of a review and/or tenure and promotion process. As in the scenario described in the first paragraph, the primary focus of this paper is on the formative approach: the improvement of library instruction and the development of teaching skills.

Based on the cases described in the LIS literature, the most widely used model for the peer observation of teaching in academic librarianship is a three-part scheme consisting of a pre-observation conference, the classroom observation, and a post-observation conference (Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008; Brewerton, 2004; Burnam, 1993; Castle, 2009; Levene & Frank, 1993, Norbury, 2001; Samson & McCrea, 2008). At the pre-observation meeting, the librarian who will be observed provides the observer with information on the class, including learning outcomes, the instructor’s goals, and any particular aspects of teaching for which feedback is being sought. During the instruction session, the observer focuses on the items identified in the pre-observation meeting. Afterwards, the post-

observation conference serves as a crucial part of the process: the observer provides the observed librarian with feedback on her teaching, and she is encouraged to reflect upon her own performance. The observation does not lead to better teaching (Siddiqui, Jonas-Dwyer, & Carr, 2007), nor does criticism itself lead to better teaching. Teaching is improved by active self-reflection on performance (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). This reflection can be fostered by dialogue generated by the observer's comments and questions about the session observed (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005; Siddiqui et al., 2007). Reflection can be promoted during the post-conference by recalling teacher and student behaviors, comparing actual and desired behaviors, analyzing why behaviors were (or were not) performed, and making inferences about achievement of lesson purpose and objective (Robbins, 1991, p. 41).

Pre-conditions

Before addressing the best practices, it is worth noting that in an ideal setting, certain conditions will already be in place.

First, the purpose of having a program for the peer review of teaching should be clear—is the program for the evaluation of teaching performance? Or is it to improve teaching? Successful feedback and exchange of ideas will be dependent upon how clear the purpose of the program is. If the intent of the program is not clear, it is likely to lead to increased anxiety and decreased engagement among participants (Weimer, Kerns, and Parrett, 1988). Instruction librarians are not unlike their classroom counterparts in that they tend to think of what goes on during the instruction session to be a private matter between themselves, the students, and the teaching faculty. Weimer et al. (1988) observed that “unsolicited intrusion by outsiders, albeit colleagues, is often perceived as an unwarranted invasion, to be strongly resisted especially if the purpose, procedure, and outcome of the visit are not clearly understood or if the stakes are potentially high” (p. 292).

The second condition that should be in place in an ideal setting is a climate of trust, honesty, and genuine concern for our fellow instruction librarians (Anderson & Pellicer, 2001; Brinko, 1993; Chism, 2007; Robbins, 1991). Describing a peer coaching program, Robbins (1991) noted the importance of trust—between individuals, in the process, that interactions will remain confidential, and that the process that allows both parties to grow and learn from each other (pp. 37-38). Honesty is essential; what good is any mechanism for soliciting feedback if the

feedback isn't frank? A colleague will be more likely to accept criticism if he trusts the observer and believes the criticism is well-intentioned (Brinko, 1993).

The LIS literature on the peer review of teaching suggests these programs are most successful if participation is voluntary, the focus is on development rather than evaluation, and feedback is confidential (Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008; Levene & Frank, 1993; Samson & McCrea, 2008).

Recommended Best Practices

The purpose of formative peer review of teaching is to be of assistance to a fellow instructor in her efforts to improve teaching and learning. Central to this process is that the observer should not harm the person she is trying to assist. Concerns that she might harm or be harmed is what makes this process challenging and causes anxiety. Observers may worry that "they were not sensitive enough to the self-esteem and feelings of the faculty member who is being reviewed," while the person being observed "may be concerned about being found inadequate or less than excellent, or of being treated unfairly or harshly" (Chism, 2007, pp. 189-190).

The primary way of ensuring the observer does no harm is to make certain the environment allows for criticism. The observer may be concerned that the observed may misunderstand what has been said; Norbury (2001) noted "sometimes people are so concerned when they give feedback, not to upset the other person, that they do not put things as clearly as they might" (p. 94). Further, Norbury suggested that as people do not necessarily like to hear criticism, comprehension of what has been said may be hindered by the desire to avoid hearing criticism. If the climate allows for honest and thoughtful feedback, the observed is less likely to take offense, and the observer may be less likely to fear that her criticism will harm the observed.

1. Create a Favorable Environment

Central to the success of the post-observation conference is the creation of an environment that encourages individuals to be more open to feedback. Participants are likely to feel better about the process if they feel they have some control over it (Gottesman, 2009, p. 14); those being observed may prefer input into what is to be observed, when the observation will occur, and where the feedback session will take place. Choose a suitable location for the conference, such as the office of the observed librarian to give her a feeling of confidence and control (Gottesman, 2000, p. 63), or a neutral location such as a conference room. In either case, the space selected should be

comfortable, private, and free from interruptions (Gottesman, 2000; Levene & Frank, 1993; Martin & Double, 1998).

2. Choose the Right Time

The post-observation conference should occur soon after the observation. Some suggest feedback should be given at once: “as soon as possible” or “immediately” (Brinko, 1993; Hamersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004).

Others recommended the feedback session occur within a few days (Burnam, 1993; Samson & McCrea, 2008).

Allowing too much time to pass after the observation makes it harder for both parties to recall details of the session and reduces the effectiveness of the feedback (Chism, 2007; Levene & Frank, 1993; Samson & McCrea, 2008).

3. Start the Conversation

Some of the education and LIS literature offered contradictory advice about who leads the post-observation process. For example, Levene and Frank (1993) recommended that “during the post-observation session, the librarians who were observed in class take responsibility for leading the discussion” (p. 39), while Hamersley-Fletcher & Orsmond (2005) suggested “the person in the role of observer controls how the process is conducted” (p. 219).

While it has been widely recommended that the session begin with open-ended questions designed to allow the observed to share how they felt the lesson went (Gottesman, 2009; Robbins, 1991), others have advocated the observer begin the session by providing feedback on how they felt the session went (Castle, 2009). Regardless of who starts the conversation, it is clear that it should be a thoughtful discussion about teaching.

4. Use Effective Communication Skills

The feedback session should be a dialogue or conversation because when feedback allows for response and interaction, it is likely to be more effective (Brinko, 1993). During the conversation, both participants should regularly pause, paraphrase what they think they’ve heard the other party say, check for understanding, and seek clarification if needed (Robbins, 1991, p. 42).

Open body language should be used during the post-observation feedback conference. Avoid crossed arms and constantly checking the time; the observer should sit upright and listen attentively (Gottesman, 2000, p. 64). Focus only on what is being said and avoid making assumptions (Levene & Frank, 1993, p. 40).

Observers should use open-ended, probing questions that prompt the observed to reflect on her teaching (Martin & Double, 1998). Allowing the observed to reflect and come to realizations themselves increases the likelihood they will make changes (Gottesman, 2000, p. 67). Successful application of these communication strategies encourages individuals to share perceptions, engage in reflection, and be more receptive to feedback.

5. Be Positive and Build on Strengths

Literature on the peer review of teaching generally agrees feedback should begin with the positive and build on the instructor's strengths (Brewerton, 2004; Castle, 2009; Chism, 2007; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Martin & Double, 1998). "You" statements that focus on the instructor's skills (not on the instructor) are likely to be well-received (Brinko, 1993).

Even when addressing something that did not go well, try to maintain a positive tone (Carter, 2008). Using positive language to "sandwich" negative comments can make the feedback more effective (Brinko, 1993), but be sure the praise is meaningful and substantive, not empty (Verderber & Verderber, 1986, p. 149).

6. Describe Behavior

Comments delivered during the feedback session should describe behavior rather than judge or assess the instructor. The observer should focus on behavior and share observations of the session without evaluating the colleague's teaching performance (Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008; Chism, 2007; Gottesman, 2000; Koballa et al., 1992; Levene & Frank, 1993; Weimer et al., 1988). Because descriptive comments are less likely than evaluative feedback to create feelings of defensiveness, descriptive feedback tends to be more effective (Brinko, 1993).

Focusing on the actions the observed has control over keeps the discussion constructive (Arbeeny & Hartman, 2008; Chism, 2007; Gottesman, 2000; Verderber & Verderber, 1986; Weimer et al., 1988). Criticizing a colleague's personal attributes or things he cannot control is unlikely to lead to a positive outcome.

7. Be Specific and Accurate

Comments delivered during the post-observation session should be specific (Brinko, 1993; Gottesman, 2000; Levene & Frank, 1993; Verderber & Verderber, 1986). If, during the pre-conference meeting, the instructor to be observed identified particular concerns she wanted addressed, the feedback should focus on those specific issues. Relating comments back to the needs identified by the instructor further increases the effectiveness of the feedback (Brinko, 1993).

Equally important is the notion of accuracy. Recipients of criticism are unlikely to accept feedback they consider inaccurate (Brinko, 1993). Thus, observers establish credibility by ensuring their observations reflect as closely as possible what actually occurred in the classroom (Brinko, 1993). If there is more than one peer reviewer involved, the observers could check with one another for agreement on specific observations (Chism, 2007; Skoog, 1980). If there is only one observer, she should confirm her impressions with the instructor who was observed (Carter, 2008).

8. Don't Compare

When observing the teaching of a colleague, it is natural to compare her approach with your own. Siddiqui et al. (2007) advocates observers resist the urge to compare. With exposure to different educational theories and training, however, observers can become more aware of their own biases and understand “there is not one best way to teach” (Carter, 2008). The observer should concentrate on if and how the instructional goals are accomplished, not the teaching style of the person being observed.

9. Focus on the Future

During the post-observation conference, the observed and observer reflect back on the instruction session, and while it is easy to dwell on the past, both parties should focus on the future (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). The focus should be on how the instructor might change her approach for future sessions based on feedback from the observer (Chism, 2007). The focus should be on problem-solving and finding solutions (Brewerton, 2004).

While your colleague may need and want suggestions, it is good practice to avoid overwhelming her with suggestions for improvement (Brinko, 1993). As a general rule, limit the number of suggestions or pieces of negative feedback to three (Castle, 2009; Fullerton, 1993; Gottesman, 2000). When giving advice, maintain a positive, encouraging tone and use first-person or third-person pronouns rather than “you” statements (Brinko, 1993).

Finally, a good post-observation conversation will move beyond observations of the class session and into a broader discussion of teaching and learning in which new ideas and solutions are generated (Fullerton, 1993).

10. Maintain Confidentiality

This final best practice is a reminder: maintain confidentiality. Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005), insist “the relationship between observers and observees needs to be open, allowing for honest reflection within a

process where confidentiality is assured” (p. 217). Respecting confidentiality will help maintain the peer review program. Norbury (2001) stated “the whole process is owned by the person being observed, which means that it is confidential unless the observed agrees otherwise” (p. 89). Levene and Frank (1993) suggested any data collected should become the property of the instructor who is being observed and after the observation “coaches should give their partners all information collected during the observation” (p. 40).

Conclusion

Expressing a concern with regard to the fact that most faculty are not trained to observe instruction, Weimer et al. (1988) noted “untrained observers tend to respond to teaching. . . intuitively, globally and judgementally [*sic*]” (p. 292). The best practices recommended here will allow instruction librarians to be more effective in giving feedback, which will lead to more intentional and thoughtful dialogue about teaching and learning. Such conversations foster a climate of collaboration and will encourage continuous improvement and innovation.

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