Do you think peer review of research is important? Do you think student course evaluations are a limited measure of the quality of the course? Do you sometimes feel the need for fresh ideas to change the way you teach a course? If you have answered 'yes' to any of these questions, you may be interested in learning more about peer observation of and feedback on teaching. In this article we will consider the advantages of inviting a faculty colleague to observe your teaching and provide non-judgmental and descriptive feedback.

Teaching at the university level is all too often a very private enterprise. Other than their students, it is unusual for faculty members to invite an outsider, much less a peer, to attend classes for the sake of observing their teaching. Most faculty have had little or no formal training in teaching practices and pedagogy, and often find it hard to make the time to step back and reflect on their own. It may even be intimidating to have someone else give them feedback... However, why shouldn't we think of it as scholarship? We ask our peers to review our research and our writing - why not our teaching?

When conducted thoughtfully and with some planning and training, peer observation and feedback can be extremely useful in improving teaching.

Typically, the primary (perhaps only) source of feedback that faculty receive is from student evaluations, usually after a course has ended. This perspective can clearly be very valuable. However, it is not in "real time", and often answers only some of the questions faculty might have about their teaching. The richness of working with a peer, someone who might also appreciate the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching, can be invaluable. In fact, who has more humility about the challenges of teaching than fellow faculty?
What does a peer observe and provide feedback on?

There are many facets to teaching, and multiple paths one can take to begin to reflect and improve upon it. By seeking feedback that weighs strengths and opportunities for improvement, one can make changes that will enhance student learning. The actual components of teaching that might be evaluated through this process are:

- the syllabus
- course materials
- how student work is evaluated
- classroom teaching (either in real time or with video)

Evaluating curricula and assessments is not very intimidating, yet when it comes to direct classroom observation, there can be some trepidation. For this reason, it is good for those who are being observed and those who are observing to plan the process together, and to have some training on how to do this effectively and constructively. It can be helpful (to both observed and observer) to choose a specific area or two to focus on at one time. Some areas for examination could be: the conduciveness of the physical classroom environment to learning; the organization of the class; the interaction between students and the teacher; how well the teacher teaches to a culturally diverse group of learners; how well the teacher teaches for diverse learning styles, and so on.

Videotaping can be a very effective complement to classroom observation and well worth a try even for those of us who don't enjoy seeing ourselves on tape! It gives the professor the opportunity to review his or her own teaching in conjunction with other feedback. This can give the process added validity, and provides the opportunity to review practices multiple times, and later to see where improvements have been made. Ideally, all of the above mentioned components of teaching would be evaluated over time, creating a well-rounded picture of the whole.
What is the process like?

In order to ensure that the process is constructive, some training in observation, evaluation and delivering constructive feedback is important (see the section in this newsletter describing an upcoming workshop.) Following training is a three step process. An observer meets with the faculty member to discuss their goals for the observation, and what they specifically want to learn about their teaching. Next, the observation(s) takes place. Third, a feedback session is in order. Ideally, observation would happen more than once, and over the course of some time. Some combination of checklists, rating scales and written analysis is the most effective way to collect and summarize information. CELT can provide sample forms for you to choose from and adapt as necessary.

How do you identify a peer to work with?

There are a few ways to determine who the right person to evaluate might be, depending on what the observed wants to learn more about. For example, if the desire is to understand whether course materials and activities are optimal, one might choose a peer in the field. When the actual teaching process is to be reviewed, one might choose someone non-judgmental and constructive, possibly from outside the field. Both parties usually learn from the process, so the benefits are often mutual.

CELT services are available

If you have further questions or would like ideas for how to proceed in this process, please contact CELT celt@tufts.edu and we will be happy to provide you with more reading, forms and guidance.