Using Peer Review of Course Materials

Course materials play an important role in shaping in-class learning and out-of-class experiences. These materials provide insight into the instructor’s course philosophy, expectations, and presentation of the subject matter. Peers are best able to judge accuracy and adequacy of course materials. Advantages of conducting peer review of course materials include the relative convenience and unobtrusiveness, paired with the relatively high level of information that can be gained from these reviews.

**Formative assessment and peer review of course materials**

Review of course materials can enable peers to see an instructor’s course philosophy in practice. Regular review or exchange of materials can promote reflective discussion about the goals of a course, goals of the larger academic unit, teaching assumptions, ways of motivating students, etc. for the enrichment of both the instructor and peer(s).

**Summative assessment and peer review of course materials**

Often when course materials are used for summative assessment several years of work are under review, and a very large number of course materials could be included in the review effort. Deciding how to choose a representative sample of material can be done by asking the faculty member to select items, or by requesting a few specific items from the faculty member. Most often a combination of these two methods are used to ensure some uniformity in how different instructors are treated when being reviewed and to allow each instructor some say in choosing items considered best for summative reviews.

**Course materials that can be used in peer reviews**

- Materials that communicate course policy and practices (syllabi, ground rules for discussion, teaching evaluation instruments, etc.).
- Materials that communicate content (course packets, bibliographies, handouts, multimedia supplements, etc.).
- Materials that serve as assignments and assess student performance (tests, project assignment directions, directions for classroom exercises, etc.).
- Instructor feedback on student work (graded papers or tests, journals, etc.).
- Materials that show development over time in content or teaching strategies used in a course.

**Overall guidelines for peer review of course materials**

Understanding the course context and instructor's rationale is important to a fair and effective peer review of course materials. The reviewer must take care to filter out his/her own biases for or against a specific teaching method or course design when reviewing materials. The review may be provided orally when used for formative assessment, and is generally made available in writing as part of a larger dossier when used for summative assessment.

**General guidelines for conducting formative peer review of course materials**

1. Gather course materials and contextual information about the course, instructor, students, ways in which the materials are used, and the instructor’s concerns. For example, the instructor may ask the reviewer to pay particular attention to the appropriateness of tone used when giving instructions.
2. Review the materials.
3. Conduct a feedback conversation with the instructor about the review.
4. The reviewer should be available for follow-up conversations as an improvement plan is implemented.

**General guidelines for conducting summative peer review of course materials**

1. Gather a representative sample of course materials and corresponding contextual information about the course(s), instructor, students, and ways in which the materials are used.
2. Review the materials.
3. Report on the results using narrative, checklists, or rating sheets.

**Just one tool in the toolbox...**

It is important to remember course materials alone cannot provide a complete picture of an instructor's teaching. Ultimately, the best summative evaluation of a person's teaching comes from an examination of multiple sources of information across time. Because teaching is a multi-dimensional job, assessing what we do as teachers requires a multi-faceted approach. No single instrument can capture all aspects of any individual style or method of teaching. Peer review of materials is just one part of a comprehensive evaluation program and should be used alongside and in conjunction with other methods of assessment from the toolkit.

**Resources:**