

A Program for Peer Review of Teaching

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Abstract

North Dakota State University has recently created the Peer Review of Teaching (PRT) Program which seeks to promote student-centered learning through the use of cooperative peer review teams to promote enhanced teaching methods, techniques, and strategies. The PRT project is a faculty-driven initiative intended to offer individual faculty added feedback related to instruction. Faculty members work together to set goals and to interpret student reactions to instruction strategies. The process is intentionally limited to formative assessment. Project participants are required to observe the teaching materials and teaching activity of a peer for at least one class per semester, provide meaningful feedback to his or her peer related to his or her syllabus and teaching strategies, and provide a measure of evaluation and assessment related to enhanced student learning. The contents of this paper document, 1.) the background and development of the PRT program, 2.) the selection and coordination of the peer teams, 3.) the development of the peer philosophy and project deliverables, and 4.) an evaluation and assessment of the PRT program.

Background

Peer review at NDSU has always been officially considered part of the process of promotion and tenure. However, in a practical sense and within the last ten to twelve years, the peer review process has been nonexistent. While peer review is considered "good" practice by both faculty and administration (when conducted properly), a formal well-structured program for peer review has never been set into practice. The NDSU University Senate created an ad-hoc committee to investigate the peer review process and to develop strategies that could be implemented to achieved a successful and well-received program for peer review. Based on the report from the ad-hoc committee, the University Senate and the Provost decided to fund a project for peer review of teaching. Initially, the program was very loosely structured and intentionally so, in order to provide a relaxed, social atmosphere for peer review. However, as the program matured, more structure was required (as documented in this paper). Basically the call for a

more organized approach came from both the faculty and administration. Faculty were calling for more structure for several reasons, but primarily to give them guidance and support for the peer review process which was a new endeavor for most faculty. Administration needed a means to document faculty participation and level of effort, since each faculty participant would be awarded a stipend of five hundred dollars.

Selection and Coordination of the Peer Teams

A call for proposals was sent to all NDSU faculty during the 2002 Spring Semester. Interested faculty were asked to collaborate with a team member, ideally from ones' discipline, thus forming a peer team. Thirty teams were selected for the PRT program based on their response to the proposal solicitation. The PRT program was to begin at the start of the 2002 Fall Semester. On August 19, 2002 prior to the start of the Fall Semester, Dr. Stephen W. Kiefer (Kansas State University) presented a one-day workshop related to the peer review process. Some of the basic topics covered in the workshop included, Scholarship of Syllabus, Permission Forms, Course Goals, Partner/Peer Review, Teaching Methods, and Assessment. The workshop set the tone for the remainder of the semester and helped to add some structure to the overall process, as well as, developing a more refined philosophy and actual deliverables for the PRT teams.

Peer Review Philosophy

The mission of the PRT project seeks to enhance student learning through the use of cooperative peer review teams. The PRT project is a faculty-driven initiative to offer individual faculty added feedback related to instruction. Faculty members work together to set goals and to interpret student reactions to instruction strategies. The process is intentionally limited to formative assessment, and the peer assessment data is owned by the individual faculty.

PRT Project Deliverables

A four-step process was established for the 2002-2003 academic year, as outlined below:

Task 1: Observe the teaching materials and teaching activity of a peer for at least one course per semester. Provide meaningful feedback to your peer related to his or her syllabus. Provide meaningful feedback to your peer related to classroom observations of his or her teaching strategies. Provide meaningful feedback to your peer related to the evidence of student learning that your peer collects from his or her students.

Task 2: Attend group meetings with your PRT leader.

Task 3: Write three reflective essays per semester, based on your goals and feedback from your peer. The essays must be completed no later than the last day of the semester. The three essays (not to exceed one page) should be based on: 1.) discussions with your peer related to your syllabus or outcomes for the class that is being reviewed, 2.) discussions with your peer related to the teaching strategies you have selected for review, and 3.) evidence of student learning that you collect from your students.

Task 4: At the end of each semester, complete a brief numerical rating scale that summarizes your activity in and your assessment of the PRT project.

Evaluation and Assessment

A website for the Peer Review Project has been developed (<http://www.ndsu.nodak.edu/prt/>) which includes information concerning the call for applications, the list of participants, participant feedback, group assessment forms, and reflective essays of the participants. The Reflective Essays were forwarded to the PRT group leader, then summarized (authorship anonymous) and forwarded to the PRT Board. Summaries of the submitted information are available on the PRT web site. The PRT Assessment Form was completed using Blackboard. An anonymous survey was used to collect feedback concerning the PRT process for the 2002 Fall Semester and 2003 Spring Semester. A summary of the assessment data is presented below. There were 38 respondents and the scale used was: (5) strongly agree, (4) agree, (3) feel neutral, (2) disagree, and (1) strongly disagree

Most respondents (78%) either (5) strongly agreed or (4) agreed that the meetings with the PRT partner were productive. In addition, 87% either (5) strongly agreed or (4) agreed that the discussions with the PRT partner regarding her/his observations of my teaching were productive. Concerning the meetings with the PRT partner to discuss ways of enhancing my classroom teaching methods, 84% either (5) strongly agreed or (4) agreed. However, only 68% indicated that the meetings with the PRT partner to discuss ways of assessing students' learning were productive. When asked if the PRT program helped to improve either the content of the syllabus or the understanding of the course objectives, 83% strongly agreed or agreed. The same percentage (83%) also indicated that the PRT program helped improve classroom instruction. Classroom assessment was another issue. Sixty-five percent (65%) indicated that the PRT program helped to improve the assessment of student learning.

The following text represent some of the comments of the PRT participants:

"The PRT program has been very effective in promoting effective conversation about communicating courses to students, improving instruction, and assessing learning. I have learned a great deal from listening to teams converse on these items, and I have applied or adapted several things which I have heard.

"I view PRT as a long term activity, where progress is made in small steps. Assessment seems to be a major difficulty. Assessment should not be obtrusive. Often seems during discussion that the process becomes more important than the class.

"I hope that this opportunity will continue. The Peer Review process has encouraged me to look at my current teaching techniques and to experiment with changes. I also like that the entire process has been faculty driven in a non-threatening environment. I would like to see our Peer Review groups move in the direction of assessing student learning techniques.

"Although I am not yet sure if I would support Peer Review as a mandatory part of the review process, I feel that as a voluntary program it has been very helpful and I would certainly recommend it to other faculty members."

"I think there are some important intangible, hard to assess benefits with PRT. I am working in a small group with people from my dept., and the small group meetings help collegiality and build a sense of a community of teachers. Even if the pay off for PRT is not immediate or profound, I think the long-term benefits could be tremendous for any department that makes it part of their culture."

Summary

A program for peer review of teaching (PRT) has been established at North Dakota State University. The initial program was offered during the 2002-3 academic year with a total of 38 participants and 8 group leaders. The program has several key components including peer meetings, syllabus review, and classroom observations.

Initial assessment of the PRT program indicated that the program was helpful and would like to see a continuation of the PRT program. In response, administration has issued a "Call for Applications for the Peer Review of Teaching Fellows 2003-2004." As of June 15th, 60 faculty have applied.