Innovative Higher Education, Vol. 19, No. 3, Spring 1995

EDITOR'S PAGE

Peer Review of Teaching

Ronald D. Simpson

How often have you dropped by a colleague's office and said, "I am going to present this paper next month to the ABC meeting in Chicago and I would like to get your feedback?" Most of us consider this not only a normal transaction in academe but one of the most treasured parts of our work. In short, as a community of scholars we depend on peer feedback and review for planning research, conceptualizing ideas, writing, editing, and, of course, evaluation.

How familiar does this second scenario sound to you? "I have been struggling with a course syllabus and I was wondering if you could go over this draft and tell me what you think is missing." My guess is that this situation is much less familiar to us. In fact, my own experience suggests that it is rare to share substantive ideas with colleagues about teaching.

At most research universities the process of promotion and tenure review depends more heavily on peer evaluation than on any other factor. It is common for article reprints and other creative materials that have been produced by the candidate to be sent to reviewers at other institutions. In effect, it is important for scholars at the University of Wisconsin, for example, to know what scholars at the University of Michigan think about a person's work. Credibility among one's peer group means everything in the world of research and these kinds of judgments usually determine whether or not one is funded by an external agency or otherwise rewarded at his or her institution.

When one compares the way teaching is evaluated with the way research is evaluated, a stark difference emerges. Traditionally the most crucial data in an annual report or promotion dossier relating to teaching are student evaluations. While other criteria are encouraged, it is not uncommon to see a personnel file with a summary of student evaluations and comments, and that is it. I have seen thick files that included page after page of judgments from others about the quality of one's research followed by only a page or two of summary data from student evaluation forms. We evaluate research pro-

ductivity of faculty members differently from the way we evaluate teaching effectiveness.

Why does this difference exist? Is it because research is seen as something that is "objective" while teaching is more "subjective"? Is it because we can measure one enterprise more quantitatively than the other? Is it because one is more important than the other? These questions raise too many issues for us to resolve in this short space. But one thing seems evident: until we become as serious about our means of evaluating teaching as we are about our means of evaluating research, this disparity will continue to exist at the institutions where most of the nation's PhDs and future professors are produced.

Many leaders in higher education believe that promoting peer review of teaching is one of the most solid steps we can take toward improving the way in which we evaluate teaching effectiveness. The American Association for Higher Education with support from The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts is coordinating a major national project wherein 12 leading universities are working together to find new ways to incorporate the thoughtful use of peer review into the way teaching efforts are evaluated in higher education. This is a big step in the right direction and will be a project worth watching.

The most refreshing concept to emerge from the peer review of teaching concept, however, is the notion that the major purpose of all of this is to foster improvement and to stimulate conversation among academicians about an important part of their work — that of teaching. Peer review does not necessarily mean visiting each other's classes. This, in fact, may not be the best use of a faculty member's time. What this new concept actually calls for is the initiation of dialogue, at a substantive level, about the important things we do as teachers. Rather than visit a class and make notes on how well the instructor used the chalkboard or made eye contact with the class, Lee Shulman at Stanford (who is affiliated with the AAHE project) suggests that we exchange course syllabi and then talk to each other about what and how we are trying to teach, or what we are trying to help students learn.

A universe of rich ideas become possible when two faculty members sit together and talk about their goals in a given course, their reflections on what they are doing in their courses, and the values they most cherish as teachers. I have observed veteran teachers of 30 or more years who, when given the opportunity and framework in which to discuss their roles as teachers, become transformed. I

once heard a marvelous professor of history say that his involvement in a year-long faculty development program inspired him to rewrite all of his course syllabi and to reflect, each day, on his teaching in a way he had never before experienced.

William Prokasy, formerly Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and now Vice President for Academic Affairs at the University of Georgia stated recently to a group of faculty: "I think we should move from the term 'faculty evaluation' to the term 'faculty development'. It makes more sense to try to help someone become better at what they do than to just evaluate them at the end." Vice President Prokasy is right. Formative evaluation is a developmental process that is supportive and nurturing. Summative evaluation (evaluating someone after the fact for purposes of promotion, tenure, and pay raises) is necessary, but often comes too late to be helpful. Peer evaluation of teaching will help elevate the seriousness of teaching on many campuses while at the same time doing so in a substantive, collegial, and positive manner.