

Running Head: THE IMPACT OF A PEER REVIEW COMMUNITY ON TEACHING

The Impact of a Peer Review Community on Teaching

Geri Miller, Ph.D.

Diana Quealy-Berge, Ph.D.

Appalachian State University

Caption:

The impact of a peer review community on one teachers' effectiveness was analyzed quantitatively.

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Abstract

There is evidence that a teaching community can have a powerful impact on teaching effectiveness. While “common sense” and the individual stories of teachers may support such a perspective, this article is a case study where one professor, who was involved in a peer review community of teachers, quantitatively examined the impact of this community on her teaching via her teaching evaluations.

If professors are wounded, damaged individuals, people who are not self-actualized, then they will seek asylum in the academy rather than seek to make the academy a place of challenge, dialectical interchange, and growth. (Hooks, 1994, p.165)

These quotes underscore two of the issues related to effective teaching: institution tendencies to not reinforce good teaching and professors not developing their potential as teachers. The literature indicates that a teaching community can have a powerful impact on teaching effectiveness (Sweeney & Grasha, 1979). In this article, one professor, who was involved in a peer review community of teachers, tells the story of how this community of teachers impacted her teaching and quantitatively supports her assertions of a positive impact through her teaching evaluations.

History of the Peer Review Community

In September of 1995, the author, a non-tenured, assistant professor, applied for participation in the institution's project on peer review. The purpose of the project was to assist faculty in being more collectively responsible for the effectiveness of teaching and learning. The three goals of the project were to encourage reflective, scholarly teaching, developing a sense of a teaching community, and enhancing the departmental peer review process over three semesters. The author had worked as a full time therapist professionally prior to entering academia in 1990. She began teaching at this institution in 1992. A tenured, full professor colleague had received a flyer on this new peer review program and told her, "This sounds like something you would be interested in. You should apply." Although she was overwhelmed with the requirements of tenure, she was very invested in being the best teacher she could be and was increasingly aware of her limited formal training as a teacher consisting of weekly group supervision of her teaching in her doctoral training in psychology. Her commitment to teaching and her

awareness of her limited knowledge base of teaching overrode her concerns regarding the time and energy required.

In her program application letter, she stated she had come to the institution because it still had a commitment to teaching. She described her teaching philosophy as attempting to assist students in developing both their minds and their “hearts” through assignments, textbooks, and classroom atmosphere. She wanted to be more organized, encourage more dialogue, and encourage more critical thinking. In her application letter she described the variety of avenues she had used to improve her teaching. First, she had been involved with an institution faculty resource center committed to enhance the development of faculty and staff, by having her teaching videotapes critiqued, attending their workshops on teaching, and participating in one of their programs, *New Faculty Seminar on Exemplary Teaching*. Second, she had also read some books on teaching more effectively. Third, she had spent time with colleagues regarding teaching styles and issues. While she believed each of these three avenues had improved her teaching, she wanted to be involved in the peer review project because she thought that working with a group of 8 to 10 faculty over a 12 month period on her teaching would enhance the effectiveness of her teaching.

She was notified during Fall Semester 1995 that she had been accepted into the program and attended the first meeting of the teachers in December 1995. At the December meeting, a schedule for the next year was distributed with seven meetings scheduled involving an assignment of a reading or exercise. The agenda for the meetings was described as follows on a handout labeled “Perpetual Draft Document”:

1. January: Sharing stories and stages via a milestone exercise.
Establishing peer review teams.
Assignments: Read Singe (1990).
Complete mental models exercise, “Good teaching is...”
2. February: Describing the concept of mental models.
Sharing in small groups “Good teaching is...”
Establishing procedures for peer review which included classroom visits.
Assignments: Read Brinko (1993).
Carry out Round 1 of peer review activities.
3. April: Having teams report on peer review activities.
Providing feedback on the peer review process.
Discussing “What is the scholarship of teaching?”
Assignments: Read Singe (1990).
Read Barr & Tag (1995).
4. May: Discuss articles.
Assignments: Read Kegan & Lacey (1984).
Read Van Heck (1994).
Prepare individual action plan.
5. September: Discuss articles.
Report on individual action plans.
Assignments: Carry out round 2 of peer review activities.
Work on papers or presentations.

Attend special session with mentor (9/27/95).

6. October: Report on team peer review activities.

Discuss “What is a satisfactory definition of peer review?”

Discuss “How can we most effectively promote the scholarship of teaching at this institution”

Prepare reports on individual action plans.

7. November: Report on individual action plan results.

Critique the project (What worked? What didn't? Recommendations).

Have a professor and the college dean discuss the project perspective.

Personal Reaction to the project on peer review.

The author described reactions to the project in four stages. In the first stage (January through May), she reported a period of intense insight, awareness, and processing. This stage was kicked off by the milestone exercise where each faculty member shared significant personal markers in their lives. It was this storytelling that set up a community because each faculty member became a human being as he or she shared a personal life story of milestones. The author's presentation was symbolic of the personal markers in her life: she chose to use symbols to describe her life journey. By doing this symbolic representation, she received feedback from her colleagues that her creativity would be an asset in her teaching; one colleague described it as “stepping off the paper.” This feedback was an important insight for her that both acknowledged a

teaching strength and set off a chain reaction of awareness for how she incorporated this creativity in her classroom teaching.

In the second stage (May through August), she began to apply this insight of the impact of her creativity in her teaching to syllabi and classroom application. While she may have been doing some of this application previously, this period of time evidenced that she was making this application in a conscious, organized manner. This fluctuation from process to application repeated itself. From August through December, during the third stage, she again noted a period of time of intense insight, awareness, and processing followed by the last stage (January through May) where she again applied these insights to her syllabi and classroom activity. This replication of the cycle indicates that her time with her peers encouraged a processing mode and the time away from her peers (the summer, the project end) encouraged the application of the awareness.

The author originally wanted to simply learn to be a better teacher that for her included being more organized, encouraging dialogue, and encouraging critical thinking. She believed that being connected with a community where teaching was valued increased the effectiveness of her teaching. Within this community, she was provided with an opportunity to dialogue about her and others' teaching both in a retrospective and current perspective.

The author believed the peer review process made her a better teacher for the following reasons: a) realization of the ongoing process of learning to become a teacher (six of the other nine participants were all tenured faculty), b) increased awareness and trust in her teaching strengths (use of creativity and ability to create a classroom atmosphere of dialogue), c) the importance of the presence of supportive colleagues

(discussion of teaching struggles and issues), and d) development of a teaching framework. Behavioral changes she noticed in herself included being more confident in the classroom because of an awareness of her strengths, passing on teaching compliments she heard to other professors, and encouraging students to become teachers in whatever manner they could professionally. Although she believed that although she felt she had changed and saw some behaviors indicating change in herself, she wanted to see if these changes evidenced themselves numerically in her teaching evaluations.

Quantitative Analysis of Teaching Evaluations

Teacher evaluations were analyzed in terms of five classes which the author taught prior to, during, and following involvement in the project on peer review which ran from 12/95-5/97.

These classes were:

1. 4570 The Addictive Process (undergraduate/graduate class)
2. 5140 Psychological and Educational Testing (graduate class)
3. 5570 Counseling the Addicted (graduate class)
4. 5900 Practicum (graduate class)
5. 6720 Group Counseling/Therapy (graduate class)

Items were selected from the standard 38 item department evaluation that matched the author's teaching improvement goals. The goal to be more organized included six items, the goal to encourage dialogue included three items, and the goal to encourage critical thinking included two items. The selection of items (as well as classes) was done by the author in collaboration with an institution researcher who assisted non-tenure faculty with data analysis. The items chosen are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Teaching Objectives

Goal	Items
Increase organization	<p>Objectives of course explained in clear and unambiguous terms.</p> <p>The instructor answered questions clearly and concisely, summarized what was covered before new topic or end of class.</p> <p>Managed day to day administrative details in well organized manner.</p> <p>Presented classes in a well-planned and organized manner.</p> <p>The lectures & presentations were clear & easily understood.</p>
Encourage dialogue	<p>Demonstrated leadership in classroom discussions.</p> <p>The instructor encouraged class interaction.</p> <p>Permitted and/or encouraged discussions in class.</p>
Encourage critical-thinking	<p>Demonstrated a willingness to explore other points of view.</p> <p>The instructor encouraged critical thinking and analysis.</p>

Methodology

T-tests for independent sample means were done on the means for the pre-post groups. The Bonferonni technique was used to control for error. Those which had a p value of <.01 were retained as significant.

Results

The data showed a trend increase for each goal. Twelve of the 15 pre-post comparisons showed an increase in mean evaluation scores while only three of the comparisons showed a decrease that were minimal to nonexistent (.02, .01, .09). The initial values of the mean scores approach the upper limit of the possible range of values on the evaluations; therefore, the increase in the 12 cases is a meaningful trend.

The three goals listed show the mean scores of each course are as indicated in Table 2. Note that the time frames for the pre-project are prior to Spring Semester 1996 and the during/post-project are Spring Semester 1996 through Fall Semester 1997.

Table 2. Statistical Analysis of Objectives

<u>Goal</u>	<u>Course</u>	<u>Time Frame</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Significance</u>	
Be more organized	4570	pre-project	4.55		
		during/post-project	4.68	.012	
	5570	pre-project	4.60		
		during/post-project	4.88	.004	
	5900	pre-project	4.65		
		during/post-project	4.97	<.000	
Encourage dialogue	4570	pre-project	4.79		
		during/post-project	4.91	.018	
	5900	pre-project	4.80		
		during/post-project	5.00	.002	
	Encourage critical-thinking	5900	pre-project	4.68	
			during/post-project	5.00	.003

Summary

The findings of these analyses of teacher evaluations indicate a trend increase for each of the three project teaching goals: teaching was more organized and encouraged dialogue and critical thinking. Improvement was shown to be statistically significant at the .01 level for organization (classes 5570 and 5900), dialogue (class 5900), and critical thinking (class 5900), and approached significance for organization (class 4570) and dialogue (class 4570).

In summary, the project appeared successful in terms of overall teaching and especially successful in: a) a practicum counseling class (5900) which is difficult to teach in terms of organization, dialogue, and critical thinking, b) a counseling class focusing on addiction (5570) which is difficult with regard to organizing an overwhelming amount of addiction information, and c) an undergraduate class on addictions (4570) where teaching challenges include organization of material and management of classroom dialogue. The author's experience was so positive and beneficial she advocated to the college's administrative counsel in an attempt to support the continuance of the program. Using apples as a metaphor to explain the project, she said that apples are like what education should be to people: nourishing and tasting good. Yet, she pointed out that apples do not grow on their own, but they grow within a community of support that attempts to create the best apple it can create. An apple does not grow alone and a farmer who pulls information from and collaborates with other farmers about apple growing approaches can bring forth the best in an apple.

In response to her positive experience with a peer review community, The author wrote the following dedication to institution professors:

This gift is a symbol of good teaching for all the times you spend time with a student instead of working on that journal article, grant, or committee work calling to be done.

Being kind to a student or students after being treated unkindly by the system of academia.

Responding to the less than adequate work of a student with both compassion and accountability.

Doing all the “extras” that no one sees or recognizes on a larger scale, for example,

Reading and grading papers carefully.

Staying late/coming early.

Writing recommendation letters.

Redesigning syllabi.

Finding ways to support and care for students that are more kind than necessary.

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