

Faculty Members' Professional Growth in Teaching through the Summative Peer Review of Teaching and Other Departmental Practices

Background

In research-intensive universities, where research productivity is rewarded over teaching and escalating demands impose significant stress on academics, faculty members commonly limit their involvement in professional development activities for the improvement of teaching. Yet teaching is a chief responsibility in academic careers and central to faculty members' work. As such, ongoing professional growth in teaching is both necessary and helpful to faculty members as they work to fulfill their professional responsibilities and enhance their teaching roles.

Prior research has confirmed that a great deal of faculty members' professional learning about teaching occurs as they participate, within their department, in informal teaching-related activities and

other practices that do not intentionally aim to improve teaching. These practices, therefore, are especially relevant to a study of faculty members' professional growth in teaching.

In North American institutions, one departmental practice commonly used to evaluate teaching in tenure and promotion decisions is summative peer review of teaching. Since summative and formative (developmental) peer review of teaching exist on a continuum, the former can potentially contribute to professional growth.

The extent to which summative reviews can foster instructors' growth has been questioned in the literature but little research has investigated this aspect of summative peer review in the Canadian research-intensive university.

Participant* Quotes On Research vs Teaching

"I think that the research definitely comes first. And if your research record is not in place, no way will you be promoted at all; that's it." (Knauer, Full Professor, Science)

"I would say the prevailing notion is that you can be a bad teacher and if you have excellent research, you will get tenure." (Dawson, Assistant Professor, Science)

"It's been announced and written up in [name of university publication] that people are being denied tenure and promotion based on teaching. So that's the most important thing. I think that sort of scared people into realizing teaching's important, because some people now have been denied tenure based on their teaching. And you know, ten or more years ago, that never ever, ever, ever, would have happened." (Moretti, Full Professor, Science)

* All participants' names are pseudonyms.

Study Objectives

- (1) To examine faculty members' experiences of summative peer review and their understandings of how that process contributes to professional growth in teaching.
- (2) To explore other departmental practices that contribute to a culture that values teaching and might, therefore, help faculty members grow in their roles as teachers.

Theoretical Lens

I investigated the issue of faculty members’ professional growth in teaching through the lens of academic culture, drawing from scholarship on peer review of teaching and previous research on institutional, disciplinary, and departmental cultures.

Research Questions

- 1. What are faculty members’ experiences of summative peer review of teaching and how do they understand the relationship between summative peer review and professional growth in teaching?
- 2. What existing departmental practices support or hinder a culture that values teaching?



Participants

Table 1: Participants in the Faculty of Arts: Gender and Rank (n = 15)

	Female	Male
Department A1	-	
Department A2		
Department A3		

Table 2: Participants in the Faculty of Science: Gender and Rank (n = 15)

	Female	Male
Department S1		
Department S2		
Department S3		

Data Collection & Analysis

I interviewed 30 tenure-track faculty members working at a large, research-intensive Canadian university. Through the administration of a questionnaire, study participants were purposefully selected, from within the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Science, to get a range of rank and gender.

I conducted semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour with each professor in the spring and summer of 2010. Once the interviews were transcribed, I used Atlas.ti to code and develop themes that helped me make connections between the participants and their ideas.

Peer review of teaching: An additional burden

“Doing peer reviews makes it look like we value teaching [but] it only exacerbates the problem in some ways because it’s another administrative burden that takes away from time that we have in the classroom” (Nemeth, Associate Professor, Arts)

“Peer observation is a time consuming process that takes valuable time away from other activities. Everyone at this university is overstretched and asked to do too much.” (Manfred, Full Professor, Arts)

Key

Pre-tenured = assistant professors
Tenured = associate and full professors

Female professors: Pre-tenured = Tenured =

Male professors: Pre-tenured = Tenured =

Key Findings: Experiences and Understandings of Summative Peer Review of Teaching (Question 1)

Purpose

"I think most of the time, you're in there to see, 'Okay, no train wreck.'" (Quinn, Full Professor, Science)

"I look on the peer review as being an opportunity for an outsider to suggest things that I might change to make my lectures better." (Abendroth, Associate Professor, Science)

Outcomes

"I don't have anything that ever came out of this [peer review]. In the annual meeting with my Head, I asked him [about it] and he said 'Oh yeah it was fine.' ... He didn't have it in front of him. It was not part of that conversation. And I did not receive a copy of it afterwards." (Warren, Assistant Professor, Arts)

Challenge

"We don't know about pedagogy and don't have training as teachers. So, there is a reticence about telling people how to do their job." (Hadzik, Associate Professor, Science)

Professional Growth in Teaching

As it concerned the potential for summative peer review to contribute to professional growth in teaching, participants were of the opinion that **this objective was seldom met because of the poor quality of feedback**. That is, in most cases the candidates and reviewers did not discuss feedback; in the rare cases when they did, feedback was typically unspecific and therefore unhelpful to the candidate. Many faculty members **expressed disappointment** at the absence of feedback from the summative peer review process. Nevertheless, several suggested that the process should not seek to meet multiple objectives because the evaluative functions conflicted with the formative aims of summative peer review.

Purposes of Summative Reviews

Participants identified three purposes for summative peer review:

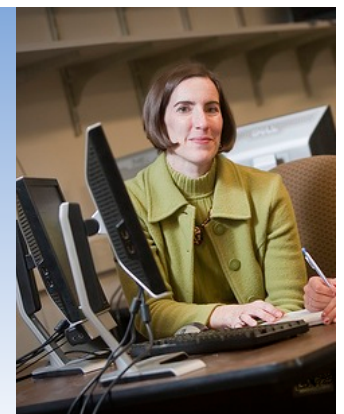
- a formal mechanism for evaluation
- a means of promoting professional growth in teaching, and
- a supplement to the student evaluations of teaching.

Faculty members did not think that the summative peer review process was successful in achieving the first two objectives. They cited **unsuitable reviewers** (where lack of suitability was defined as being a poor teacher, and/or having insufficient content and pedagogical knowledge, and/or being untrained on how to evaluate teaching), **ambiguous or nonexistent criteria**, the **episodic nature of reviews**, and **few (or no) guidelines for conducting reviews** as possible reasons for the lack of success.

Furthermore, the majority of participants believed summative peer review failed as an evaluative tool because: (1) faculty members are **unwilling to document suggestions** for teaching improvement for fear that these might have a negative effect in tenure and promotion decisions, and (2) **more attention and weight are given to the numerical scores from student evaluations of teaching**.

Documenting Constructive Comments

"It wouldn't be appropriate to put those [constructive comments] in the summative evaluation because they're just going to be viewed as negatives when they're really meant to be helpful, constructive suggestions." (Stromberg, Full Professor, Arts)



Preserving Collegiality and the Paradox of Peer Review

A primary reason for faculty members' lack of engagement in summative peer review is the ways in which this practice can unsettle and even jeopardize collegial relationships. Collegiality may be disturbed when:

- peers provide "negative" (or constructive) feedback to each other (this can feel threatening and/or be uncomfortable);
- decisions arising from the summative process are believed to influence tenure, promotion and reappointment decisions (tenure is highly cherished); and
- the norm of teaching as a private activity, one shared only between an instructor and his/her students, is countered.

The "paradox of peer review" refers to the fact that on one hand, many faculty members claim that the formative and evaluative functions of peer review should be kept separate, because, when combined, neither can be well achieved and, on the other hand, many express disappointment that the peer review process does not contribute significantly to their growth as teachers. **From a professional growth perspective, sharing constructive feedback would be desirable, but from a tenure/promotion perspective, the same feedback might harm a colleague's career advancement.**

Departmental Practices that Support or Hinder a Culture that Values Teaching (Question 2)



In departments described as "collegial" and "strong teaching departments" (by the participants), numerous departmental practices contributed to a culture that values teaching. Though formal departmental practices (e.g. lunchtime seminars on teaching, formative peer reviews, and teaching retreats) help, **informal practices play a more important role** in doing so.

Informal Conversations

Participants repeatedly mentioned that ongoing, informal conversations among peers in a context where diverse notions of good teaching are valued were the most important informal practice for fostering their growth as instructors.

The unplanned learning conversations, which contribute to faculty members' growth as instructors, normally occurred between **trusted colleagues who work on campus and value each other's knowledge and approaches to teaching**. They were **facilitated by the presence of people assigned to positions that emphasize teaching**, such as course coordinators, undergraduate chairs, and tenure-track instructors. The conversations were also influenced by **disciplinary cultures**, especially whether there is an established tradition of working collectively (i.e. Science) or individually (i.e. Arts). Additionally, the **department head** was an important individual when it came to establishing a culture that values teaching and where there are frequent collegial conversations about teaching. S/he did so by encouraging collegial relationships, appointing committees to address specific departmental teaching issues, discussing teaching with professors in one-on-one meetings, and supporting faculty-led initiatives for the enhancement of teaching.

Learning Conversations

"Most faculty try to improve their teaching, if they're interested, by talking to other people, other faculty" (Warr, Full Professor, Science).

Influence of Institutional Culture



Faculty members' engagement in summative peer review and other departmental practices that contribute to a culture that values teaching are strongly shaped by the institutional culture. Participants unanimously agreed that **research productivity garners greater rewards than teaching** and because of this and the **high demands on their time**, the majority limited the time they spent on teaching (broadly defined) in order to focus on research and publication.

Though most participants acknowledged that the University is placing greater attention on teaching now as compared to the past, several expressed cynicism at the University's claims that teaching matters.

Recommendations for Practice

Broad area of recommendation	Sub-category	Recommendation
Enhance summative peer review of teaching	Involve the department head and/or associate head (or other senior departmental leaders)	1. The department head discusses peer review results with the candidate. 2. The department head considers peer reviews and student evaluations of teaching more equally. 3. The department head clarifies expectations and enhances awareness of summative peer review process through departmental guidelines.
	Improve the feedback process	4. Peer review committee shares written and/or verbal feedback with the candidate. 5. Ensure that feedback is delivered by a credible source. 6. Explain to the faculty member the value of receiving feedback on content <i>and</i> teaching approaches.
Foster a culture that values teaching	n/a	7. Build and maintain a collegial culture where faculty members enjoy frequent conversations about teaching and where diverse notions of good teaching are valued.
Increase adoption and integration of improved teaching practices	n/a	8. Help faculty members understand how proposed new policies and practices improve teaching. 9. Provide tangible support for sustaining change related to teaching policies.

About the Researcher

I am an educational developer at the UBC Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT) where I assist members of the teaching community enhance their pedagogical knowledge and skills. My work involves developing and facilitating workshops, working one-on-one with individuals and creating educational resources for the improvement of teaching and learning in higher education. Together with a colleague, I coordinate a formative peer review of teaching program at CTLT.

In my "free time," I write for publication, pursue qualitative research opportunities, and delight in my children.



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To read the dissertation abstract and/or download the dissertation: <https://circle.ubc.ca/handle/2429/42465>

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