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Creating effective peer observation faculty training through a community of practice

Becky Tugman, Lauren E. Stephens, Taimi Olsen, and Alfred E. Bundrick

Abstract

Peer observation of teaching (PoT) is a recognized evaluation tool. However, faculty concerns persist regarding bias, beneficial feedback, and lack of peer observer training. While faculty desire to provide quality and equitable reviews, many higher education faculty peers have little expertise in conducting observations and evaluations. This article proposes a comprehensive approach to enhance the quality and fairness of PoT in higher education through the use of a community of practice model, aligning it with the evolving needs of teaching evaluation processes. The authors share their growth process from an ad hoc committee into a long-term organic community of practice to meet formative and summative observations of teaching needs. Based on literature supporting PoT steps, the collaborative vision between the faculty and the Center for Teaching and Learning director resulted in a supportive model for reviews that provided faculty with feedback and professional growth. The training model starts with new members experiencing the observational process, completing an in-depth practicing PoT training, pairing with experienced peers to grow confidence, and then eventually training new members.

Keywords: academic development, community of practice, peer observation of teaching, teaching and learning, faculty development

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Many universities are addressing the need for more accurate measures of teaching effectiveness due to a national dialogue on the processes of evaluating instructors and their courses (Martinez et al., 2016). As a result of this heightened awareness, many universities are considering multiple ways of conducting teaching evaluations with fair and valid techniques. Department chairs are frequent judges of faculty performance; because they have limited time to become teaching effectiveness evaluation experts (Krishnan et al., 2022), they often rely on student evaluations and other forms of evidence to make decisions (Dennin et al., 2017). Classroom peer observation of teaching (PoT) is a standard tool accepted by evaluation committees (Dennin et al., 2017), but the manner in which these observations are executed may not always be equitable or beneficial due to lack of training or consistency by those who conduct the evaluation. Therefore, if PoT is considered an equitable piece of teaching evidence for performance reviews, faculty should advocate for the reviewers to understand and utilize evidence-based practices. To sustain effective, equitable practice, leaders need to examine how to overcome institutional inertia or barriers to implementation in adopting well-designed training and ongoing support for peer observers.

According to Blackmore (2005), research has many definitions for peer review. In general, it is a process that allows for assessing performance as it relates to a standard. Gosling (2014) broke PoT into three categories: evaluative (involves ratings and opinions), developmental (involves ratings to improve teaching), and collaborative (involves discussion on experience). Evaluative peer reviews are often summative in nature and are used for employment decisions and awards (Brent & Felder, 2004). Developmental reviews are performed for novice faculty to give feedback for skill growth. The collaborative process, as Gosling explained, promotes reciprocal learning, recognizes professional autonomy, is based on dialogue, is non-judgmental, focuses on change and professional development, and incorporates inquiry. No matter the observation format, "faculty seek substantive, honest, and

formative feedback" (Brickman et al., 2016, p. 8). In this article, the authors assert that the establishment of a community of practice has allowed a college to build and sustain teaching reviews for colleagues. We outline the process that, over several years, initiated, built, and then transformed a teaching effectiveness *committee* into a teaching effectiveness *community of practice*. We will describe the conceptualization, proposal, and acceptance of a college-level teaching observation committee. Through the adoption of learning community practices during our committee work, the members were able to build a community of practice that consistently and sustainably delivers peer evaluations. We will introduce the community processes undertaken to build and sustain evidence-based teaching observations that combine summative and formative approaches that are collaborative in nature.

Departmental Structure of Peer Observation of Teaching

When evaluators of educational units embrace PoT as a viable source of teaching effectiveness, the department often determines how the observation is implemented so that accurate and fair representations of the instructor's teaching are obtained. The process of who and how a department conducts classroom observation varies throughout higher education institutions. Many departments assign a reviewer based on chair or tenure, promotion, and reappointment committee recommendation. Brickman et al. (2016) found that observers were often selected based on seniority, not necessarily teaching awards or effective teaching recognition. Some departments allow instructors to choose an observer from within or outside the department (Torres et al., 2017), which may lead to bias due to a preexisting relationship or the fear of future interaction. Many departments have recommended observation guidelines that include a scoring tool for evaluators to utilize (Bell et al., 2019; Berk, 2005), but faculty observers can have varying opinions on execution of the tool when no training or discussion about

how to use the tool has occurred. Archer et al. (2016) recommended that observers undergo training, practice, and certification before conducting observations to increase equity and reliability in their reports. Despite the recognized value of PoT training, many higher education observers have little to no training prior to reviewing colleagues.

In terms of how an observation is conducted, some reviewers use feedback forms or rubrics to examine areas of interest (rigor, organization, content accuracy, demeanor, presentation skills, assessment incorporation, or student rapport) during a single classroom visit (Bell et al., 2019; Brickman et al., 2016). Other reviewers take detailed notes using time intervals to document all verbal and nonverbal events they observe (Archer et al., 2016). Observer feedback can be content- and/or pedagogically-based when the reviewer is within the instructor's discipline. A non-discipline reviewer, who may not have knowledge of or content expertise in the class they are observing, can focus on pedagogy instead of curricular topics (O'Keeffe et al., 2021). When peer review feedback addresses the instructor's concerns and is formative, subsequent teaching practices show growth (Brickman et al., 2016; Iqbal, 2014). In some instances, effective peer review can benefit the collegial culture while disseminating effective teaching methods (Hendry et al., 2021).

The Need for PoT Training and Consistency

The time and resources needed for training observers for PoT commonly occur among K–12 administrators and team leaders (Archer et al., 2016) yet are less frequently available in higher education settings. In the higher education literature, it is noted that training peer observers requires a significant time commitment, and instituting this process also involves assurances to faculty that the observation process that emerges will be equitable (Dillon et al., 2020). Some training involves short workshops on PoT, but the faculty impact of short

training sessions is less known. Many recommended practices require calibration of the use of rubrics or protocols through training and practice as well as repeated observations of class sessions (Dillon et al., 2020) to, in part, address concerns about the value, equity, and effectiveness of the resulting observations. Because of their time demands and job responsibilities, many higher education institutions struggle to recruit faculty to engage in time-intensive training to learn how to identify effective teaching and provide valued feedback during classroom observation. However, some higher education institutions have found success when faculty come together as a community to engage in peer review (Smith, 2014).

Community of Practice

Community of practice (CoP) is a well-researched learning community model in which members bring existing experience to address a current concern (Wenger, 2000). A CoP is based on social learning theories, whereby individuals learn by sharing knowledge through constant interaction (Wenger, 2000). Wenger (2000) described a community as having a sense of joint enterprise (the domain) to contribute to addressing the issue, establishing norms with mutual relationships (the community), and sharing a repertoire in specific subjects among practitioners (the practice). CoPs enable academics to come together to address current challenges, including providing policy changes, formulating mentoring circles, and supporting professional development (Bottoms et al., 2013; Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2012).

The shared interest in a particular subject is the why a group is formed, but the how it is formed can also influence its success. McDonald et al. (2012) described different CoP formats as organic, nurtured/supported, or created/intentional. Organic groups develop from a common concern and have complete autonomy over the content and the frequency of the meetings. These spontaneous

communities can be less structured and can exist without funding or administrative buy-in. The other two types of CoPs have some level of administrative initiation, oversight, and funding (McDonald et al., 2012). Regardless of the structure, when members are dedicated to the cause, productive conversation within a CoP can promote learning and innovation. "Communities of practice are voluntary; what makes them successful over time is their ability to generate enough excitement, relevance, and value to attract and engage members" (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 1).

The organic CoP transformation depends on the members forming strong interpersonal relationships built through continuous interactions (Sánchez-Cardona et al., 2012). As the shared vision of desired outcome(s) develops, the group's individual knowledge is captured and transmitted to all members to create the product (Hildreth & Kimble, 2004). Buckley et al. (2019) stressed that a true CoP is more than a group of people, taking place instead where learning occurs among practitioners. Many organic groups transform into formal CoPs that receive institutional support and recognition (McDonald et al., 2012). This was our experience.

The Group's Formation

Recognizing the need for and value of a uniform process for PoT, two faculty members at a large land-grant university in the southeastern United States proposed a college-wide initiative to support improved PoT in response to patterns of past evaluations that had minimal impact on pedagogical growth or were not completed. In the summer of 2021, a university faculty learning community (FLC) examined routes to support faculty efforts in documenting teaching effectiveness for annual and promotional evaluations. In the FLC, the members discussed common barriers to beneficial PoT. Their comments echoed current literature that faculty report experiencing review bias, not

receiving practical and timely feedback, having observations provided by untrained reviewers, and experiencing punitive consequences for employment evaluation (Berk, 2005; Brent & Felder, 2004; Thomas et al., 2014). Out of the discussion of these barriers, two faculty members were motivated to suggest a means to deliver a uniform PoT process by developing a cohort of trained observers to conduct these observations.

This university had no current non-discipline college-level mechanism for peer review training and support. With the idea of developing robust training methods that established an invested and committed community of practitioners, these two faculty members consulted with the university's teaching and learning center (TLC), and they and the director proposed a college teaching committee to address PoT to the college's associate dean. The triad wanted to create a space where colleagues felt supported during peer review while also providing a viable and equitable solution to the need for additional measures of teaching effectiveness.

The motivation to fix a problem is a common reason for forming a CoP, but the natural formation can vary (McDonald et al., 2012). In higher education, ad hoc committees are created when an administrator needs to address a concern, and the committee typically ends when the task has been accomplished. The members are elected or appointed, and their time is considered a service to the department, college, or university. As described previously, the two FLC members hypothesized that a uniform training model could be a better method for getting equitable PoT feedback in a timely manner. They envisioned that forming a committee to support peer review training and practice would be an opportunity to provide service to the university and to struggling colleagues. Although they initially suggested a committee, their intent was to bring the committee into a close working relationship.

At the request of the triad, the college's associate dean created a temporary (ad hoc) college committee to address this problem of

inconsistent and untimely peer review and feedback. The associate dean contacted each department chair within the college, requesting that they nominate a teaching faculty (based on passion and commitment to teaching) to serve as a core member on the temporary committee so that there was representation from each of the college's seven departments. These seven members were nontenured faculty with various levels of teaching experience, spanning both length of time in the classroom as well as varying instructional modalities such as face-to-face and synchronous online teaching, which allowed them to bring unique perspectives to what constituted effective teaching. The TLC director was asked to be a member of the committee to share her broad knowledge and experience with conducting PoT and to help guide the formation of the educational training the committee and trained observers would use.

During the committee's inaugural semester, the group viewed themselves strictly as a committee because they were focused on a task and were slowly learning about and becoming comfortable with each other's strengths. During this time, the group met every two weeks to review the literature, create review documents, and build the PoT process they would use moving forward. Though they did not know it at the time, the group was already following the initial stages of CoP formation, which, according to de Carvalho-Filho et al. (2020), should include articulating goals and values and beginning with a specific task. As the group's protocol developed, so did the members' commitment to making the group a sustainable entity for the college. The associate dean recommended that the group claim a new identity as it had grown naturally into many aspects that Wenger (2000) described as a CoP. At this recommendation, the committee was renamed the Teaching Effectiveness Community (TEC) due to its organic CoP structure. Table 1 outlines how the PoT process was developed and refined over the course of two academic years, noting the shift from committee to community.

Table 1. Timeline for Development of Teaching Effectiveness Community and PoT Resources

Teaching Effectiveness Committee established. Members were task-oriented in learning the process. Committee member actions listed below.	
Date	**Topic**
September 2021	• Reviewed and compared literature on effective PoT models and current trends • Created a list of effective teaching techniques
October 2021	• Discussed and developed a teaching effectiveness peer review categories reference sheet • Reviewed literature on observation note-taking and practiced the skill with teaching videos
November 2021	• Reviewed literature on pre-observation meetings and role-played • Practiced note-taking in a live classroom and debriefed on experience
December 2021	• Reviewed literature on post-observation meetings and role-played • Discussed the format of the post-observation letter • Discussed the intersection of formative and summative feedback • Created a process enabling faculty to use the observation for either or both types of feedback
January 2022	• Completed all forms and processes • Reported progress to associate dean and dean
February 2022	• Recruited willing faculty to practice all steps of the process • Created a survey to get feedback from faculty observed
Community of practice emerged. Transition to a long-term commitment to PoT, where the instructor and observer learn from each other and members support the process. Member actions listed below.	
March 2022	• Completed at least one full observation individually or in pairs (to compare findings) • Met to debrief on experiences
April 2022	• Discussed survey feedback • Set agenda for recruiting and training additional members
Fall 2022	• Met monthly to discuss schedule and debrief on observations • Completed observations on potential recruits for the committee • Adopted the name Teaching Effectiveness Community • Attained "copyright free commons" designation through the university, publishing materials and the process on the college website
January 2023	• Conducted training for new members • Determined observation sign-up process
Spring 2023	• Conducted faculty-requested PoT in new-member/experienced-member pairs to continue training
Fall 2023–Spring 2024	• Continued supporting faculty-requested PoT within the college individually or in pairs • Evaluated recruiting of new members as the number of PoT requests increases • Evaluated uses of the PoT processes for an expanding group of peer observers in other colleges • Adopted language within the committee for better use by colleagues external to the community

Developing the Training

The TEC approach to the peer-supported review of teaching for an in-class observation is based on a collaborative model (Gosling, 2014). Their process follows the educational literature, which entails a pre-observation meeting, in-class observation, a post-observation debrief, and a summary feedback letter (Archer et al., 2016; Gosling, 2014). A pre-observation meeting allows the instructor to identify their needs and give the observer background information about their class (Newman et al., 2019). During the in-class observation, the observer watches the colleague and notes the methods and skills utilized during the class session (Hendry et al., 2021). Following this, the instructor is given a set of reflective questions to self-assess how the class went and to provide insight to the TEC member completing the observation during the debrief. A timely post-observation debrief allows both the instructor and the observer to reflect on the observation data and to share feedback and the rationale behind it (Newman et al., 2019). Several researchers found this method to be a basis for pedagogical dialogue between committed faculty members (Gosling, 2014; O'Keeffe et al., 2021; Servilio et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2014). Finally, the purpose of the summative letter is to provide feedback and documentation of the observation (Brent & Felder, 2004).

While consulting the educational literature on the process, the seven members of the CoP wanted to build their understanding and skills in PoT. Together, they brainstormed effective teaching practices and used these to build a category sheet for identifying quality practices in class organization, presentation skills, class climate, and teaching strategies (Teaching Effectiveness Community, n.d.). No rating scales were incorporated into the category sheet to emphasize the formative feedback element of the review as opposed to a judgment of teaching ability or practice. Before engaging in a live observation, timed-stamped note-taking was practiced through video and live classroom teaching. The member's observational notes are solely of observed behaviors, as opposed to subjective preferences or assumptions, and

can include a description of room set-up; student engagement (e.g., questions, on-task behaviors) or distraction (e.g., phone use, sleeping); and instructor presentation skills, including verbal and nonverbal communication and visuals used, teaching methods utilized, and class climate (e.g., respect, comfort level, distracting behaviors). After each practice round, members compared notes and strategies to build one another's understanding and confidence in observation. Role-play was utilized for practicing the pre- and post-observation meetings. Other colleagues were recruited to allow members to practice and refine the PoT process. Once the members were satisfied with the process they had created (see Figure 1), they advertised their services to conduct PoTs at the college's seven departments' faculty meetings.

As depicted in Figure 1, a faculty member initiates the observation process by submitting a request for an observation with an objective already in mind (e.g., feedback on a teaching method, insight on student engagement, need for written documentation of teaching). A TEC member or pair of members (pairs are preferred, when available), typically from a different discipline than that of the faculty requesting observation (to ensure teaching, not content, is observed), selects a request based on their availability and relationship with the instructor requesting the PoT (TEC members avoid evaluating instructors they

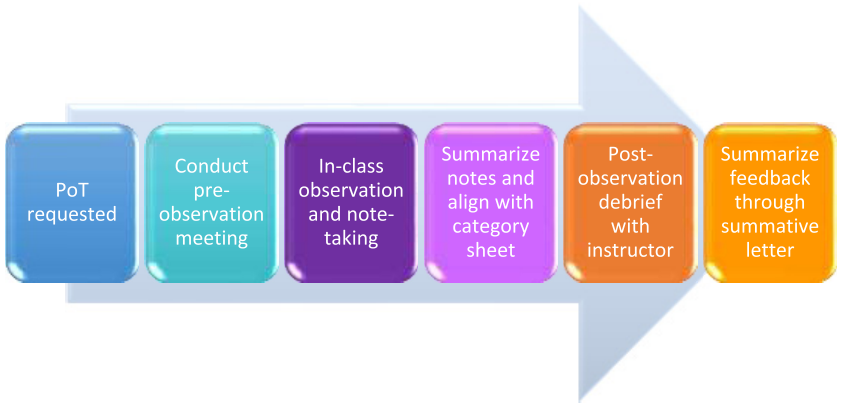

Figure 1. TEC Observation Flow Chart for PoT

know to reduce potential bias) and begins the observation process outlined above. Each TEC member commits to conducting at least one PoT per semester.

While the original seven (core) members had a sense of ownership in this process, they wanted to incorporate more members to provide a higher number of qualified observers. Therefore, a "train-the-trainer" model was agreed upon as an effective way to continue practicing skills for seasoned members while training new members on the PoT process. Each original member was asked to recruit an experienced teacher from their department to join the group. This new recruit underwent an observation as the first step of the training so they could understand what it was like to be on the receiving end of the PoT process. The new recruits attended a half-day training session at which they learned the research behind the approach. Then these novice observers shadowed an experienced member during a new observation, which allowed them to develop a better understanding of the process as they worked through the observation steps themselves. Once members are comfortable conducting an observation independently, they become trainers for new recruits, and the process continues in an iterative fashion, with each cycle of new recruits being brought into the community debriefing and monitoring meetings. The primary goal of PoT is to be a formative practice for observers and those observed, but the community acknowledges the benefit of a summative review for administrators, so the final letter is designed to serve either formative or summative purposes.

Discussion

This article aims to relay the uniqueness of this faculty team that began as a committee but transformed organically into a CoP. Although the group's initial intent was to address peer review of teaching as a formative practice, the guided conversations and ownership of members in the development of the process created a strong bond between

the members, which led to the transformation of the committee into a CoP. The committee members grew individually as they learned from one another and the TLC director and aligned their intentions of providing college faculty with fair, supportive, and substantive peer observations. The TEC leadership wanted to ensure members had evidence-based training that included reflective practices and that the end product included an iterative approach to observer recruitment, training, and implementation.

In order to sustain this community, the TEC members (including continued collaboration with the TLC director) meet multiple times each semester for collaboration sessions, where everyone engages in discussions of open-ended questions such as, "What could we add to our process?" "How do we build and grow this initiative?" and "What did we learn from engaging in this observation process?" This iterative discussion reflects the CoP approach, where the protocol and procedures are developed together, based on the literature, but with a strong emphasis on ownership and with the goal of contributing to the well-being and development of colleagues. The combination of the train-the-trainer model with ongoing training has promoted continual learning for the trainers and the integration and support of new members.

The original goal of the two founding faculty members was to provide a service to their college through which any faculty member could obtain fair and helpful insight into their teaching performance and evidence of teaching for annual evaluations and promotional cycles could be provided. Although the committee transformed into a CoP, the initial charge of providing both formative and summative reviews has been retained and achieved. New goals are being set and reached, as an increasing number of PoT are completed with each passing semester. Furthermore, when possible, the TEC members continue to provide two non-departmental observers for each observation request to avoid implicit bias and to provide a more comprehensive picture of the class being observed. The pairing of observers also reinforces the community approach, which is a strength of this design that,

although not initially a priority or focus in the formation of this group, remains one of the greatest outcomes of this initiative. In a post-training survey, one new member commented, "Working with these members allows me to be not only a better observer but also a better instructor. I am inspired regularly by the approaches of other faculty members, which inform my own teaching." In addition to providing a service to the departments, college, and university, TEC members have created cross-disciplinary, peer-to-peer relationships, resulting in genuine support between colleagues regardless of the stages of their academic careers.

As mentioned previously, the TEC approach is not unique to literature; however, it is a collaborative, community-based example that may be useful to other educational developers and to faculty and academic administrators looking for a better PoT solution. The TLC director attended all meetings as a peer to work alongside faculty instead of as a PoT expert, which allowed faculty to create their own vision of the community and the product. This collaboration between eight people from different disciplines required a shared focus on pedagogical development and equality.

In short, key factors for building a community to sustain peer observations of teaching center on building knowledge together, instructional support—but not control—by an expert, community processing, iterative building of resources, and thoughtful integration of new members. A final key factor to the success of this CoP approach to PoT was the community's creation of a unique list of criteria (i.e., TEC category sheet) that guided the observation process. While many observation criteria lists exist in the PoT literature, it was through intentional scouring of existing literature, critical discussion and (sometimes, even) productive disagreement, and piloting the selected criteria that this teaching effectiveness *committee* transformed into a *community* of practice. Members have a voice, shared responsibility, and ownership of the process and product. While educational developers or faculty groups may use the TEC observational steps and documents,

this community's recommendation would be to take the time to dig into the literature, pull a variety of resources, and engage in critical dialogue in the pursuit of a new list, unique to your institution's needs. The collaborative effort of discussing and creating a process is vital to producing a culture of togetherness and support and transforming a committee into a community.

Biographies

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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