Peer Review of Teaching  
Department of Computer Science

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Goals and Objectives

Encouraging and maintaining high quality teaching is a fundamental goal of our department. We use a number of complementary methods for assessing teaching quality and providing feedback to faculty members, including student course evaluations, interviews with graduating students, and peer review. This document outlines our department’s procedures for conducting peer review of teaching.

Before presenting these procedures, it is important to understand the functions that peer review of teaching has played in the years since its adoption.

Feedback: It serves as a means of providing constructive feedback for improving teaching quality and effectiveness. Informal one-to-one meetings between faculty members and reviewers encourages the exchange of ideas on effective teaching methods. As a byproduct, it increases the level of discourse on teaching within our department.

Evaluation: It is a means to evaluate the quality of teaching. It has been used a number of ways:

- Providing data for the APT reports that are part of the dossier that the Department prepares for the University’s APT procedures.
- Providing information to the Department for use in evaluating the reappointment of instructors and for assistant professors (as part of their three-year review).
- Providing information to the Department’s committee in charge of salary increases.

The policy and procedures that are outlined here are designed to reflect the importance of both of these functions. While at a minimum this procedure is designed to satisfy the APT evaluative requirements, its preeminent purpose is to improve the quality of each of our faculty member’s teaching and to enhance the overall educational experience of our students.

Throughout, the term faculty refers both to instructors (both full-time and part-time) and professorial faculty, teacher refers to the person being reviewed, and reviewer refers to the person performing the review.

Who is Reviewed and When?

If possible, every assistant professor and instructor shall be reviewed every year, and every associate professor shall be reviewed every two years. At present, review of full professors is not required, but any faculty member may request to be visited by the committee at any time. The review is performed by an assigned member of the teaching evaluation committee (TEC). In unusual cases, the teacher may nominate a faculty member of equal or higher rank from outside the TEC to perform the review. Such requests are subject to the approval of the TEC.
The Review Process

The review process involves the following three steps:

Step 1: The Initial Meeting: This is an informal meeting between the teacher and the reviewer to discuss the general course structure. At this meeting the reviewer should explain the review process and inquire about the course content and structure. The purpose of this initial meeting is not evaluative. It is primarily for the reviewer to gather background information on the course, to learn about the teacher’s approaches, and to generally understand the context in which the teacher is working. Reviewers will have an opportunity to give feedback in the follow-up meeting, described below.

Step 2: The Classroom Visit: The reviewer visits and observes a single class session. To insure that the session is typical, the day of the visit is to be prearranged with the teacher. There is no checklist of things that the reviewer should look for. Every teacher has his or her own particular way of presenting material, and the reviewer must be sensitive to the teacher’s unique approach. The ultimate issue is whether the teacher is doing an effective job in conveying the material to the students.

Step 3: The Follow-up Meeting: Shortly after the classroom visit (ideally within a week) the teacher and the reviewer shall arrange an informal follow-up meeting to discuss the reviewer’s observations. The reviewer should highlight positive elements of the visit and provide constructive comments (not criticism) and suggestions for improvements. As with the initial visit, this should be informal interchange of ideas and approaches. The reviewer should also inform the teacher what he or she plans to include in the report. If it is deemed worthwhile by both parties, a second classroom visit may be arranged.

Report

After completing the above review, the reviewer will write a short (1/2 to 1 page) report to be given the chair of the Teaching Evaluation Committee. This report should describe both the positive elements and areas for improvement. It should discuss not only the results of the classroom visit, but also comment more broadly on overall structure of the course and the adequacy of course materials, including the syllabus, course resources, and homework assignments and projects. Because constructive feedback is an important aspect of the review process, the contents of the report should be shared with the teacher prior to filing.

These reviews will be collected by the chair of the TEC and subsequently filed in the Chair’s office. They will be made available only for authorized Departmental personnel matters, for example, to the Department’s merit-pay committee, to the chair of the APT subcommittee responsible for preparing the evaluative APT reports for the teacher, and to the Department Chair for the purposes of deciding on the reappointment of instructors. (We recommend that these reports not be made directly available to people from outside the Department.) Any faculty member may request a copy of his or her own reports and provide a response to any comments contained therein.
Guidelines for Evaluations

Here are a few guidelines and suggestions for performing classroom evaluations and preparing reports.

Courses to be reviewed: Ideally reviews should be done for core undergraduate courses as opposed to service courses and specialized graduate courses. Core courses tend to be the most challenging to teach, and enhancing the quality of teaching in these courses will have the greatest impact on the overall quality of the Department’s education program.

Step 1: The Initial Meeting: This meeting should be a face-to-face meeting, and in particular, it should not be done by email. The informal exchange of information and the opportunity to ask questions is an important part of the process. Prior to the meeting the reviewer should ask the teacher to send relevant course materials. This might include, for example, the course syllabus and sample assignments and tests from either this or prior semesters. Examples of topics to be discussed include the following:

- Course topic and objectives.
- Course syllabus.
- General course structure. (For example, teaching format, number and types of projects and homework assignments, use of group projects, student presentations, use of class web page, etc.)
- Course text and its adequacy.
- Changes over previous semesters, including new and innovative elements.
- Adequacy of departmental/university support. (For example, adequacy of teaching assistants, availability of software and hardware from the Department or from OIT, etc.)

Step 2: The Classroom Visit: Some thought should be given to the time of the classroom visit. Ideally, the visit should not be scheduled too early in the semester, since the teacher has not yet had the opportunity to build rapport with the students. Also it should not be too late in the semester, since students may be unduly stressed with term projects and final exams. It is also good to avoid days immediately preceding major due dates and immediately following the return of graded exams, since the level of classroom tension is often highest at these times.

As mentioned above, everyone has their own teaching style, and it is important that reviewers respect each teacher’s unique approach to teaching. Nonetheless, there are some basic common-sense elements that are worth noting.

Does the teacher:

- effectively organize the material to be presented?
- demonstrate a clear understanding of the material?
- communicate clearly and effectively?
- explain important ideas simply and clearly?
- encourage participation from the class?
- respond appropriately to questions and comments?
- maintain student interest?
- encourage critical thinking and analysis?
- use class time effectively?
Successfully satisfying each of the above items generally involves a myriad of other skills. For example, clear and effective communication involves speaking clearly and loudly enough, legible writing and/or well designed slides, maintaining eye contact with students, proper use of intonation to vary emphasis. Reviewers should critically analyze how the various elements of the teacher’s approach serve to achieve these general goals and consider what changes might be made to enhance their teaching.

The reviewer should sit at the back of the classroom in order to observe not only the teacher, but the students’ level of attention and participation as well. It is best to stay for the entire class period (assuming a traditional 50 or 75 minute class), since it is important to observe the student’s participation throughout the entire class period.

**Use of the Reports:** Those using teaching reports for the purposes of evaluation are expected to use judgement in excerpting or paraphrasing portions of these reports or in forming conclusions. They should be aware of the special aspects of the course being taught (for example, is this the first time the teacher has taught this course?), the level of expertise of the teacher in the area being taught, the possible biases of the reviewer, and the stage of professional development of the teacher at the time of the review.