Peer Reviews of Teaching
A Best Practices Guide
California State University, Northridge

This document is intended as a guide to assist university departments and personnel committees to prepare for and conduct peer teaching reviews and evaluations. A sub-committee of PP&R, conducted on campus and off campus research into "best practices" for conducting peer reviews of teaching. This document summarizes those practices that may be most valuable and applicable to our campus.

While there are multiple methods of evaluating teaching that involve various sources of data, this guide focuses primarily on conducting reviews of classroom teaching, online teaching and teaching that involves service learning. Although Personnel Procedures may require peer teaching evaluations to take place on a set regular basis, departments and individual faculty can conduct more than the required reviews.

Purpose of Peer Reviews
The literature identifies two types of peer evaluations with different purposes: **formative** (to improve teaching) and **summative** (for personnel decisions). At CSU, Northridge peer classroom reviews are often utilized for personnel decisions as well as to provide the instructor with constructive feedback. Each department should decide on the focus and purpose of their classroom peer review process. Departments must conduct minimum summative peer class visits, but may also, with the concurrence of the faculty member, conduct formative peer reviews.

Notice of the Review
According to Section 612.5.2.c.(2) (ii) of the Administrative Manual, the scheduling of a peer class visit should be by mutual agreement between the faculty member being reviewed and the reviewer. In addition, Article 15.14 of the Faculty Contract, requires that the individual being reviewed should be provided a notice that a classroom visit is to take place at least five days prior to the visit. In order to provide an effective review, the visit should take place on a class session that reflects regular class topics (not on the first day of class or a day when an exam is being administered or returned).

Orientation and Training of Faculty Who are Asked to Conduct Peer Reviews
Because peer reviews of teaching are important elements of an individual's retention, tenure and promotion process, we recommend that Department Chairs spend some time orienting and training tenured faculty, who may be asked to conduct peer reviews, about the purpose and process for conducting peer reviews for their Department.

What is the best way to begin a peer review process?
The faculty member who is assigned to conduct a classroom peer review should contact the person who will be reviewed and if possible meet to discuss the **purpose, process, date and location** of the review visit. If the reviewer is unclear about the purpose of the

class visit, he or she should consult with the Department Chair. The review process is enhanced if there is a discussion prior to the visit about the course goals and objectives with the instructor being reviewed. This is also the time that the person being reviewed can ask for specific feedback about his or her teaching. If a classroom observation form or rubric is utilized, this should be shared with the faculty member prior to the review. This meeting can also be the best time to ask for a copy of the course syllabus and review it together

What to look for when reviewing a class syllabus?
A typical syllabus should include the sequence of assigned readings and activities by topic and date and information about course policies, procedures and objectives. The syllabus should also include language about University policies related to the Americans with Disabilities Act, plagiarism and others as listed in the course catalog. The syllabus should describe what students will be expected to know or be able to do after completing the course, including the skills and competencies that will be developed. The course student learning objectives should be clearly listed in the syllabus. The syllabus should give students a sense of what the course will cover, what work is expected of them, and how their performance will be evaluated, including grading criteria.

What to look for during the class visit?
Faculty who are asked to visit and review the teaching of a colleague should, if possible, observe the class for the entire session or with three-hour classes, at least until the break. The following should serve as a guide for what to look for and note in the review process:

- Does the class start on time?
- How many students attend the class?
- Does the instructor introduce the topics for the day, is material presented in a logical manner, does the professor use examples to illustrate concepts, does the professor summarize the main points at the end of the presentation?
- Does the instructor demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter?
- Does the instructor speak clearly and hold the students' attention throughout the session?
- Is the instructor enthusiastic about the subject matter?
- Does the instructor answer questions clearly and accurately?
- Does the professor provide a clear explanation of assignments, due dates, etc.?
- If there is a group assignment during the review, are clear directives given to the small groups; do students understand what they are supposed to do in the small groups?
- Is the lecture/class discussion consistent with the course outline, class content, etc.?
- Is the instructor aware of the extent to which students are engaged in the lecture/discussion? Does the instructor attempt to elicit input from those who are less engaged? Is the instructor receptive to student questions?
- Does the professor use appropriate pacing for student note-taking?

How is feedback provided?
At California State University, Northridge, we have traditionally relied on written comments (via letters) as a form of feedback to the faculty member. These letters range from brief reviews with template language to extensive letters that include the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate's presentations and provide comments for improvement. We recommend thoughtful and extensive written feedback that is individualized to the specific instructor, course and discipline under review. All written or verbal feedback should be accompanied with specific examples or observation notes and delivered in a timely manner to meet the RTP deadlines. A **follow-up feedback** meeting is also recommended to provide both highlights and strengths of the teaching as well as address areas for improvement.

Departments Can Develop Class Visit Observation Instrument/Guidelines
Departments can develop their own evaluation/observation forms, rubrics and review criteria that are appropriate to their discipline and type of class being observed. We recommend criteria and rubrics that allow for written comments and observations not just a check list of criteria. Many Departments at California State University, Northridge have developed their own review criteria and/or observation forms. Some examples, available on the Office of Faculty Affairs website under "policies" or the Department's website include Personnel Procedures for the Departments of Business Law, Civil Engineering & Applied Mechanics, Economics, Educational Leadership & Policy Studies and Marketing.

**How to conduct peer reviews of online or hybrid courses?
For hybrid classes the peer review can be a blended peer review. For example, the peer reviewer can attend a class when it meets face-to-face and when the class meets online. This will provide the peer reviewer with information about how the face-to-face portion connects with the online portion of the class. The blended peer review also enables the peer reviewer to see the instructor's pedagogy, delivery, engagement of and interaction with students as it is done in a physical classroom visitation.

Online classes can be peer-reviewed by having the peer-reviewer log-in as a guest when the class is synchronized (meeting online at the same time). Another way is to have the peer-reviewer "lurking" – sitting in as a "technician," while the class is in session. "Lurking" provides the peer-reviewer with information about the instructor's online teaching and interaction with students without the students' knowledge.

Suggested Steps for Peer Reviewing a Fully Online Course

1. Request to observe the online course. This involves asking for the following from the online instructor:

**Special thanks to Carolyn Jeffries Maeder, Department of Educational Psychology and Counseling, for her contributions to this section.

a. Enrollment into the online course.

   You should decide whether you would like to be enrolled as a formal guest or as a lurker. A formal guest would be introduced to the students and have a presence in whole class and group discussions and on participant lists. Someone who is lurking is not typically introduced to the students and is not an active member of online discussions or interactions. The lurker is transparent, the same way a technical support person would be. There are benefits and challenges to both designations.

b. Information on how to log-in.

c. Information on where the syllabus or syllabus information is located and how to access it.

   The syllabus could be posted as one piece for reading online, copying and pasting into a word document, and /or downloading. Or, it could be posted in a folder as several separate pieces: course description, course schedule, readings and resources, contact information, and objectives. You could request that the instructor e-mail you a copy of the syllabus or place a paper copy in your mailbox; however, this would be extra work for the online instructor if the syllabus was developed and posted in pieces.

2. Arrange for an observation time frame.

   In an online course this could vary (e.g., an hour, a day, a week, a specific time) depending on how the course is set up in regard to synchronous and asynchronous aspects such as due dates.

3. Log-in to the course and review the syllabus or syllabus information according to the evaluation criteria.

4. Visit a few sections of the online course and review them according to the evaluation criteria.

   Sections could include lectures, topic information, resources, whole class discussion forums, group forums, blogs, assignments, weblinks, course information, activities/exercises, reviews, and quizzes. As with on-ground observations (a typical face-to-face, residential CSUN course), as a peer reviewer you may not have access to some important sections/components of the course such as quizzes, each student's grade book, and personal communication of students with other students or students with the instructor.

5. Follow the same format for providing feedback as with on the classroom courses, either a letter or a letter and follow-up meeting to provide feedback.

Other Relevant Tips for Reviewing On-line Courses
When reviewing and evaluating an online course and its instructor be aware of the following issues:

1. If there seem to be formatting, layout, or technological problems/challenges - remember that the instructor has little control over much of the availability and functioning of the technology. It is unfair to include such technology related items or problems in instructor evaluations. However, it is fair to assess what the instructor has done to compensate for those problems and make information easier to find (e.g., posting an assignment due date in many places at multiple times, giving lots of reminders about locations or different types of information).

2. If there seems to be a paucity of visible communication and interaction, it may be that the communication is rich and robust but it is occurring via independent technologies and/or private means. If there seems to be a lack of visible interaction, you may want to ask the instructor how and where it may be occurring.

3. If the online discussions and interactions seem shallow, off topic, or profuse, they may be. Educators who are new to online instruction may not yet be knowledgeable about ways to allow students to communicate on topic and off topic as well as freely explore new technologies.

4. Look for indications that the instructor is designing, setting up, staging and giving feedback to encourage rich discussion and interaction (e.g., positing protocols and specific directions/activities for discussion topics, giving feedback that brings a discussion back on topic, reminding students that there are special forums for sharing off topic information). Look for specific ways that the instructor is allowing for off topic interaction. Ways to allow for off topic communication (e.g., sharing locations of additional information/resources, sharing new ideas, asking questions about procedures, coursework, or the field) can range from setting up special discussion forums with labels designating them as off topic to simply suggesting that the students communicate off topic issues within the message center or by e-mail.

5. Look for indications that the instructor is introducing a new technology and inviting free exploration.

Reviewing and Assessing Service Learning Teaching/Courses
Service-learning is a teaching methodology which links classroom learning and community service to enrich the learning experience and emphasize civic responsibility (University of Missouri, Center for Teaching & Learning, www.umsl.edu). Some suggested criteria for evaluating the teaching of service learning courses or components of courses are:

Suggested Steps and Tips for Reviewing Service Learning Teaching/Courses

1. Prior to the visit, follow the same suggested steps for setting up any classroom visit.
2. Request to visit the course during the time that the course meets on campus and students are provided a background for service learning and given instructions for their placement.
3. If the course is taught off-campus, request site location and a map (if necessary), specific time to arrive, and parking details.

What to look for during the class visit?

- Does the instructor clearly explain the service learning processes and requirements to the students?
- Are the service learning aspects of the class integrated with the course subject matter?
- Does the instructor maintain current and ongoing contact with community sites where students are engaged in service learning?
- Are service learning opportunities developed and designed in partnership with the community being served?
- Does the instructor work with the student and community partner to resolve scheduling and logistical problems?
- Does the instructor provide opportunities for students to reflect about their service learning experiences and does he or she provide feedback about the reflections?
- Does the instructor motivate students to continue to perform community service?
- Does the instructor make students aware (through placements or reflection) about the needs of diverse community populations?

If online, hybrid or service learning courses will be reviewed using different criteria from that used for in-classroom visits, the Department should develop these procedures and submit them for review through the University review and approval process.