

A Teacher-Initiated Course Review Process

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Abstract

Faculty of the Department of Agronomy at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln have formulated a process for review of courses with the objective of instructional improvement. The teacher-initiated process includes input from peers both in and out of the teacher's subject matter area, and from a professional educational consultant. In the courses reviewed to date, the process has been successful at highlighting course strengths, offering an objective evaluation of proposed course innovations, and establishing a teaching support network.

Introduction

College-level courses should be reviewed periodically for many reasons. Knowledge advances in all subject areas, making the consideration of new facts, concepts and relationships essential. Course revision may be necessary to incorporate new techniques that provide the students a better learning experience. Professional development of the teacher may initiate the need for course renewal. The teacher may be thrust into teaching in a field in which he or she lacks technical education. Renewal of a course which is taught frequently may be a device to allow the teacher to gain greater personal satisfaction from the teaching process and avoid burnout. Occasionally, students may demand changes in a course, whether for career preparation, competitiveness in the job market, or to ensure better preparation in follow-up courses.

Regardless of the motivation, renewal of a college course has traditionally been something of a solitary or ad hoc process. In most cases, changes in a course are incremental and are carried out by the teacher alone in the privacy of the office. This is in contrast to the observation that adults thrive on cooperative learning, and teaching renewal can be seen as simply a special case of adult learning

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(McDaniel, 1987). If there is outside input, it is most commonly drawn from student evaluations of instruction which may suggest a deficiency in the course, or from informal consulting with one or two colleagues in the hallway or over coffee. Unstructured self-appraisal such as this can be flawed, however, by lack of uniformity in approach, inappropriate questions, non-objective data, or outright self-delusion (Seldin, 1982). On some campuses, formalized instructional consulting from professionals is available to assist in course renewal. Examples are the Center for Instructional Development at Syracuse University (Diamond, 1989) and the Teaching and Learning Center at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (Lunde and Healy, 1991).

While participating in a project on rewarding college teaching, sponsored by the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), personnel from the Department of Agronomy at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln determined a need for a more systematic way to approach renewal of a course. The model which was developed is analogous to the periodic review and approval process undertaken by faculty at land grant universities in conjunction with their Agricultural Experimentation Station research projects. It also bears some similarities to peer consulting programs at Texas Tech University (Skoog, 1980) and the University of Wisconsin-River Falls (Baker and Meyers, 1991), and to the instructional evaluation and improvement process described by Aleamoni (1976).

The objectives of this paper are 1) to describe the process of teacher-initiated course review in use in the Department of Agronomy at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and 2) to offer some early qualitative evaluations of the process by persons having various roles in it.

Description of the Process

A course review process of the type described here could have varying objectives, depending on the intentions of the people involved. The principal objectives were:

1. To facilitate the improvement of instruction based on input from peers and educational consultants;
2. To provide personal support to individual teachers;
3. To provide a sounding board for teaching ideas;
4. To improve communications among teaching faculty;
5. To improve coordination of instruction in related areas.

The review process was intended to benefit individual teachers, their courses, and their students. Particularly the last two objectives, however, offered the hope that the en-

ture teaching program of a department will benefit from the activity. The results of reviews were not an explicit part of the performance evaluation of any faculty member

The process proceeds as follows:

1. The teacher expresses an interest in undertaking a course review to a faculty member designated as the department teaching coordinator or any person in a similar role.

2. The teaching coordinator and teacher cooperatively choose the chair and other members of the review team. The formal involvement of the teaching coordinator ends at this point. The team includes, at a minimum, one person from within the teacher's field of instruction, one person from outside the teacher's field of instruction, and one educational consultant. While all team members contribute to the objectives of the review, each has a special contribution to make. The person from inside the field of instruction is expected to be conversant with the technical or subject matter aspects of the course, and the needs of students who will be using the course to build their professional credentials. The person from outside the field of instruction should be able to offer fresh insight into teaching methods and approaches, clarity of presentation, organization and related matters, without becoming caught up in the "what" of subject matter. This person can ask "naive" questions and may actually find a lack of subject matter expertise an advantage (Diamond, 1989; Menges, 1987). The role of the educational consultant is to offer suggestions for problem resolution which are grounded in valid educational research and in general to keep the process on track and bring closure (Diamond, 1989). This function has been filled by persons from different instructional development offices on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln campus and by faculty from the Department of Agricultural Education, but could be filled by anyone with a strong background in course or curriculum development and pedagogy in higher education.

3. Identification of the priorities and scope of the review in advance is important to ensure its success (Diamond, 1989). Accordingly, the review team chair and the teacher must plan a schedule for the review activities, determine the role of students in the review, decide whether in-class observation will be part of the review, and if so, how many sessions will be observed and who will observe. We recognize that the objectives of the teacher may not be served in every case by a particular kind of activity such as student interviews or classroom observation, so flexibility should be maintained.

4. Review team meets as a group with the teacher to hear his or her teaching philosophy, assumptions, and course expectations. The teacher provides the team with an overview of relevant characteristics of students in the class, such as major, class year, academic background, etc. The place of the course in the overall curriculum is also discussed.

5. Beginning at the first meeting and during the following days, the review team examines course materials supplied by the teacher. These materials may include text(s), any printed notes, problem sets, handouts, tests, computer programs, visuals, videotapes, slide-tapes, or other materials used by the students.

6. Review team members observe class, laboratory, or other sessions as deemed appropriate.

7. Review team meets without the instructor to summarize observations and prepare suggestions.

8. Review team meets with the instructor to present observations and suggestions for consideration.

9. Instructor prepares plans for the course based on the review team's suggestions and his or her self evaluation of the course.

10. Teacher presents his or her plans to the review panel.

11. Upon completion of the review, all written materials gathered or provided to the review team are returned to the instructor.

12. Review team chair informs the teaching coordinator when the review has been completed.

13. Teacher may, as an option, provide an evaluation of the review process to the teaching coordinator, department head, or both.

The success of this process was predicated on some very basic assumptions, including a genuine desire of the teacher to examine one or more aspects of his or her teaching in detail. This approach also required a high degree of trust and openness on the part of the teacher and a parallel requirement of confidentiality and professionalism on the part of the review team members. Eble and McKeachie (1985) similarly stressed the importance of mutual support and collegiality in the success of faculty development generally. Other, more specific assumptions were as follows:

1. This review is not to be used in any way for administrative or other summative evaluation. The educational literature is nearly unanimous that review for improvement and review for evaluation must be kept separate, at the very least because evaluative review is relatively ineffective for substantial improvement (Drenth et al., 1989). It is possible that one or more review team members may serve on promotion, tenure or other evaluative review committees. A review team member in such a position, however, must carefully avoid introducing any information into the evaluative review obtained from the course review process. Such an action would be a serious violation of the trust required for the review and probably lead to a general failure of the entire process in the department.

2. No review will be conducted except at the expressed request of the teacher. This was a point of contention when the course review system was adopted in Agronomy. Here again, however, educational literature states the case strongly that ownership by the teacher in the review process is essential (Diamond, 1989) and that an imposed system of review is ineffective and possibly harmful (Menges, 1987; Seldin, 1982). While a department head or other administrator may suggest that a teacher consider a course review, to require a review without the teacher's willing participation probably would not lead to productive changes in teaching and could endanger the success of the program in the department as a whole.

3. The nature of the final plans for course improvement are entirely up to the teacher.

4. The entire review will be completed promptly, ideally

in a time not to exceed three weeks after the first meeting. The purpose for this compressed time frame is to focus the energy of the review team and the teacher on the specific objectives of the review and to avoid the review becoming a lengthy burden on the participants. Such a condensed period will require good preliminary planning on the part of the chair and the teacher, which Diamond (1989) cites as a positive factor in course and curricular review. Objectives specific for a particular review, such as to compare learning at different times in the course, may require a longer time period.

5. The instructor may invite other persons involved with the course to be a part of joint meetings. Such persons might include teaching assistants or former students.

6. No formal final report, other than described above, will be required of the review team. This keeps the workload of the team members to a manageable level and reduces the temptation to enter a formal termination report into the evaluation process.

7. Except in rare circumstances, no person will be asked to serve on a review panel more than twice in an academic year. While the formal meeting times are purposely kept to a minimum, the time spent in classroom visitation (if required) and examining written materials could quickly become excessive if only a small group of faculty members are repeatedly asked to participate in reviews.

Evaluation of the Review Process

Quantitative evaluation of the results of the review process is difficult. Each teacher has inherently different objectives for undertaking a review of a particular course. This means that the degree of accomplishment of those distinct objectives is the principal criterion of success. Comments gathered from the participants in course reviews completed to date offer some insight into the value of the course review.

Teachers' comments

"There is a definite advantage to sharing your teaching materials and methods with one's colleagues."

"The review process increases communication between teachers and also increases a teacher's knowledge of other courses in the discipline."

"Of possibly more value to me than the specific course structure and technique suggestions from the committee, was the chance to formally write down my teaching philosophy and rationale for a specific course. Then I had to explain, first to myself and then to my committee, if my intentions and practices were consistent--a very challenging and useful experience."

Teaching Peers' Comments

"This process has been an important vehicle for feedback from the student to the professor. The course review gave the students the opportunity to talk among themselves and with a neutral third party on their likes and dislikes of the course and to make constructive suggestions." (Note: One course review committee used information gathered by the educational consultant from in-class student interviews.)

"The process reminds the *reviewer* [emphasis added] that through the use of some feedback, he/she might enhance the learning experience in other courses."

"The visit to another class and examination of teaching materials nurtured a greater respect for a teaching style unlike my own."

"In the review meetings there was an exuberance about teaching that is rarely seen these days."

Educational Consultants' Comments

"Introspection by a teacher, especially with others to make suggestions or ask questions in a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere will lead to improvement...As long as faculty take it seriously and are conscientious about implementation, it will make a substantial contribution to the quality of instruction."

"The weak link in the process is the fact that variations in conscientiousness of the faculty member won't be reflected in evaluations...Nonetheless, it is reasonable to believe that the process itself, with faculty who have a sense of pride in their teaching, will lead to real improvement."

Conclusions

Based on the several courses reviewed at the time of this writing, these concluding statements can be made:

1. The review process successfully highlights the strengths of a course.
2. The review process provides a fresh look from unbiased third parties at innovations an instructor may be attempting.
3. Undertaking a review establishes, if only temporarily, a teaching support network with specific, positive objectives.

The first three objectives cited earlier, facilitating improvement of instruction, providing instructor support, and offering a sounding board for ideas, have been accomplished. The last two objectives, improving communication among teachers and improving course coordination, should be realized as the network of teachers involved with the review process expands.

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