Peer Evaluation of Teaching in an Online Information Literacy Course

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abstract: This paper reports on the development and implementation of a process of peer evaluation of teaching to assess librarian instruction in a high-enrollment online information literacy course for undergraduates. This paper also traces a shift within libraries from peer coaching to peer evaluation models. One common model for peer evaluation, using pre- and post-observation meetings between instructor and evaluator, as well as a formal summative report, has been adapted to focus attention on key aspects of online teaching. The paper also discusses the need for evaluating librarians’ online teaching performance, as distinct from online course design.

Background

Peer evaluation of teaching is an important and often required component of annual reviews and promotion portfolios of all instructors who teach university courses. Although librarians have long held teaching responsibilities, they are relative newcomers to the peer evaluation process. As library instruction efforts continue to grow rapidly at college and research libraries, there has been increasing interest in developing peer assessment methods by and for librarians. Academic libraries have developed a number of programs for peer evaluation of teaching to improve and assess librarian teaching, most often focusing on course-related instruction sessions.

Many educators prefer credit-bearing IL courses over course-related instruction sessions because IL courses can better be linked to deep student learning and success.

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to deep student learning and success. Such courses should also include peer evaluation as a means of assessing the quality of the teaching and course materials.

The authors’ institution, Iowa State University in Ames, is a land-grant university classified as a “Doctoral/Research University—Extensive” institution by the Carnegie Classification of Higher Education. At Iowa State, librarians teach a credit-bearing IL course that is a graduation requirement for all students. The course currently enrolls approximately 7,500 students each academic year. This course has existed for over 100 years and has gone through many transformations in course design, delivery, curriculum redesign, and assessment since its inception. Until recently, however, the course did not include peer evaluation of teaching, perhaps because it emphasized using automated tutorials rather than librarians as teachers.

In 2004, the course was completely redesigned as an IL course delivered online through course-management software, with librarians actively teaching sections of the course and communicating directly with students. An initial face-to-face class orientation session from the previous course model was retained, with the remainder of the eight-week course delivered and taught online. Approximately 13 librarians currently teach the course during the fall and spring semesters. Summative student evaluations of the course and its librarian instructors have been conducted for many years, but there was no organized or formal process in place to conduct peer evaluation of teaching. Librarians could ask others to observe and provide informal feedback on their teaching, but few did so.

Since the successful redesign of the IL course, Iowa State has increasingly focused on the professional development of librarians as teachers, and interest has grown in developing peer evaluation of teaching to strengthen course delivery and student learning. Librarians demonstrate through peer evaluation that they take their teaching responsibilities seriously. Peer evaluation enables them to become involved in continuous improvement and accountability in teaching practices, similar to other instructors across campus.

Literature Review

Peer evaluation of teaching is a long-established method of reviewing and evaluating the professional practice of teachers. A quick search of the phrase “peer evaluation” in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) education index finds almost 4,000 citations, dating from the 1950s to the present. In contrast, peer evaluation of library instruction does not emerge until the early 2000s, even though the role of academic librarians as teachers is long established (dating back at the authors’ institution more than a century). The library literature shows that librarians have not always felt comfortable with assessment of their teaching performance, particularly for personnel decisions. Since the early 2000s, libraries have begun to develop and use peer evaluation to assess
librarian teaching for promotion and tenure decisions, professional development, and teaching improvement.

In 1993, Lee-Allison Levene and Polly Frank discussed the process and benefits of developing a peer coaching program to improve the teaching practices of librarians. Based on educational literature from the time, they outlined a model of partnering with another librarian and holding pre- and post-observation meetings to discuss professional development goals, needs, and what was observed. The authors stressed that peer coaching differs from peer evaluation in that it is formative and thus developmental, voluntary, typically private, and with no reporting obligations for personnel decisions. The primary reasons for libraries to develop peer coaching for teaching improvement were that instruction is just one of multiple responsibilities required of librarians and that many librarians charged with instruction had little experience or preparation for teaching. In this context, Levene and Frank reported that “librarians are often relieved to learn” that the peer coaching they discussed was not the same as peer evaluation, thus suggesting that librarians perceived peer evaluation to be threatening.

Patrick Ragains reported on a national survey of the instructional performance of librarians and the methods used for assessing librarian teaching. His study found that survey respondents frequently mentioned peer observation as one of several means of gathering input. Ragains described peer observation as a formative, developmental, and informal process, thus closely aligned with peer coaching as described by Levene and Frank. Most survey respondents indicated that evaluation data were used primarily to give feedback to the individual librarian and to evaluate the overall instruction program. Unlike Levene and Frank’s model, a majority of survey respondents in Ragains’s study indicated that instruction assessment data were not private but were shared with the instruction coordinator. Some respondents added that data were reported to direct supervisors as well. However, despite these reporting obligations and the apparent frequency of some form of teaching observation, few respondents indicated that any instruction evaluation data, much less peer observation of teaching in particular, were used for actual performance appraisal.

Cheryl Middleton produced one of the first articles on library-focused peer evaluation, describing how Oregon State University in Corvallis developed a peer evaluation process to assess teaching in library instruction sessions. The main reasons for developing peer evaluation were improving library instruction, described by Middleton as primarily delivered in one-shot sessions, and for “compliance” with university faculty guidelines. Toward this end, the university put into place a formal peer evaluation process modeled after campus faculty practices, with training sessions for both the librarian to be observed and the evaluators.

A national survey on library instruction evaluation conducted in 2003 by Francine DeFranco and Richard Bleiler for the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) found that
few if any librarian peer evaluation models had been implemented at that time among responding institutions.\textsuperscript{12} The survey report focused on one-shot sessions and student evaluations of library instructional programming. “Peer review” was mentioned only three times in the report, with one institution commenting that campus faculty rather than librarians conducted the perhaps misnamed “peer review.” The two other mentions concerned the Oregon State model described by Middleton.\textsuperscript{13} Although roughly 39 percent of all respondents (N = 67) reported that their library taught at least one “for credit library instruction course,” peer evaluation of teaching by and for librarians was clearly not yet a reality in most academic libraries.\textsuperscript{14}

A later survey showed similar results. In 2005, Scott Walter and Lisa Hinchliffe produced an ARL SPEC (Systems and Procedures Exchange Center) Kit on the topic of instructional improvement programs, which specifically mentioned evaluation by peers. A handful of responding institutions provided links to Web pages documenting their local, nonevaluative peer coaching programs or, in two cases, their peer evaluation programs. Nonetheless, survey respondents reported that the most common means of assessing librarian teaching were “self-report/reflection, supervisor evaluation of instruction, and student evaluation of instruction.”\textsuperscript{15}

**Evaluating Classroom Teaching**

There are a number of relevant library-specific examples of peer evaluation of teaching in face-to-face classroom situations. Following Middleton, examples began to emerge in the literature circa 2008 that provided more details on developing the processes, tools, and forms used for peer evaluation of teaching. Many studies included the same steps as in the approach taken by Levene and Frank, bookending the teaching observation with meetings before and after in which evaluator and instructor discussed plans, results, and implications for professional development.\textsuperscript{16}

To aid the peer evaluator in giving specific information about the instructor’s teaching, many of these studies developed forms to categorize observation notes. Some provided a qualitative approach, while others looked to give ratings for the level of success achieved in different areas. Checklists, rating forms, and rubrics were often used to assist in evaluating teaching performance. Ned Fielden and Mira Foster developed a simple peer evaluation rubric, a scoring tool describing various levels of performance, coupled with a set of open-ended questions to allow for narrative commentary, in addition to the numerical portion of the rubric.\textsuperscript{17} At the time of their paper in 2010, they were still assessing whether the rubric provided the desired formative information.

Two studies, one by Loanne Snavely and Nancy Dewald and the other by the team of Jaena Alabi, Rhonda Huisman, Meagan Lacy, Willie Miller, Eric Snajdr, Jessica Trinoskey, and William H. Weare Jr., both indicated a preference for classroom observation forms to allow note taking rather than ratings or rankings, as would be required with a rubric. To aid the class observation, Alabi and her coauthors followed the observation form developed by Lindsay Johnston, Angelique Mandeville, and Virginia Pow at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. This form was designed to prompt written observations in various categories without assigning numbers or scores.\textsuperscript{18}
Additionally, the process presented by Snavely and Dewald included a letter formally summarizing the observation as well as the context of the pre- and post-observation meetings. These letters provided a written record of the instructor’s teaching improvement. Fielden and Foster also finalized their process with the reviewer utilizing the rubric to produce a formal evaluation of the instructor’s teaching, which remained as part of the instructor’s portfolio.

These peer evaluation processes include both formative and summative elements. Pre- and post-observation meetings between instructor and evaluator provide opportunities for formative feedback, where both participants learn from discussions of teaching and learning practices. The summation provided by descriptive letters from the evaluator is also beneficial to both parties: the librarian being evaluated obtains formal documentation for performance reviews and evaluations, while the evaluator gains important professional experience participating in personnel reviews.

**Evaluating Online Teaching**

To date, library peer evaluation literature has focused primarily on assessing face-to-face classroom teaching. However, online library instruction should also be subject to peer assessment. While there are a number of models for evaluating online course design, few publications specifically address peer evaluation for online teaching.

A well-known model for online course evaluation is the Quality Matters Program (QM), developed by Quality Matters, a nonprofit organization dedicated to improving course design for online and blended learning. The stated focus of the QM rubric is assessment of online course design, not online teaching. Still, some Quality Matters standards highlight desired course design elements that correspond to good practices for online teaching, such as “The course facilitates learner access to support services essential to learner success,” which fits with a teaching goal of providing online learner support. Carol Gaskamp and Eileen Kintner discussed using the Quality Matters rubric to evaluate some elements of teaching, making little distinction between course design and online teaching practices.

Other rubrics to guide online course design include the 2009 Rubric for Online Instruction (ROI) from California State University, Chico. This rubric provides a framework of best practices for creating and modifying online courses, citing Quality Matters as one of the sources consulted. In contrast to Quality Matters, the Rubric for Online Instruction not only focuses on course design issues but also emphasizes curriculum and instructional design, student-faculty communication and feedback, and teaching with technology. Cal State Chico developed an updated Quality Online Learning and Teaching (QOLT) rubric in 2014, expanding on many of ROI’s categories as well as distinguishing at times between course design and course delivery.
Mimi O’Malley used both the Quality Matters and Cal State Chico rubrics to develop the Course Delivery Rubric for the Learning House, a company that creates professional development courses. This rubric, comprised of six standards, specifically focuses on online teaching rather than course design. It includes the following categories: (1) social presence and availability, (2) instructor feedback, (3) student retention, (4) forum participation, (5) reinforcement of course/institutional policies, and (6) student pacing.

**Developing a Peer Evaluation Process**

The main goals our library wished to address through peer evaluation were teaching improvement, professional development needs, and performance evaluation. The four authors were appointed to a Library Peer Evaluation of Teaching Task Force and charged with developing a centralized and standardized process, instruments, and assessment expectations for peer evaluation of teaching for the library’s credit-bearing information literacy course. The Task Force was also asked to plan for reporting and retaining the evaluation data.

In large measure, the Task Force based its recommended peer evaluation structure on practices described by Snively and Dewald and by Alabi and her team, such as a pre-observation meeting, the teaching observation, a post-observation meeting, and a descriptive letter documenting the observation. Similarly, a standardized evaluation form was largely adapted from the literature for use in face-to-face classroom observation. While those forms were developed for evaluating course-related instruction sessions, we determined that they could also apply to the single face-to-face session of the IL course.

Since most of the teaching and learning in our IL course take place online, the Task Force also needed to develop ways to observe and evaluate the online teaching of librarians. One initial challenge we faced was to help our colleagues understand the difference between online course design and online teaching. Before our implementation of Peer Evaluation of Teaching, it was not uncommon to hear some of our colleagues lament they were “not really teaching” if they were not standing in front of a physical class, or if they had not developed the curriculum and their online course materials themselves from scratch.

A standard template is used to create all sections of our multi-section IL course. All standardized course content, assessments, and tools are already present in the templated sections created for librarians. Librarians teaching the course customize their sections in defined areas and maintain communications with students throughout the course. Because of this templated approach, there was a tendency to conflate course design with online teaching, making it difficult for librarians to acknowledge their own teaching role. Thus, the Task Force needed to clearly define what constituted course design versus online teaching.
One helpful approach was to recognize that online teaching is what the online instructor does with the course template and its tools to help students learn and successfully progress through the course. For one example, the course template includes a blog tool. The presence of that tool is an element of online course design, but the content the instructor adds and how the instructor uses that tool constitute teaching. In addition, we recognized the importance of instructors maintaining connection with their online students through ongoing communication utilizing announcements and other course management software (CMS) tools, and by establishing their own regular and engaged presence in the course.

Once this distinction was clarified and agreed upon, we needed to develop ways that online teaching could be observed and evaluated. We reviewed online course evaluation methods, especially the Cal State Chico Rubric and that of Quality Matters, and a locally developed checklist used by the IL course instructors as a guide to customizing the course template in their sections and aiming for aspirational best practices in online teaching. From this work, we developed the Online Classroom Evaluation Form (see Appendix). Similar to the face-to-face observation form, this form guides evaluators in their reviews of instructors’ online teaching, such as evaluating the blog/discussion board and announcements page each instructor creates to communicate with the students. There is a strong focus on librarian-student communication and teaching with CMS tools.

The Task Force then piloted use of the Online Classroom Evaluation Form to review a past section of the IL course. Reviewing a past section is a common practice within online course design evaluation models such as Quality Matters and fits well with summative evaluations. After slight modifications, the Task Force decided the evaluation forms were ready for wider input.

**Peer Evaluation Procedures**

The Task Force recommended a process of pre- and post-observation meetings, classroom observations that address both the physical and online classrooms, and a summative descriptive letter from the evaluator that documents what was observed and discussed. The culminating letter is based on classroom observations, thus is at least partly based on the forms, but it does not draw on a formal rubric or a system of quantified scores.

The Task Force recommended that all IL course instructors should undergo peer observation of both face-to-face and online performance at least once every three years.
Initiating teaching observations within the three-year time frame is the responsibility of the instructor. The head of instruction is charged with maintaining peer evaluation records indicating date and type of observation completed. The head of instruction also helps schedule observations to manage issues of scale, timing, and workload. Analysis of the results of peer evaluation is a shared responsibility between evaluator and instructor, and potentially between instructor and supervisor, between instructor and the head of instruction, or both.

Eligibility as an evaluator requires training in the procedures, purposes, and policies of peer evaluation, and evaluators must themselves teach the IL course. The head of instruction trains evaluators and determines who assesses whom, taking into consideration scheduling needs and potential conflicts of interest. For example, a supervisor should not serve as a peer evaluator of a supervisee. One reason for developing a formal peer evaluation system is to include other voices in performance evaluation. Further, supervisors are not “peers” of those they supervise.

Centralized reporting and retention are part of our peer evaluation process. The evaluator sends a culminating letter of what was observed to the instructor, the head of instruction, and the instructor’s supervisor. The head of instruction is responsible for retention of all observation letters. Supervisors are responsible for retention of their supervisees’ observation letters, and each instructor maintains a copy of her or his own letter. Peer evaluation letters and outcomes are confidential documents. Evaluators do not share details or letters with anyone other than the instructor who was observed, the head of instruction, and the instructor’s supervisor.

To use the peer evaluation process for professional development, IL instructors should give full consideration to peer feedback and teaching improvement suggestions they may receive. Observation letters also should become part of portfolios that are compiled for promotion or tenure reviews.

Adopting the Recommendations

The Task Force used a transparent and inclusive process of gathering feedback from librarians teaching the course. This involvement helped provide useful perspectives to improve the proposed procedures and to ensure buy-in from colleagues. We hoped this approach would quell librarian concerns about being evaluated, such as those Levene and Frank noted. We discussed that peer evaluation is not about personal teaching style preferences but about effective teaching, and that forms and procedures are designed to help guide the process. Colleagues were reassured to learn that observation forms were intended to serve as guidelines, not rating rubrics. As Snavely and Dewald observed, not all items on the relevant form may be observed during any one classroom observation, and some items may be aspirational or suggestive of other good practices that may
not explicitly be listed on the form. After discussion, the librarians teaching the course unanimously approved the proposal and adopted it.

**Using the Recommendations and What We Learned**

Once the recommendations were adopted, librarians immediately began participating. At the writing of this article, about half the instructors of the IL course have been evaluated at their request, and slightly more than half of the instructors have been trained and served as evaluators.

Librarians have commented on how much they learned through discussions in pre- and post-observation meetings, regardless of which role they took. For example, only through the peer evaluation process did one librarian realize she was routinely writing out hyperlinks in her online course materials but not activating them for student ease of use. Another librarian learned how easy it would be to embed presentations and videos within her course pages rather than provide a simple link to the Web content. Still another librarian learned how to better engage students in the face-to-face session after discussing active learning strategies at the pre-observation meeting. The friendly and helpful tone of the pre- and post-observation meetings has served as a safe zone for sharing and learning. The evaluation forms and guiding questions also work well for us. However, we discovered that we need to provide more guidance for instructors and evaluators in terms of understanding the peer evaluation timeline from start to finish. We also must supply more structure for the culminating letter.

Through both the face-to-face and the online peer evaluation processes, we have succeeded in enhancing teaching improvement and strengthening librarians’ promotional portfolios. Librarians observed through the peer evaluation process have benefited from peer feedback on their teaching performance and practices. They may receive confirmation that an approach they have developed is effective, or encouragement to clarify some aspects of their face-to-face or online teaching. Librarians serving as peer evaluators have also benefited by gaining insights into other effective teaching methods that they may try in their own course sections. Most important, implementing a formal peer evaluation process has enabled reflective and constructive teaching conversations to take place regularly, creating a more open environment in which we can all more readily learn from one another.

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Conclusion

As more academic libraries develop information literacy courses in addition to course-related instruction sessions, peer evaluation of teaching models specific to library IL course needs gain critical importance. Devising a method for evaluating online teaching is particularly important when the majority of the course takes place online. The authors reviewed and adapted models for assessing online course design to develop a peer evaluation process for online teaching, which can be adapted for online IL courses at other academic libraries. Through involvement in the development and adoption process, librarians at our university recognized the benefits that could come from adding peer evaluation of teaching to our existing methods of assessment.

Implementation of our peer evaluation model is progressing and will lead to all instructors of the IL course both being evaluated themselves and evaluating other instructors. Our process has both formative coaching and summative assessment elements, and it has prompted new discussions of teaching and learner support. Our implementation of peer evaluation has helped create a more open environment where such conversations can take place, an unexpected and welcome outcome of this process. Student evaluations and learner outcomes remain central elements of course assessment, and peer evaluation adds a valuable perspective.

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Appendix

Online Classroom Evaluation Form

Peer evaluator: ____________________________
Instructor: ________________________________
Class section; Semester/Session of class: _____
Date of evaluation: _________________________
Instructor Contact

- Home page customized with instructor name, office hours, availability by appointment, etc.
- Meet Your Instructor includes name, office hours, photo, and personal message, and is made visible to students.

Section Customization and Tool Use

- Instructor provides appropriate section-specific customizations.
- Correct dates and times are listed on Calendar, Final Exam Info page, etc.
- Instructor has chosen Discussion Board or Blog and hidden other unused tool.
- Instructor uses tools correctly; instructor content displays properly to students.
- Customizations and any added materials are content relevant, easy to navigate, clearly organized, and error-free.
- Fonts and materials are legible and visually consistent; graphics display properly, etc.

Course Instructional Delivery

A. Communication

- Instructor tone portrays course and student learning in a positive way; shows enthusiasm, availability, welcoming attitude, etc.
- Instructor communications are clear, understandable, and error-free, or with any errors promptly corrected.
- Communication tools (Announcements, Blog/Discussion Board) show sustained weekly engagement on part of instructor.
- Communications (Announcements, Blog/Discussion Board) are archived for continued accessibility.

B. Online Learner Support

- Instructor provides online learning orientation, such as course expectations message, online learning strategies, time management tips, how to succeed in an online course, etc.
- Instructor orients students to course page organization, where things are found, how to do online activities, support, etc.

C. Online Teaching Activity

- Instructor teaching input is observable in Communication tools and class pages.
- Instructor engages in teaching, advising, announcing new content, reminding, etc.
• Instructor teaching input is aligned with course content and learning objectives.
• Any additional content or methods introduced by instructor (e.g., opening session slides, review session slides, files, links, etc.) are relevant and add value.

Notes


5. Levene and Frank, “Peer Coaching.”
6. Ibid., 36.
7. Ibid., 159, 166.
8. Ibid., 164, fig. 4.
9. Ibid., 71.
10. Ibid., 28.
17. Fielden and Foster, “Crossing the Rubicon.”
24. Levene and Frank, “Peer Coaching.”
25. Snively and Dewald, “Developing and Implementing Peer Review.”