

Heuristics for Documenting Teaching and Student Learning

In 1994, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln joined 11 other universities in a national project organized by the American Association of Higher Education (AAHE) to help faculty members document, reflect upon, and improve student learning. Today, UNL is a member of the Peer Review of Teaching Project—a consortium of five research universities (Kansas State University, Texas A & M University, Indiana University-Bloomington, and the University of Michigan) engaged in piloting a system of faculty course portfolios. The PRTP supports selected faculty over the course of a fellowship year as they write three reflective commentaries (called “interactions”) on different aspects of teaching (Intellectual content, teaching practices, and student understanding). Faculty then combine these interactions with classroom artifacts (such as syllabi, assignment prompts, and sample student work) into an electronic course portfolio. The following prompts are used by faculty to write about their selected target course. For more information about the PRTP or to review completed faculty portfolios from its member institutions, see <http://www.unl.edu/peerrev/>

PEER REVIEW INTERACTIONS

For the Peer Review project your departmental/area team will be asked to engage in three interactions as a means of developing a comprehensive course portfolio. There are three parts to each interaction:

- **Part I** will ask each individual to write a “reflective” memo about their own course.
- **Part II** will ask each individual to share their reflective memo with the other team members and then the team will engage in a discussion regarding the standards for reviewing teaching and linking of individual courses to the broader curriculum.
- **Part III** involves a follow-up to this discussion where each individual first determines if they want to add an addendum to their reflective memo and then shares that memo and addendum (if there is one) with one other team member. That team member will then write a “responsive” memo to that individual’s reflective memo (and addendum) based on the standards for reviewing teaching discussed by the team.

Each of the interactions will generate at least one 2–3 page memo; this is the basic explanation of your procedures, decisions, and rationale. In some cases there will also be a follow-up and a reaction from one of your colleagues. Our procedure for sharing these documents is an electronic workspace organized using UNL’s Blackboard system. You and your departmental teammates are listed as a group under the communications button in the Blackboard peer review section. We will use the discussion board “forum and thread” system to post memos and comments so the members of each team (but only those members) can see and comment on the materials.

INTERACTION 1

REFLECTIONS ON A SYLLABUS

Part I – Individual Preparation for Interaction

Please use the syllabus from your target course as the source of a reflective memo (inside four pages). The memo should provide a peer in your field with a window on the choices and rationale that underlie your syllabus. The following prompts may help to guide you in this writing. The purpose of the prompts and questions are to get you thinking about how and why you teach your course as you do.

A. Course Goals and Rationale

(1) What do you want students to learn from your course?

- What do you want them to know? What do you want them to be able to do? What do you want them to understand? What perspectives or attitudes do you want them to have?
- What is important for them to learn about your field? What should they learn about themselves as students or as contributors to our society?

(2) Why did you choose the goals you did?

- Why is it necessary for your students to achieve these goals? What do you know about your students that makes these goals appropriate for their education?
- What perspectives of your discipline or field shaped your goals for the course? How did you decide between the breadth of content and depth of content? How is the depth of understanding reflected in your course goals?

(3) Where are these goals found in the syllabus for your course?

- What readings or other sources of material are connected with the particular goals of the course? How did your vision of the course influence your selection of topics and resources?
- Are there any activities for students in the syllabus that are particularly crafted to achieve individual goals of the course?

B. Course Content and the Broader Curriculum

- How do your goals fit in with the goals of other courses in your discipline? How does it lay the foundation for courses that follow it or build on what students have already learned in other courses?
- How in general does your course fit within the larger conception of curriculum, program, or undergraduate experience? How is the content connected to the general goals of your major or your college's general studies guidelines?

Part II – Interaction with Department/Area Peers

Have all department peers share their syllabus and memo. After the entire team has reviewed each individual's syllabus and memo, engage in the following conversations:

A. Standards for Reviewing Teaching

Imagine that these two documents are part of a promotion/tenure or annual review file. Discuss what would be important to take into account when reviewing these documents. For example, coherence and coverage of goals? How well goals represent the important concepts of the discipline? Connectivity of course goals to the broader curriculum? Goals' level of expectation for student learning? With whom and how are the goals shared? Clear and detailed goal description? Thoughtfulness of teacher's reflection or rationale?

B. Identifying Shared Objectives for Student Learning.

Discuss the connectivity of each individual's course goals with other course goals and the broader curriculum. Identify for either each individual course or for your group of courses promising outcomes (2-3 outcomes) to focus upon in the next two interactions.

Part III – Follow-up on Interaction

Following the discussion with your teammates, please review your memo and add an addendum for changes or additional thoughts. Exchange your original memo, addendum, and syllabus with one other team member. Write a responsive memo (inside 2 pages) after reviewing your teammate's documents using the standards you discussed with your departmental team as a basis for your response. Share your responsive memo with your teammate.

INTERACTION 2

CAPTURING THE PARTICULARS OF COURSE CONCEPTION

Part I – Individual Preparation for Interaction

As Kenneth Elbe has written about teaching, “it is attention to the particular that brings any craft to a high degree of development” (1988, p. 6). This interaction is designed to uncover this high degree of development that is embodied in the particulars of your conception of your course. For your target course please write a reflective memo (inside four pages) that describes how you use specific teaching methods, course materials, and courses assignments to monitor and help direct student learning of your focus objectives. You may choose to append to this memo any relevant materials, such as handouts, study questions, course notes, or copies of your exams. As you write your reflective memo, the following prompts may be a useful guide.

A. Teaching Methods/Course Materials/Course Activities

- (1) What teaching methods (lecture, group work, question/answer, etc.) are you using during your contact time with students to meet your objectives?**
 - How do each of these teaching methods facilitate students’ achievement of course objectives?
 - How will you use each of these methods during class time and over the course of the semester?
- (2) What course materials (textbooks, course notes, etc.) are you using to meet your objectives?**
 - What characteristics make these materials useful to students’ achievement of the course objectives?
 - How should students use each of the course materials?
- (3) What course activities outside of class (such as projects, computer simulations, web exercises, practica, or group work) are you using to meet your objectives?**
 - Why have you structured your activities in the way that you have?
 - What, in particular, do you hope your students will learn from each assignment? What are your expectations?

B. What is the rationale for the methods you have chosen?

- In what ways do you expect your choices for methods, materials, and assignments to assist your students in meeting the goals of your course?
- What influence has your discipline or field had on your choices?
- Why do you expect that the methods will be effective in promoting the learning you hope to achieve with these instructional practices?

C. Course Choices and the Broader Curriculum

- How do the methods, materials, and activities prepare your students for the broader curriculum?
- How do your choices for methods, materials, and activities assist students in their future courses and/or endeavors beyond graduation?

- How do your choices for methods, materials, and activities build upon what students have learned in previous courses?

Part II – Interaction with Department/Area Peers

Have all the department peers share their memos and relevant materials. After the entire team has reviewed each individual's memo and relevant materials, engage in the following conversations:

A. Standards for reviewing teaching

Again, imagine that these documents are part of a promotion/tenure or annual review file. Discuss what would be important to take into account when reviewing these documents. For example, Creativity and originality of course materials and procedures? Thoughtfulness of teacher's reflection or rationale? Connectivity of procedures and course materials to course goals? Association of materials and procedures with successful student learning? How well the course procedures and materials support the pedagogy of the discipline?

B. Identifying the link between course procedures and course materials and objectives

- How do teaching methods and courses materials help build students knowledge and skills for the course and the broader curriculum? How should the methods and materials differ because of the objectives of the course or the foundation of learning being provided for the broader curriculum?
- What type of course assignments provide the level of complexity for course objectives at various stages of the curriculum? In what ways can course assignments, collectively, provide an opportunity for student to demonstrate mastery of a course's and a curriculum's most important objectives?

C. Impact on department curricular development and revisions

- What common methods or objectives can be read across your team members' interactions? How can your memos help you to identify or develop common course objectives across various stages of the curriculum? Can you identify common objectives about "mastery," "content coverage," or "methodology," or "student performance" based on these collective memos?
- Are there common issues or concerns about student learning arising from your team members' memos? Can you see ways that these courses could be connected (or made more distinct from another) in order to better support student learning?

D. [Optional] Getting feedback on student contact time

If you wish to, you can invite a departmental teammate to visit your class and give you feedback on your time with learners. Your colleague should take your rationale for the time, including the specific goals you have, and offer you feedback on how those goals are achieved. If there are specific goals for the contact period(s) shared, feedback on those specific goals would be helpful. Your teammate should write a one-page memo commenting on how your contact time matched

your own individual goals for that time. Up to three such visits would provide a good sample for your colleague to give you good feedback.

Part III – Follow-up on Interaction

- Following the discussion with your teammates, review your memo and add an addendum for changes or additional thoughts. Exchange your original memo, addendum, and relevant materials with one other team member.
- Write a responsive memo (inside 3 pages) after reviewing your teammate's documents using the standards you discussed with your departmental team as a basis for your response.
- Share your responsive memo with your teammate.

INTERACTION 3

PUTTING THE FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

Part I – Individual Preparation for Interaction

In the first two interactions, we asked you to think about your teaching as it is designed and proposed (through the syllabus) and conducted (through structured procedures and methods). But the conceptions and actions of teachers are only part of the educational picture, and effective teaching is intrinsically tied to assisting in the improvement of student learning. For this interaction we ask you to reflect on your teaching in terms of student learning. For up to three focused objectives in your course please choose one course assignment that is designed to promote and/or demonstrate that important aspect of your course. Then identify three samples of student work that clearly represent high pass, medium pass, and low (minimum) pass levels of performance on that assignment. If you provided individualized feedback on the assignment, please include that as well. Write a reflective memo (inside of 6 pages) where 1 to 2 pages is focused on *each* of the chosen exercises. The following prompts might be useful.

A. *The Nature of Student Understanding*

(1) How solid is learners' fundamental understanding of the ideas and skills you were teaching?

- Is there evidence of deep understanding in the work samples you received? Do you see examples of the highest level of work you set as a goal? How does performance on your assignments indicate students have developed an understanding for your field of study that will be retained and that students can apply to new contexts?
- How does the understanding represented by the work samples you present differ among the students? How do these differences relate to the criteria you use in grading the assignment? How do these criteria relate to the intellectual goals you have set for the class?

(2) What do your assignments and students' work tell you about how students are constructing the ideas that are central to the course and to your teaching goals?

- What misconceptions do they have about these ideas?
- How do you identify and address student errors and misinterpretations?

B. *Student Performance and the Broader Curriculum*

- How has your course prepared students for the broader curriculum?
- Does performance on your assignments indicate that students are prepared for other courses or have achieved the aims of the broader curriculum?
- Was there evidence that students entered your class with skills and concepts expected to be learned in prior courses?

C. *Guiding Improvement in Future Offerings*

- Overall, how well did student work meet your intellectual goals for the course? Was the distribution of achievement by students up to your expectations? Was it comparable to previous offerings of the same course?

- Were there particular parts of the course in which achievement was especially high or low, as compared with the rest of the general course goals?
- What changes could be made to help more students achieve in the higher categories of learning? Are there particular features of the course that you would redesign? What specific changes do you plan to make in the way you teach the course the next time it is offered? How do you think those changes would improve student understanding?

Part II – Interaction with Department/Area Peers

Have all the department peers share their samples of student work and their reflective memos. After the entire team has reviewed each individual's work samples and memo, engage in the following conversations:

A. Standards for reviewing reaching

Student evaluations are the most common standard used to evaluate our teaching but there are various options for this evaluation. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using student learning performance when evaluating of teaching? Given your discussions on the first two interactions, what other options for evaluating teaching could be used? What combination of student performance and these other options would offer a useful/fair/appropriate picture of your students' experiences in your course?

B. Identifying the link between student performance, course objectives, and broader curriculum

- In what ways could the criteria used for judging student performance be linked to instructor's goals in giving each assignment?
- How could the course assignments or their analysis be refined to gain more information about student learning?
- In what ways could students use the feedback provided to improve their work? What would make feedback to students more useful?
- How can student performance on individual course assignments be used to assess student learning across a curriculum?

Part III – Follow-up on Interaction

- Following the discussion with your teammates, review your memo and add an addendum for changes or additional thoughts. Exchange your original memo, addendum, and work samples with one other team member.
- Write a responsive memo (inside 3 pages) after reviewing your teammate's documents using the standards you discussed with your departmental team as a basis for your response.
- Share your responsive memo with your teammate.