

# Peer review at UP



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The purpose of this document is to explain peer reviews of teaching practices at the University of Pretoria (UP) and to guide lecturers, Heads of Department and peer reviewers through the process. Reference to UP policies is made where applicable.

▮▮ The fact that you worry about being a good teacher, means that you already are one. ▮▮  
*Jodi Picoult*

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# INTRODUCTION

Lecturers passionate about teaching are often seeking ways of becoming more aware of their teaching environments, students, practices, and impact on student learning.

Brookfield (1998) provides critically reflective lecturers with four lenses through which to observe their practice, with a view of improvement and growth where required:

- Their autobiographies
- Their learners' eyes
- Their colleagues' perceptions
- Theoretical, philosophical and research literature.

The latest versions of the following UP policies (available on the UP intranet) allude to these four lenses:

- Policy on Teaching Evaluation
- Policy on Teaching and Learning.

In light of the above, peer review forms a part of the proposed comprehensive approach to critical reflection on teaching practice. It allows looking at our practices through our colleagues' perceptions and experiences. The peer lens highlights the hidden habits in teaching practice and provides innovative solutions to teaching challenges. Using this lens, colleagues can inspire each other and provide collegial support through some of the following activities: Peer Observation, Faculty Learning Circles, and Collaborative Problem Solving (Brookfield, 1995).





## What is a peer review?

The peer review of teaching is where two or more colleagues of equal standing collaborate to review one another's teaching practices, or part of it, to provide feedback and suggestions for improvement and growth. The most common form of peer review is class observations (in person or online). Still, it can also include the evaluation of other aspects of teaching, such as assessment plans, study guides or online module design.

## What is the purpose of a peer review?

A peer review can serve different purposes. When the intended purpose is to develop, improve or enhance the reviewee's teaching, it serves a **formative** purpose. The report and feedback, in this case, will be mainly for personal reflection, improvement and growth. On the other hand, a peer review could be used for **summative** purposes. For the latter, the intention is to evaluate and assess someone's teaching practice (i.e., judging it according to set criteria) to arrive at a collective judgement. As part of the evidence included in a teaching portfolio, this could be used for promotion, award applications or other purposes identified by the reviewee or their Head of Department (HOD).

## Types of peer review

For promotion and appointment confirmation purposes, the required peer review is a **class observation** informed by the module's relevant study guide and online presence. Other review types may be requested for other purposes, such as professional growth or teaching awards with a particular focus. These may include other aspects of teaching practice, such as:

- a recording of a lecture;
- the study guide for the module;
- the module assessment plan;
- question paper(s);
- assessment marking tools (e.g. rubrics and memoranda); or
- any other aspect or product of the teaching and learning environment.

## What criteria should be used for peer reviews?

Depending on the purpose (and combination of aspects selected for review), the peer reviewer may use different sets of criteria to comment on products or performance:

- Criteria for **class observations** are detailed in [Addendum A. The Classroom Observation Protocol for Undergraduate STEM \(COPUS\)](#) tool can be used as an alternative in suitable contexts. This tool and guidance on its application can be obtained from the Faculty Education Consultant. The reviewee or peer reviewer can obtain them from the Education Consultant assigned to a faculty.
- The faculty's version of the UP module study guide template (available [here](#)) could serve as a benchmark for **study guide** evaluations.
- A combination of faculty and UP principles for **assessment** (see the latest UP Assessment Policy on the Intranet) may inform reviews related to assessment plans, instruments or marking tools.

Relevant online learning design principles (see [Addendum B](#)) should inform the reviews of the online presence of modules, ideally administered by the E-Learning unit in the Department for Education Innovation.



## Who benefits from a peer review?

Since effective student learning is the main aim of reflecting on and improving teaching practice, the students are the most important beneficiaries of any improvements following a peer review. The other beneficiaries of the process are the lecturer being reviewed, the peer reviewer, the department and the institution. In a Western Sydney University (WSU) publication in 2020 titled "The place of peer review in learning and teaching", the following benefits for an individual reviewee and their institutions are described:

### Benefits at an individual level

- It improves confidence in teaching ability.
- It enhances awareness of the student learning experience.
- It develops capacity as a reflective practitioner.
- It enhances supportive, collegial relationships.
- It stimulates the adoption of innovative and engaging teaching strategies.

### Benefits at an institutional level

- It promotes commitment to continuous improvement of quality teaching practice.
- It contributes to the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning.
- It creates an informational data source for academic development programmes.
- It creates an enhanced sense of belonging to the institution.

### Benefits at an individual and institutional level

- It raises the status and recognition of teaching within the institution.
- It provides evidence for promotion and teaching excellence awards.
- It creates opportunities to transfer good practice.

In addition to the above, there are also benefits for the peer reviewer in maintaining and enhancing their teaching quality, including the following (Rowe, Solomonides & Handal, 2010:3):

- It provides an opportunity to reflect on aspects of teaching practice.
- It develops self-awareness in a variety of instructional aspects.
- It identifies and promotes good practice and innovation in teaching and learning.
- It deepens understanding of the work of colleagues.
- It increases networking with colleagues, increasing the sense of collaboration and trust.

## Who is regarded as a peer?

When a colleague is approached to be a peer reviewer, it complements their belief that they are at the top of their profession and that the reviewee can benefit from their advice. At UP, a peer can be a lecturer from within a department, a discipline, or an Education Consultant (EC). Different faculties at UP may have other selection criteria for peer reviewers. For increased reliability and fairness, it is proposed that peer evaluation be conducted by two peer reviewers who can be selected from the following list:

- colleagues from the home department of the reviewee;
- colleagues from the same cluster as the reviewee;
- colleagues from a related discipline (either at UP or another institution);
- Education Consultants from the Department for Education Innovation.

Ideally, a peer reviewer is someone with valued experience, competence and interest in teaching, learning and assessment (preferably, but not exclusively, at the same or higher level of appointment as the reviewee).

## Principles

Successful peer-supported review of teaching is based on and supportive of the following principles:

- Creation of a professional community;
- Building of collective efficacy;
- Promotion of open, collaborative discussion of teaching issues;
- Identification, sharing and enhancement of good teaching practice;
- Enhancement of teaching quality without being judgemental;
- Trust building in professional relationships;
- Confidentiality; and
- Integrity.

(Adapted from Martin & Double (1998), the Canterbury Christ Church University (2013), and the University of Huddersfield (2019))

## Review process

Depending on the particular purpose for the review, a peer could evaluate various teaching-related processes or products, ranging from a class observation (required for promotion and confirmation of appointment purposes) to the evaluation of an assessment plan or the clickUP presence of a module. Reviews happen against the relevant criteria outlined in this document.

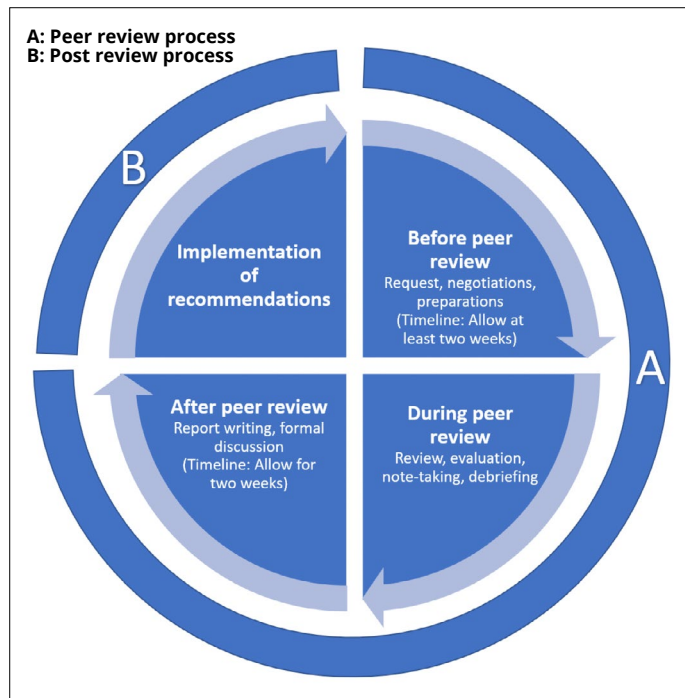


Figure 1: Peer review cycle



## BEFORE THE PEER REVIEW

### Request a peer review

The HOD or the lecturer can initiate peer review requests. The most common requests are for promotion or confirmation of appointments. These will mostly then be a request by the relevant lecturer. However, where a HOD requests a peer review for a particular purpose, the lecturer should always be part of the process from the beginning. The peer review request should be apparent to both the reviewee and the peer reviewer. A peer review should never be experienced as something "done unto" a lecturer. However, it should always be seen as a partnership between role players with an opportunity for growth to the benefit of all involved, including the particular lecturer's current and future students.

### Negotiations

#### *Nature of the review*

As part of, or shortly after, the initial request, there will be negotiations around the **nature of the review**. This is the time to communicate what the lecturer hopes to accomplish with the review, what the review should cover and what aspects need specific attention. Although most reviews centre on class visits, the process can include reviewing any combination of the aspects mentioned in the [criteria for peer reviews section](#).

The purpose of the review will determine the above. All this information provides the peer reviewer with an accurate framework within which they can reasonably measure the reviewee.

#### *Criteria*

The peer reviewer may use [different sets of criteria](#) to comment on products or performance depending on the combination of aspects selected.

#### *Access to the relevant information*

The selected criteria and reporting templates the peer reviewer will use for the review should be shared with and agreed to by the reviewee. This is followed by a request from the peer reviewer for **access to the relevant information** mentioned above. clickUP access as "Viewer" can be granted to peer reviewers by sending their personnel numbers to the clickUP Help Desk ([esupport@up.ac.za](mailto:esupport@up.ac.za)). Access to clickUP modules should always be with the consent of the relevant lecturer.



### **Time and timing**

The **time and timing** of the review (see Figure 1) is a factor that needs careful consideration as it impacts both the reviewer and the reviewee. The process involves working with others, and reviewers may need time out of the classroom/office to conduct a peer review. Be flexible. The timing of a request impacts the peer reviewer and asks for timeous and proactive initiation from the side of the reviewee or HOD requesting the review. A review request should be posed timeously – if not earlier, preferably two weeks before the review date. This will allow the peer reviewer to plan their time and ensure they are available for the relevant time slot(s) of possible sessions.

As a reviewee, it is important to consider the best time during a semester to be reviewed (especially in the case of a class observation) whilst allowing enough time for the entire process.

### **The presence of the reviewer**

A peer review is often a stressful situation for the reviewee. Peer reviewers should keep this in mind and always respect the reviewee. Furthermore, having a visitor in the lecture or online session can also be a factor of discomfort to the students. Therefore, it is sensible to take an intentional decision before the visit on whether to introduce **the peer reviewer** to the students **or not**. The reviewee may decide what they feel most comfortable with.



## **Pre-review preparations**

### **Preparations by the reviewee**

When a class observation is requested, there is no substitute for preparation. Thoroughly prepare for each session by referring to the relevant criteria in [Addendum A](#). Particular attention should be paid to:

- constructive alignment of class activities with the learning outcomes.
- effective use of educational technologies.
- student engagement.
- varied activities and approaches to meet different students' learning needs.
- opportunities for students to demonstrate reasonable mastery, and
- monitoring of learning.

A lecturer can be more spontaneous when they have fully prepared and reflected on the possibilities that can occur during a session. They also will be able to make adjustments during the session more readily and smoothly.

In the case of other review types, the appropriate preparation has to be done.

### **Preparations by the reviewer**

Before visiting a class or session, reviewing the study guide for the particular module is sensible. This provides the context of where the session fits into the module and the intended outcomes. This way, it is also easier to determine whether there is a proper alignment between the learning outcomes and the teaching methods in the module. Most of all, it is essential to study the reporting template and the relevant criteria. It clarifies what to look out for during the review. It also clarifies what to comment on and give feedback on in the report.



## DURING THE PEER REVIEW

### The review process

Considering the applicable criteria, the peer reviewer evaluates the process or product and makes notes for later reference when the report is written. As for the reviewee, be truthful and avoid being distracted by the review process.

### Immediate informal debriefing

Depending on the availability of both the reviewer and the reviewee after class, it is good to briefly discuss the class observation for a few minutes directly after the session. The reviewer could give the reviewee a chance to comment on the session first. Then, the reviewee has the opportunity to explain their approach and how they experienced the session from their point of view. The reviewer could ask questions like:

- How did you experience the session?
- What do you think of your session?
- Is there anything else that has to be noted?



## AFTER THE PEER REVIEW

### The official written report

The peer reviewer uses the agreed-upon criteria to write an unbiased and non-judgemental report. The criteria would be shared with the reviewee beforehand to ensure transparency on what would form part of the report. The recommendations in the report can be used for self-reflection and improvement of practice. The recommendations can also be used for summative purposes, such as promotion and confirmation of appointment, which will be included as evidence in a Teaching Portfolio.

### Formal reflection and discussion of the peer review

The peer review and report are formally discussed at a predetermined time convenient for both parties. The discussion is an open two-way process. For giving and receiving feedback, refer to the good practice guidelines below.

#### ***Giving feedback:***

- Be respectful, tactful mindful, considerate and constructive in your approach.
- Keep the content balanced by focusing on strengths and possible pointers for improvement.
- Provide non-judgemental feedback focused on the review criteria.

- Rather than making general statements, refer to observed examples and specific points of improvement to clarify discussions.
- Concentrate on evidence from the observed behaviour, not the person.
- Ask open-ended, probing questions to help the reviewee learn from and reflect on the observation.
- Communicate clearly and provide an opportunity for discussion and for possible clarification of the unperceived context where applicable.

#### ***Receiving feedback:***

- Be open to feedback as an opportunity for growth; don't take it personally.
- Be willing to contribute your reflection on what has been reviewed.
- Ensure that you understand the reviewer's message correctly.
- Carefully consider and assess the value of the feedback.
- Where appropriate, clarify misconceptions/ misunderstandings, but do not be defensive.

It will be beneficial to both parties to have an openness and willingness to consider various viewpoints while discussing solutions and possibilities for future implementation as appropriate. A well-conducted and concluded session will leave both parties with a sense of accomplishment. Essentially, it is a professional learning opportunity for the reviewer and reviewee.



## POST REVIEW PROCESS

The written report and discussions after a review are not the end of the road. These are mainly meant to spark ideas for further growth and development of teaching within the relevant and other modules.

The recommendations may include the following:

- Strengthening good practice.
- Implementing appropriate changes.
- Further consultation with a mentor/an Education Consultant.
- Attending relevant professional development opportunities.

The process is continuous and iterative, with teaching practice evolving and improving with every iteration. In this growth and development of teaching practice lies the actual value and benefit for students. Therefore, follow-up and new peer reviews may be requested as deemed necessary.



## References & sources

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## ADDENDUM A

“Class observation” is used here in its broadest sense, referring to the observation of any synchronously facilitated session whether face-to-face or online. This can for example include a lecture in a lecture hall on campus, a practical demonstration in a laboratory/studio, or a discussion session in Class Collaborate. In certain instances where recordings are available (e.g. a recording of a Collaborate session), the peer observation can be conducted after the session. Although the principles of good teaching remain the same for both face-to-face and online modes, some slight differences in skill may be applicable. The guidelines below can be used for all types of class observations and may be adapted where applicable.

### 1. Background Information

#### 1.1 Logistical information

Lecturer	
Department	
Module code	
NQF level	
Date	
Time	
Format of the session (face-to-face/ online)	
Venue/ platform	
Campus	
Purpose of the observation (e.g., promotion/probation/feedback)	

#### 1.2 Session overview

Duration of the session	
Type of session (e.g. lecture/practical session/ seminar)	
Number of students present	
Title/Topic of the session	
Session outcomes	

### 2. Feedback on the observed session

Below is a list of topics or potential discussion points, along with associated questions. These are intended to guide the peer reviewer during observation and feedback formulation. They also provide insight to the lecturer regarding the type of feedback they can anticipate in the peer review report following the class observation.

#### 2.1 Pre-class activities

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback:

- Did students have to complete any pre-class activity?
- What was the purpose?
- Is it referred to and integrated with the session?
- What worked well, or how can the preparatory activities be amended?



## 2.2 The introduction

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback:

- Did the lecturer review the outline and expected outcomes for the session?
- In what way was the class atmosphere established?
- How was prior knowledge or experience activated and students' attention captured?
- Did the session start on time?

## 2.3 Presentation and communication

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback:

- Did the lecturer's verbal communication (e.g. voice quality, volume, language usage) underscore their message?
- Did the lecturer's non-verbal communication (e.g. self-confidence, attitude, pace, eye contact, use of space where applicable) support student learning and classroom dynamics?
- Was media/technology used effectively?
- How did the slide design and organisation facilitate or hinder understanding?
- In the case of a virtual session: Did the lecturer take care to communicate clearly, both in oral and written format?

## 2.4 Organisation of content

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback:

- How was the session/content structured?
- Were outcomes addressed?
- Is the content relevant and in line with the module's NQF level?
- Did the content reflect a diversity of perspectives and contexts?
- What different methods were applied to explain/display content?

## 2.4 Student engagement

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback:

- What teaching methods were used during the session (e.g. questioning techniques, explanation, giving examples)?
- Were the teaching methods supportive of learning in the discipline?
- Were students actively engaged in appropriate activities (e.g. active reflection, writing, small-group discussions, application-based activities)?
- Were discussions and other forms of student engagement effectively managed (e.g. clear instructions, time management)?
- In the case of a virtual session: Did the lecturer provide communication channel/s to students to voice their opinions or ask questions to clarify their understanding (e.g. chats, polls, or other online tools)?

## 2.5 Monitoring understanding

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback:

- What opportunities were created for students to practice a new skill or ask questions?
- How did the lecturer check students' understanding of content/concepts (e.g. through in-class or online quizzes, lecturer feedback, or peer feedback)?
- In the case of a virtual session: Did the lecturer address the lack of visual cues from students by using relevant tools available to gain a sense of their level of understanding?

## 2.6 Learning environment

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback:

- How was class climate established?
- Did the lecturer create a safe and supportive learning environment:
  - Allowing for different viewpoints,
  - Communicating ground rules for interactions,
  - Providing guidance on where to find additional resources, or
  - Constructive feedback to students during the session?
- Was the class managed effectively?

## 2.7 Session conclusion

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback:

- How was the session concluded?
- Was a summary of the session provided?
- Was the learning loop for the session closed (e.g. tying the conclusion to the outcomes)?

Was there a feed forward to the next session or consolidating after-class activities?

## 2.8 Overall comments

Use the following questions to help guide your feedback in the table provided below:

- What were the overall strengths and weaknesses of the session?
- What particular commendations and recommendations can be highlighted and summarised?

Commendations	Recommendations

## ADDENDUM B

### clickUP Course Peer Evaluation



Module code: \_\_\_\_\_

Lecturer: \_\_\_\_\_

Reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Criteria to evaluate	Comments, Recommendations & Suggestions
<b>Administrative elements in clickUP include:</b>	
• a study guide and departmental guide.	
• an appropriate introduction.	
• a calendar / schedule to guide student learning.	
• answers to frequently asked administrative questions.	
• streamlined online administrative processes, e.g. clickUP Groups Tool to organise the groups, Announcements to communicate, etc.	
• online management of grades within the clickUP Gradebook to reduce administrative workload.	
• the use of the clickUP to monitor and track student activity and performance.	
<b>The online course has been designed to</b>	
• comply with basic design principles for online media (small files, web-optimised graphics and YouTube to share videos in order to reduce data costs).	
• logically group information and activities in such a way that students can reach the element within three clicks from the course/module homepage.	
• use the proper tools for the correct purpose, e.g. Gradebook to display grades, Announcements to convey urgent messages.	
• have a logical course flow so students would intuitively know what to do next.	
• use the functionalities within clickUP to release appropriate course elements automatically based on dates, groups or performance.	



## ADDENDUM B CONTINUED

Criteria to evaluate	Comments, Recommendations & Suggestions
<b>Communication in clickUP comprise of</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>clearly stated rules of online engagement, including a communication policy and "netiquette" for online discussions, e-mail and other forms of communication.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>announcements from clickUP to convey urgent information and a sense of care that advance student learning.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>asynchronous online communication (clickUP Discussions) that includes student-student and student-lecturer communication.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>synchronous online communication (Collaborate) that creates a sense of immediacy and belonging.</li> </ul>	
<b>The instructional materials in clickUP:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are divided into manageable and logical segments that facilitate learning flow.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>contains an explanation of the purpose of each learning resource and how it is to be used for learning activities.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>are appropriately cited to acknowledge sources consulted and model practices that students are expected to follow; and copyright agreements of UP are adhered to.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>represent a rich variety of material, e.g. textbooks, publications, instructor-created resources, websites, multimedia, visual and auditory elements.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>include low-cost or no-cost materials, e.g. OERs, MOOCs or scanned chapters of textbooks with appropriate copyright clearance.</li> </ul>	
<b>The following teaching strategies are visible from the clickUP module and/or studyguide:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>reference to contact learning opportunities, e.g. lectures, tutorials, practical sessions, clinical wards, etc.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>online learning opportunities in clickUP that extend learning beyond the classroom.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a clear description of how the contact and online environments are integrated.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>activities to encourage students to interact with their peers in purposeful ways.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>methods relevant to the discipline, e.g. inquiry-based learning / mastery learning / experiential learning, flipped learning, etc.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>application of learning in a real world / simulated setting (authentic learning).</li> </ul>	

## ADDENDUM B CONTINUED

Criteria to evaluate	Comments, Recommendations & Suggestions
<b>The online learning activities:</b>	
• include clear guidelines on what students must do and how to complete the activities.	
• are structured to encourage students to take control of their own learning.	
• include remedial activities or resources to improve learning.	
• require active learning of students by "doing" something through interaction with content, lecturers and peers, e.g. discovering, processing or applying concepts and information.	
• include the use of clickUP / other relevant online tools to complete online activities independently.	
<b>The assessments in clickUP includes</b>	
• clearly written instructions, expectations, use of AI and assessment criteria with sufficient detail to ensure understanding.	
• one or more form of online submission of assessments such as clickUP tests, clickUP / Turnitin assignments or other graded activities.	
• rubrics or descriptive criteria to convey expectations of the quality of the completed assignments.	
<b>Support to students include</b>	
• an introduction of the learning process that includes a course schedule, delivery modalities, communication channels, learning activities, use of AI and assessment.	
• Gradebook is set up according to study guide and Current Grade is set correctly to guide students on their progress.	
• clear expectations of optional and / or required technology. The expectations include any additional costs and instructions on how to use the technology.	
• online design principles that accommodate differently abled students are adhered to (Ally ratings of documents and media – green, orange, red).	
• references to the appropriate student support structures within the faculty (Departmental / study guide).	
• Guidelines on e-tutoring, where applicable.	

General comments:

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