

# Six myths about peer review of teaching

To those unfamiliar with the practice of peer review of teaching, it may cause a lot of confusion and anxiety. Peer review of teaching (PRT) is the practice of having instructors evaluate the teaching practices of other instructors, for purposes of improvement and/or evaluation. There are lots of myths about PRT that only help add to that confusion and anxiety. Let’s look at some common myths about PRT and explore the realities behind those myths.

### Myth #1: student evaluation of teaching (SET) surveys are faster, easier, and more accurate for evaluation of teaching.

Reality:

While it is true that student surveys are faster and easier, they are not accurate. More specifically, they are not reliable or valid measures of teaching effectiveness. According to evidence, SET are not valid; i. e., students are not able to accurately evaluate the quality of teaching. Also according to evidence, SET are not reliable. That is, student evaluations of instructors vary based on irrelevant characteristics of the student and instructor such as race and gender.

In SET we have a fast and easy method that is unfortunately a poor measure of teaching effectiveness.

### Myth #2: faculty cannot accurately evaluate teaching quality because they have not been trained in pedagogy.

Reality:

It is true at R1 universities that most faculty have had no formal training in pedagogy. However, faculty are paid professional instructors who design courses, facilitate classes, and assess student performance. Even without a formal education in teaching, faculty perform as teachers, so evaluating teaching should not be far beyond the scope of their abilities especially if supported by training and effective evaluation tools.

Faculty professional development training in pedagogy, once rare, is becoming more common. At USC, CET provides year-long pedagogy institutes open to all faculty to help them discover best practices. CET instructional designers offer confidential, individual consultations on course design and classroom practices. USC also provides evaluation tools based on evidence and best practices, and training on the use of those tools, to make the evaluation task more manageable. Essentially, the tools provide a checklist of best practices to guide faculty in their peer evaluations.

### Myth #3: PRT is not the best way to measure instructor effectiveness.

Reality:

This may actually be true. Unfortunately, there are no common practices available that are better. In the world of research, peer evaluation is held as the gold standard for evaluation, and the reputations of most top-notch research journals are based on peer evaluation. There are no perfect measures or tools, but it is generally agreed that peer evaluation is as close as we can get to perfect in an imperfect world and the use of PRT in higher education is rapidly increasing.

### Myth #4: Classroom observations only determine the effectiveness of a instructor’s practice on the one day that they are being evaluated, so they can plan to be extra-good on that day.

Reality:

This myth assumes that a faculty member will be evaluated on one day, by one peer. Best practices suggest at least two peer evaluators, observing at least two classes each.

But even if only one observation is made, then the faculty member is still being evaluated for their teaching practice. It may be their best-case teaching practice, but that’s not necessarily a problem. Many other evaluation decisions are based on single observations. The faculty hiring process often depends on the faculty member giving only one research talk or sample class. Student grades often rest on their performance on a single final exam. In both these cases, the person being evaluated knows when they will be evaluated and are able to put their best foot forward. It would be ideal to have an evaluation process that includes all instances of a person’s performance, but that cannot often happen in the real world.

 It may be more productive to look at PRT classroom observation as evaluating an instructor’s best example of their practice, rather than pretending that it reflects every day of their teaching. This approach is analogous to a research article. One doesn’t assume that the data presented in a research manuscript represents all of the data collected during a research project; some experiments fail and others produce data that is invalid for some reason. The research manuscript presents a researcher’s work in the best possible light.

### Myth #5: PRT will be a political process.

Reality:

In that most human collective activities are political processes, this is true. However, there are best practices that reduce the political complications of PRT. Committees or deans can assign peer evaluators, rather than having faculty choosing their closest friends. Faculty can be allowed to veto an individual assigned to evaluate them, particularly if there are personal factors that could undermine the evaluator’s objectivity. In some cases, departments record classes so that evaluators remain anonymous to the faculty being evaluated. Subjectivity can be reduced by using evaluation tools that focus on objective, observable elements of teaching.

### Myth #6: PRT will require that everyone teaches exactly the same way.

Reality:

It has been said that the practice of teaching has three components: science, art, and craft. First, teaching is a science. There is an extensive body of verified research into how the brain learns and which techniques work best to promote learning. Second, teaching is an art. The most effective teachers bring much of themselves into their practice, which makes teaching a very individualized practice. What works well for one teacher may not work so well for another with a different style or personality; this personal aspect is what makes teaching an art. Finally, teaching is a craft. A craft is a set of skills learned through experience. Knowing the science of teaching and having developed an understanding of one’s teaching style is not enough to excel in teaching. It also takes experience to hone the skills.

Well-designed evaluation tools based on best practices, which delineate the science of teaching, are compatible with many different instructional styles. Faculty are expected to achieve instructional best practices through their own