

Revised Plan for Formative Evaluation of Teaching

Department of Philosophy

The Philosophy Department takes seriously the idea that teaching is “community property,” and therefore envisions our formative evaluation procedures to be directed at the improvement of teaching in the department in general. We have historically had a fair degree of conversation, mostly informal, in the department about pedagogical issues; our intention with this plan is to try to formalize such conversations, and add to them what has traditionally *not* taken place in the department (except in the context of tenure and renewal reviews): a significant element of mutual class observation that could serve as a basis for the conversations.

Accordingly, our plan is to devote several staff meetings per semester to the question of teaching. At the first such meeting of the term, we will choose a particular area of focus for that term. Areas might be content-based (how best to teach Descartes’ *Meditations*, say) or process-based (how to lead discussions, say, or what are some good ways to organize group projects, or what’s the best way to employ in-class presentations?) or a mixture of these (how to present material in upper-level classes to students with very mixed degrees of background in philosophy?). After choosing such an area of focus, we will determine the best way to address it. We may do so by scheduling various class visits (to classes where the *Meditations* are being taught, say, or where discussion is key, or where difficult material is being presented to a group with mixed backgrounds) in which different members of the faculty will observe each other’s approaches. Informal conversations between observers and those observed will take place both before and after the observations; but in addition discussion of the classes, and of what can be learned from them, will then be the topic of several staff meetings afterwards. We may also decide that formative teaching will be better served by focusing on discussion of assignment structure, sharing syllabi, etc.

Again in keeping with the formative rather than summative character of the process, our emphasis will be on learning from each other, on looking for alternative solutions to problems, on discovering new ways to do things, etc., rather than on drawing conclusions about “teaching effectiveness” or talent as a whole. The observers will be learning for themselves just as much as they will be providing suggestions to those observed. Teachers at the beginning of their careers can presumably gain much from viewing those with more experience in the classroom, just as such teachers can gain much from hearing the opinions of more experienced colleagues who observe *them*. But by the same token those with more experience may have much to learn from viewing those with new ideas and approaches, as well as by hearing the responses of those newer colleagues to their own classroom styles and strategies.

Our goal is that *each* member of the department be observed during at least one semester every three years. (This is a revision of our earlier plan due to the

recognition that the initial observation schedule was quite onerous, on the one hand, and took time away from other kinds of discussions about teaching, on the other.) Usually our preference will be to arrange multiple visits by an observer to a particular course, rather than a single visit which makes it harder to grasp the overall dynamic. We will also typically try to arrange for multiple (two) observers of a class, to allow for more perspectives in the discussion.

Departmental Mentoring Plan

A formal “mentor” will be appointed for every untenured member of the department. This will be a tenured member of the department identified as a contact and advisor for discussions regarding departmental procedures and issues, pedagogical questions, research concerns, faculty development possibilities, and any other issues relevant to the tenure and renewal process that the junior colleague wishes to raise. The untenured colleague’s preference as to who his or her mentor should be will play a significant role in the appointment process. Naturally, *all* members of the department will be expected to continue to provide advice and offer suggestions to *all* members of the department regarding these kinds of issues as well.

The minimal expectations for this mentoring relationship are as follows:

- At the beginning of the first year, the junior faculty member will meet with his/her mentor to discuss the review process and expectations.
- At the end of the first year, the junior faculty member will meet with his or her mentor in order to discuss his or her progress toward tenure in terms of teaching, research, and service to the institution. There will be a second such conversation at the end of the second year.
- In the second year, junior faculty shall choose 2 observers from tenured faculty who will undertake at least two classroom observations each (may visit same classes). Although the formative/evaluative line cannot be as easily drawn or maintained here, the focus of this set of class visitations will be formative. These visits may be undertaken in the context of the department’s formative teaching evaluation, and the mentor may be one of the observers. However, since that plan calls for every faculty to be observed at least once every three years, we want to ensure that junior faculty have sufficient opportunity to get feedback on their teaching prior to their third-year review. (If class room visits take place during the first year of appointment, second year visits may not be necessary.)
- Class visits are to be followed by conversations about what was observed, what was intended, what was more or less effective, etc.
- A similar process will be implemented during a junior faculty’s second review cycle (i.e. during the fourth and fifth years of appointment) leading up to the tenure review.