Guidance on assessing teaching

E. Elle, Vice Provost, Learning & Teaching, December 2022

At SFU, we are interested in collecting information about teaching for a number of reasons. These include a desire to both celebrate and learn from our best teachers; an interest in providing formative feedback to support the development of others; and a need to consider teaching as part of regular instructor reviews.

So what kind of information can be collected, and how should it be used? At SFU, it is up to departments, schools, and/or faculties to set out procedures for assessing faculty members (to be approved by the dean; Article 28 of the SFU/SFUFA Collective agreement). Units should consider how to align their procedures with best practice, which includes accessing multiple forms of evidence, at multiple time points. Doing so would align with what we do for research assessment. For instance, we consider not only books published, but also journal articles, conference presentations, creative works, funding, graduate student training, and other items depending on subdiscipline. For teaching, one could consider the quality of course materials (syllabi, student assessments); mentoring or leadership activities; innovation; feedback from students on their experience, etc.

A useful framework when considering forms of evidence to include for teaching assessment is combining peer, self, and student input. Teaching assessment should not be limited to just one form of evidence.

**Peer:** Typically, this includes a review of course and other materials that might be included in a dossier. In some cases, classroom observation can be used, but requires an investment in time for training and multiple observations to ensure it is not subject to bias. I therefore recommend peer observation mostly for formative purposes or at significant career time points like promotions, but regular use of a dossier that can be reviewed by peers on the tenure and promotion committee. Clarifying what should be included in a dossier for biennial reviews is recommended.

**Self:** The self-reflection that comes from creating a dossier (even a short compilation of the activities for a two-year review period), or from writing a short statement responding to either peer or student feedback, is invaluable. I strongly recommend a reflective statement on the part of faculty members for summative assessments, as it provides extremely useful context for tenure and promotion committees in addition to being very useful for the instructor.

**Student:** Course Experience surveys can provide rich information for both the instructor and the tenure and promotion committee. They must, however, be used appropriately. SFU’s surveys were recently re-designed to ensure they capture the student experience in courses, while avoiding language suggesting that students are assessing their instructors. Based on our focus groups with faculty and students, we anticipate the new questions and additional open-ended comment sections will be helpful for instructors. Tenure and promotion committees must remember that it is not appropriate to use such information in a comparative manner (comparing mean scores among faculty members). However, it is appropriate to consider the distribution of scores for individuals, and excellent practice to consider instructor reflection and subsequent action that is based on survey responses.

Although this document was written with faculty members in mind, the principles apply to other instructors such as sessionals and TAs. Article 20 of the TSSU Collective agreement notes the importance of including multiple forms of assessment, specifically an assessment by the person to whom they are responsible (such as the course instructor, for TAs) as well as assessment by students. At SFU we would clarify that students cannot “assess” their instructors, but they can, of course, provide useful feedback on their experience through Course Experience surveys, and this information can comprise part of sessional and TA evaluation.