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Review of Peer Review of Teaching: a Sourcebook, by Nancy Van Note Chism (pages

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Professor of higher education at IUPUI School of Education, Nancy Van Note Chism has distilled into this handbook some of her expertise in qualitative research, professional development, and college teaching and learning (xi). The two-part volume comprises an "overview" section that situates peer review of teaching (PRT) within the wider context of evaluation of teaching, followed by a collection of resource materials. Part One addresses questions relating to the rationale for PRT (chapter 1); how to establish a system for PRT (chapter 2); what elements ought to be included in such a system (chapter 3); the roles that must be played in implementing a PRT system, and the distinction between formative v. summative PRT (chapter 4). Part Two presents resource materials pertinent to various approaches and contexts for PRT: review of course materials (chapter 5); classroom observation (chapter 6); special contexts (e.g., service-learning; clinical, laboratory, studio, or web-based instruction); evaluation of "Leadership for Teaching" (chapter 8); and teaching portfolios (chapter 9). The final chapter summarizes the necessary "habits of the heart" and "guiding principles for quality peer review of teaching," and reviews Chism's nine steps for developing a coherent and effective PRT system.

Acknowledging persistent faculty objections, based in part on a culture of classroom "privacy," Chism introduces her topic by pointing out various ways in which PRT already occurs (e.g., faculty hiring decisions, reviews for salary increases, tenure and promotion decisions, sabbatical and teaching awards). Defining PRT as "informed colleague judgment about faculty teaching for either fostering improvement or making personnel decisions" (3), she highlights the need for a system that ensures the use of "appropriate evidence and thought processes" (3). The juxtaposition with her earlier sketch of existing forms of "peer review" provides a subtle but compelling argument for a structured system to ensure fairness, consistency, and reliability of data. Review of individuals' teaching performance tends to use covert criteria and take place in isolation from faculty colleagues; without taking into account the specific institution's values and practices; without assessing the reliability of the criteria and measures used; without counteracting cultural biases toward "traditional" teaching models/strategies and against under- represented minority groups. Chism implies that the best way to overcome an idiosyncratic form of peer review of teachers, driven by the unexamined biases of the individual reviewer and subject to the structural biases of the institutional- cultural context, is to establish an explicit structure for PRT "within a system that emphasizes the value of teaching to the institution and articulates a thoughtful and comprehensive approach . . ." (26).

Chapter 3 identifies ten "major design elements" of a PRT system and discusses how they can be implemented: a statement of teaching values and purpose of PRT, identification of participants, logistics, criteria, evidence, standards, instruments, procedures, preparation of reviewers, and provisions for assessment/ revision of the plan. The majority of Chism's energy is invested in outlining criteria, evidence, and standards for evaluation – the triad she identifies as the "heart" of the PRT system. Issues such as participant selection, logistics, instruments, and procedures are not tangential – especially when one is trying to establish a system that is as fair and unbiased as possible – but Chism follows the recent literature in giving them less attention. This is one area where it would have been helpful to press further.

Chism admits there is ample evidence of evaluator discrimination against teachers who belong to ethnic and/or gender minorities. In spite of the fact that these patterns of discrimination clearly appear in student evaluations as well as PRT, she asserts without qualification that "students are the most appropriate judges of day-to-day teacher behaviors and attitudes in the classroom" (17). This leaves one wondering what Chism means by "appropriate." Is not reliability the more significant concern? Consistency in student evaluations of teacher attitudes may well be an indicator of persistent student bias rather than accuracy of the data. Again, Chism recognizes that alternative patterns must be built into the PRT system itself in order to counteract widespread bias, yet she gives the least attention to the chief components where this is both possible and necessary. This volume could have been a more significant contribution to the literature if Chism had provided a more substantive discussion of participant selection, logistics, procedures, and reviewer preparation, especially with a view to structuring a PRT system that adjusts for and works to overcome such discriminatory patterns. As it stands, the book provides a helpful summary of current "best practices" and useful tools for developing structured PRT at institutions where such systems do not yet exist.

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