

# Reciprocal Peer Evaluation of Teaching and Classroom Practices: attitude, impediments, and solutions: A case study of Sudanese faculty members at University of Shendi, Sudan

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**Abstract:** *This study seeks information on Sudanese faculty members' attitude to reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching. In addition, the study endeavors to investigate which impediments matter most and which matter less to Sudanese faculty members regarding their engagement in reciprocal peer review of teaching and to suggest solutions to them. In view of these ends, a questionnaire was designed and administered to fifty faculty members at Shendi University. The study found out that Sudanese faculty members, in principle, embrace reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching, and the impediment that matters most to them and hinders their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching is that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching has not been nurtured and established as a practice and culture among their peers, while the impediment that matters less is time constraints and busy workloads of the staff members. The study suggests that in-service pedagogical training should be a must for all staff members and initiatives to promote reciprocal peer evaluation should be taken by the institution, the staff members, and determined by the institution leadership to remove the impediments.*

**Keywords:** reciprocal peer evaluation, teaching, classroom practices, attitude, impediments, solutions

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## INTRODUCTION

It rings quite true to the researcher, who is also a practicing teacher, that good and quality teaching is not a game of chance. While it is true that some teachers are naturally more talented and gifted than others, no one can deny the fact that all effective teaching is the result of a blend of academic

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and personal characteristics such as study, commitment, hard work, practice, reflection, and innovation. Consequently, and also from professional standpoint, the researcher believes beyond any shadow of doubt, that there is always room for excellence and continuous professional development for those who shoulder the responsibility for the profession of teaching to educate the future generations.

The positive impacts of continuous professional development on the students learning achievements have been well established in the existing literature by many writers. Mizell (2010), for example indicated that whether students are high, low, or average achievers, they will learn more if their educators regularly engage in high-quality professional development. This professional advancement is also a necessity for educators to grow and survive, particularly in our highly competitive modern time where concepts like, continuous professional development, quality teaching, accountability in education, innovation in teaching, classroom observation, collaboration, evidence-based educational practice, and the like dominate the pedagogical conversation and continue to gain currency. More importantly, the researcher, informed by his own experience, also thinks that the enhancement of the teaching process is within reach of practicing teacher, provided that those teachers are highly committed, motivated, passionate about their job, more open, and less arrogant.

In order for teachers to develop professionally and enhance their teaching, the available literature suggests a variety of developmental pathways such as reflective teaching, mentoring, and reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching. Reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching, which is the main focus of this study, is one of the approaches to reflective teaching. As a practice, reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching was informed by the theory of collegiality which according to Little (1990), involves collaborative interaction among teachers and implies shared responsibility, strong interdependence, and a great degree of readiness to participate in a reflective inquiry.

The available literature on reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching provides us with a number of definitions. These definitions, more or less, encompass and emphasize the concepts embodied in the theory of collegiality. For example, (Toth & McKey, 2010) simply defined reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices as the process of observing colleagues and providing feedback on their teaching. In a more elaborate definition, Dalton and Moir (1991) pointed out that reciprocal peer coaching or evaluation of teaching is a partnership between teachers in a nonjudgmental environment that is built around a collaborative and reflective dialogue. In a similar vein, (Brix, Grainger, & Hill, 2014) commented that reciprocal peer review of teaching among colleagues can provide an avenue to obtain formative feedback about teaching and learning with the intention of advancing teachers' learning and enrich their pedagogy via continuous and ongoing professional development. Based on these definitions along with many other definitions the literature on reciprocal peer evaluation to teaching provides, we can conclude that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching is one of the developmental pathways that seek to help

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teachers and college instructors obtain fresh and first-hand feedback concerning instructional quality to improve instructional effectiveness. Although reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching is a purposeful, it is absolutely a non-judgmental process about the quality of teaching, simply because the meaning of the word peer, in essence, excludes any air of superiority. It mainly aims at gathering information and evidence about teaching with a view to subjecting it to constructive critical scrutiny to achieve positive instructional practices.

The gains of reciprocal peer evaluation with regard to teaching are numerous and have been established and documented by many studies. To mention and name a few, (Byrne et al. 2010; Toth & McKey, 2010) stated that the benefits of reciprocal peer review of teaching include a positive impact on teaching practice, increased knowledge and skills, sharing of practice, increased awareness of the practices of others, social professional benefits, increased confidence, and positive benefits to students and their learning. However, not everything in the garden of peer evaluation of teaching is rosy because this technique has its limitations. Brent and Felder (2004), in the researcher's humble opinion, pointed to the most challenging point which is the lack of consensus among faculty members and teachers on what constitutes good teaching, and that the chances of reaching full agreement on this point are slim. In addition, due to time pressures and fear of the potential scrutiny of their teaching practices, some professors express reluctance to participate in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching (O'Keefe et al., 2009). Also worries about the objectivity of the observer, restrictions of academic freedom, and validity of the practice were also cited as causes of concern about reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching (Galbraith & Merrill, 2012; Siddiqui, Dwyer, & Carr, 2007).

Concerning what to judge or evaluate when conducting peer evaluation to teaching, a comprehensive survey of the literature suggested that educators can reliably evaluate:

- Commitment to teaching and concern for student learning;
- Selection of course or teaching session content;
- Mastery of course or teaching session content;
- Course or teaching session organization;
- Appropriateness of course or teaching session objectives;
- Appropriateness of instructional materials (such as readings, media, visual aids);
- Appropriateness of evaluation devices;
- Appropriateness of teaching methodology;
- Student achievement, based on performance on exams and projects; and
- Support of departmental instructional efforts. (Miller, 1987; Centra, 1993 & Weimer, 1988)

As for implementing and undertaking reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching, Siddiqui, Jones-Dwyer, and Carr (2007) agreed with (Peel 2005) that reciprocal peer review of teaching and classroom practice must be implemented in such a way that it can truly foster a culture of personal

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questioning, reflection, adaptation, and improvement. They also went further and suggested twelve tips for an effective reciprocal peer observation model. These tips include:

1. Choosing the observer carefully,
2. Setting aside time for the peer observation (pre- and post-observation discussion),
3. Clarifying expectations (decide on the roles of the observer and the observed),
4. Familiarizing yourself with the content of the course,
5. Selecting the observation instrument wisely,
6. Including students,
7. Being objective,
8. resisting the urge to compare with your own teaching style,
9. Not intervening in the teaching,
10. Following the general principles of feedback,
11. Maintaining confidentiality,
12. Making it a learning experience.

The positive contribution of reciprocal peer review of teaching to the effectiveness of the teaching process at tertiary education has been well established and reported by a growing body of research (Bell & Mladenovic, 2007). For example, (Bandy, 2015) stated that in higher education, reciprocal peer observation stands as one of the key factors for ensuring that scholarship is of the highest quality, and from it flows consequential assessments that shape careers, disciplines, and entire institutions. Brandy also clarified that reciprocal peer review is beneficial and it is worth the effort because it can improve what Ernest Boyer has called the “scholarship of teaching and learning” by enhancing instruction and faculty development, by bolstering the integrity of personnel decisions, and by enabling more intentional and mutually supportive communities of scholar teachers. In addition, the changing scene of learning and teaching in higher education in recent years presents teachers with many challenges. One of these challenges is to develop transformative reflection and look positively on the perspective provided by colleagues or peers who are “in the role of critical friend” (Biggs & Tang, 2007, p. 46).

However, in spite of the fact that a growing body of research has well established and reported the positive contribution and impacts of reciprocal peer review of teaching to the effectiveness of the teaching process at tertiary education (O’Keefe, Lecouteur, Miller, & McGowan, 2009; Toth & McKey, 2010), the researcher, as an insider, has observed that reciprocal peer review of teaching is not a common practice among university faculty members in Sudan and it is rarely practiced . Furthermore, reviewing the relevant literature reveals that much research has been carried out on the benefits, impacts, implementation of peer review, but the question of what challenges matter most and how to address them is still inadequately researched. Adding to this, in the Sudanese context, there is a dearth of research on faculty members’ attitude regarding reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching. Therefore, the overarching aim of this study is to find out whether Sudanese

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faculty members are reluctant to practice peer review of teaching because they purely have a negative attitude towards it or due to other practical reasons and impediments that have been concluded by the existing body of research on reciprocal peer evaluation to teaching. In addition, the study endeavors to find out which impediments matter most and which matter less to Sudanese faculty members regarding their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices. Finally, the study attempts to suggest some practical solutions to these challenges and impediments. Accordingly, the objectives of the study can be couched in the framework of the following two questions:

- 1- To what extent do Sudanese faculty members embrace the idea of reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices?
- 2- Which impediments matter most and which matter less to Sudanese faculty members regarding their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices?

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

### **Design**

This study attempted to approach the two research questions that have been formulated and mentioned before. Therefore, the study fits in with the quantitative research design because, by common consent, quantitative research design concerns with studying a group of people representing a larger population in order to discover how these people think, act or feel in a specific way. Quantitative research design also involves a systematic investigation of phenomena by gathering quantifiable data and performing statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques in order to identify trends and averages, making predictions, testing relationships, and generalizing results for large populations. Many types of primary quantitative research methods can be distinguished but this present study is a survey one.

### **Participants**

The specific target group of this study were the faculty members at the University of Shendi. Out of the total population of the study (50) staff members were chosen randomly to participate in the study by responding to a paper questionnaire that has been designed specifically to serve the purpose and objectives of this study.

### **Instrument**

The instrument for collecting the data of this study is dichotomous styled yes or no survey questionnaire. It is also a researcher-made questionnaire since it is normal and common for researchers to construct questionnaires that serve the objectives of their studies provided that the questionnaires undergo validation processes in order to test validity and reliability. The preparation and development of the questionnaire was informed and inspired by the existing recent literature

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK on reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom. To measure the content validity, the questionnaire was presented to a panel of experts who scrutinized the words used in every statement, looked into the connection of every statement to the present study, made sure that the statements of the questionnaire are aligned to the goal of the study in order to achieve the expected results of the research and eventually came up with comments, corrections, and suggestions. The researcher considered these comments, corrections, and suggestions and incorporated them into the final drafting of the questionnaire. On the other hand, the reliability of the questionnaire was established by using Cronbach's alpha as a measure of consistency coefficient. The Cronbach's alpha of all the questionnaire's dimensions was 0,700. Accordingly, the questionnaire was adequately designed for the participants and was overall reliable.

The questionnaire consists of two sections. Section one which includes four statements that seeks to find out about Sudanese faculty members attitude regarding their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of their teaching and classroom practices. Section two, on the other hand, includes statements about all the impediments to peer evaluation, that have been reported and established by previous researches on peer evaluation of teaching, in order to investigate what impediments matter most and which matter less to Sudanese faculty members with regard to their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of their teaching and classroom practices.

### **Procedure**

The researchers visited the respondents, who willingly gave their consent to help, in their workplaces. The researcher, then, fully informed them what it means to take part in the research, listened attentively to their questions, answered them and administered the survey to faculty them in person. Then participants were asked to fill in the dichotomous styled yes or no survey paper questionnaire (see appendix 1) and were directed to choose their favorable option. By doing so, it was possible to ascertain the respondents' agreement or disagreement with the questionnaire statements and explore their perceptions about the point presented in each statement item. No incentives were provided for the participants and their participations were voluntary. Following this, the responses to the questionnaire statement were collected and analyzed to examine the respondents' views and describe, as it is, the faculty members attitude and impediment with regard to their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom. The informants' responses to each item were calculated and the equivalent frequencies and percentage were taken as shown in Tables 1 and 2 below. The descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data and identify any existing trends. The latest SPSS software version 20 package was used in the analysis.

### **RESULTS**

Data were analyzed statistically and the percentages and frequencies of the respondents' responses were calculated in order to describe and know about the respondents' perspective regarding the questions of the study. The survey analysis results in Table 1 below revealed that (84.0%) of the

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK respondents absolutely welcomed the idea of engaging in reciprocal peers' evaluation of teaching and classroom practices, (48.0%) welcomed it but with some reservations, (6.0%) of the respondents were of two minds whether to accept or reject it, while (8.0%) of the respondents rejected it.

Table 1: Sudanese faculty members attitude towards reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices

No	Statement	N=50 responses			
		Yes		No	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
<b>1</b>	I absolutely welcome the idea of engaging in reciprocal peers' evaluation of teaching and classroom practices.	<b>42</b>	<b>84.0%</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>16.0%</b>
<b>2</b>	I welcome the idea of engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices, but with some reservations.	<b>42</b>	<b>48.0%</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>52.0%</b>
<b>3</b>	I am undecided about engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices.	<b>3</b>	<b>6.0%</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>94.0%</b>
<b>4</b>	I completely reject the idea of engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices.	<b>4</b>	<b>8.0%</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>92.0%</b>

As to the question concerning which impediments matter most and which matter less to the respondents and hinder their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices, the result in table 2 below revealed that (92.0%) of the respondents advocated the point that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching has not been established as a practice and culture among their peers, (68.0%) agree on the point that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching was not a key component of the respondents' pre-service and in-service training programs, (66.0%) support the point concerning the disagreement among faculty members peers as to what good teaching is and what constitutes it, (64.0%) acknowledged the fear that a relation built upon friendship could prevent a valid evaluation, (58.0%) accepted the point that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching might open the door for bias and, (54.0%) admitted the point pertaining to their peers' unwillingness and enthusiasm to voluntarily engage in this process, (50.0%) are for the point that is concerned with the fear of scrutiny and criticism, (48.0%) of the respondents attached equal weight to two points as impediments: the belief that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching could affect interpersonal

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK relations, and the fear that it also opens doors to the interference in their teaching, (39.0%) consider true the point regarding time constraints and busy workloads of the staff members as an impediment. Table 2: The impediments that matter most/less to Sudanese faculty members with regard to engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of their teaching and classroom practices.

No.	Statement	N=50 responses			
		Yes		No	
		Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
1	I do not engage in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because I am not satisfactorily informed about it, and it has not been a key component of my pre-service and in-service training programs.	34	68.0%	16	32.0%
2	I cannot engage in reciprocal peer review of teaching and classroom practices because it has not been nurtured and established as a practice and culture among my peers.	46	92.0%	4	8.0%
3	I am unable engage in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because of time constraints and busy workloads.	19	38.0%	31	62.0%
4	I cannot engage in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because my peers lack the willingness and enthusiasm to voluntarily engage in this process.	27	54.0%	23	46.0%
5	I am unwilling to take part in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because I think it could affect interpersonal relations.	24	48.0%	26	52.0%
6	I am not enthusiastic to undertake reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because I think the relations built upon friendship could prevent a valid evaluation.	32	64.0%	18	36.0%



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<b>7</b>	I am not encouraged to undertake reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices out of fear of scrutiny and criticism.	<b>25</b>	<b>50.0%</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>50.0%</b>
<b>8</b>	I am not enthusiastic about reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because I think it might open the door for bias and subjectivity.	<b>29</b>	<b>58.0%</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>42.0%</b>
<b>9</b>	I refrain from engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because it opens doors to the interference in my teaching.	<b>24</b>	<b>48.0%</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>52.0%</b>
<b>10</b>	I do not engage in peer review of teaching and classroom practices because of the disagreement among my peers as to what good teaching is and what constitutes it.	<b>33</b>	<b>66.0%</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>34.0%</b>

## DISCUSSION

Based on the results in table 1, it is clear that an overwhelming majority of the respondents are certain about their willingness to engage in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices and have a positive stance on it while nearly half of the respondents, in principle, embrace the idea of engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices but with some reservations. This is a clear manifestation that the answer to the first question of the study is that the Sudanese faculty members, in essence, embrace the idea of engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices and their reluctance to take part in it does not reflect that they have a negative attitude about it.

As for the question of what impediments matter most and what matter less to faculty members with regard to their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices, the results (see table 2) revealed that the obstacle that matters most to faculty members and hinder their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices is that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching has not been nurtured and established as a practice and culture among their peers. This impediment, the researcher thinks, is surmountable as long as faculty members are positive about reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching. The study suggests that two approaches should be adopted to remove this impediment: a top-down approach (where initiatives to promote reciprocal peer evaluation are taken by the institution collectively and determined by its leadership) and the bottom-up approach (where initiatives are taken by the staff members to engage in reciprocal

\_\_\_\_\_ Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development-UK peer evaluation and encourage their peers to do so). The results also showed that the second impediment that matter most is that faculty members have not been satisfactorily informed about reciprocal peer evaluation, and it was not a key component of their pre-service and in-service training programs. This result might sound strange because it is unquestionable that teachers or staff members should be recruited into the teaching profession, provided with high quality pre-service programs of teacher education. However, this is not the case in Sudan because the status quo informs us that many of the university staff members are not graduate of teacher -training colleges of education and their recruitment is based on their expert knowledge of subject matter only while their pedagogical background is, not mandatory to their recruitment. Therefore, the study suggests that in-service education and training is badly needed for all the staff members to compensate for shortcomings in teachers' initial preparation. The third point that matter according to the study population is the disagreement among faculty members as to what good teaching is and what constitutes it. This point, in principle might be true; however, all the stakeholders currently use and agree on a number of frameworks that describe the core elements of effective teaching. The fourth point that matter is related to the fear that a relation built upon friendship could prevent a valid evaluation, while the point that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching might open the door for bias comes as the fifth impediment. The point pertaining to the peers' unwillingness and enthusiasm to voluntarily engage in this process comes as the sixth impediment, and the point that is concerned with the fear of scrutiny and criticism comes as the seventh impediment. The eighth impediment is expressed in two points: the belief that reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching could affect interpersonal relations, and the fear that it also opens doors to the interference in their teaching.

Concerning the impediments from four to nine the researcher thinks that they are highly personal and can be removed provided that the staff members are well-informed about the literature on reciprocal peer evaluation because the available literature states that the core aim of is developmental not judgmental and it concentrates on the professional growth of the staff members and quality teaching which means better students learning achievements. Finally, the impediment that matters least is time constraints and busy workloads of the staff members. This is good news because it means that the staff members have time to engage in and to work to establish and nurture it among themselves.

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**Appendix 1**

**Dear faculty member,**

This is a two-section questionnaire that has been designed to gather information that concerns your attitude and the impediments that matter most to you regarding your engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices. With these two ends in view, your careful completion of this questionnaire will definitely contribute to obtain fit-pertinent data, which is crucial for accurate findings. Your information will be kept confidential and will be used just for research purposes. Thank you very much in advance for your time and cooperation.

Note: For more explanation, please feel free to reach out to me via the following contact number or email.  
 Phone numbers: 0024996657 1231 / 00966504590247  
 Email: [babker.marroof@gmail.com](mailto:babker.marroof@gmail.com)

**Section one: Finding out about Sudanese faculty members attitude regarding reciprocal peer evaluation of their teaching and classroom practices.**

No	Statements	Yes	No
1	I absolutely welcome the idea of engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices.		
2	I welcome the idea of engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices, but with some reservations.		
3-	I am undecided about engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices.		
4-	I completely reject the idea of engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices.		

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**Section three: Finding out about what impediments matter most to Sudanese faculty members with regard to their engagement in reciprocal peer evaluation of their teaching and classroom practices.**

No	Statements	Yes	No
1-	I do not engage in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because I am not satisfactorily informed about it, and it has not been a key component of my pre-service and in-service training programs.		
2-	I cannot engage in reciprocal peer review of teaching and classroom practices because it has not been nurtured and established as a practice and culture among my peers.		
3-	I am unable engage in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because of time constraints and busy workloads.		
4-	I cannot engage in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because my peers lack the willingness and enthusiasm to voluntarily engage in this process.		
5-	I am unwilling to take part in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because I think it could affect interpersonal relations.		
6-	I am not enthusiastic to undertake reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because I think the relations built upon friendship could prevent a valid evaluation.		
7-	I am not encouraged to undertake reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices out of fear of scrutiny and criticism.		
8-	I am not enthusiastic about reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because I think it might open the door for bias and subjectivity.		
9-	I refrain from engaging in reciprocal peer evaluation of teaching and classroom practices because it opens doors to the interference in my teaching		
10-	I do not engage in peer review of teaching and classroom practices because of the disagreement among my peers as to what good teaching is and what constitutes it.		

*End of the questionnaire. Thank you so much again for your time and effort*