

A learning community for university teachers: peer review of teaching

Kathleen McEvoy

Faculty of the Professions, University of Adelaide

In 2010 the Faculty of the Professions at the University of Adelaide introduced a pilot program of peer review of teaching in two of its Schools as a mutual and formative process to deliver change and improvement in the quality of learning and teaching throughout the Faculty, key factors in the enhancement of student learning opportunities and experience. It had its genesis in the Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded project, *Peer Review of Teaching for Promotion Purposes* (June 2009). The operation of the pilot program is described in this paper, as well as how it has partnered with an established Community of Practice in Learning and Teaching within the Faculty. These twin processes operate together to contribute significantly to enabling opportunities for continuing and professional development by establishing a learning community among the learning and teaching staff, and to enabling and promoting change and improvement in the quality of both learning and teaching. While the peer review process could be used for a variety of purposes, principally it is for the development and enhancement of a holistic learning environment within the Faculty, enabling development and support of new ideas and processes in learning and teaching. Its essential process is the collaboration between Faculty teaching staff as both reviewees and reviewers, and its essential partner is the Community of Practice.

Keywords: Peer review of teaching; community of practice; community of practice

In 2010 the Faculty of the Professions at the University of Adelaide (comprising Schools of Law, Business, Economics, Architecture and Education), introduced a pilot program of peer review of teaching in two of its Schools, Law and Economics. The program had its genesis in the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) funded project, *Peer Review of Teaching for Promotion Purposes* (June 2009) (<http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/peerreview/>, viewed 17 November 2010). However the Faculty process is not peer review for promotion purposes, but for a mutual formative activity designed to deliver change and improvement in the quality of learning and teaching throughout the Faculty. The starting point was that enhancement of the quality of teaching delivery is a key factor in the enhancement of student learning opportunities: as quality education is transformative, the quality improvement will impact both students and teachers.

While research activities are located firmly at the centre of universities, with entrenched scholarly conventions to provide feedback, mentoring and peer assessment of research, learning and teaching has not developed the same entrenched support, despite its centrality to the scholarly purpose of universities and research. The peer review process provides a means of duplicating the familiar scholarly processes of research support, planning, evaluation and collegial discussion, for all the same purposes: scholarly development, collaborative sharing and development of ideas, providing a secure bedrock for many other associated academic pursuits.

This paper locates the pilot process and its operation within its Faculty and School environment, provides some preliminary reflections, and proposes some forward direction with the project. This includes the partnering of the peer review process with an established Community of Practice in Learning and Teaching within the Faculty, which meets regularly to exchange and discuss learning and teaching ideas and practices. The paper considers how these processes can operate together to contribute significantly to enabling opportunities for continuing and professional development through the conscious and structured development of a learning community among the learning and teaching staff, and to enable and promote change and improvement in the quality of both learning and teaching. In particular, the Community of Practice can establish ownership, management and development of the peer review process, as well as disseminate examples of good practices. The two processes can work together to effect cultural change.

The peer review process has been developed and promoted as a collaborative and cross disciplinary means of enabling the creation and sharing of a supportive and mutual learning environment. It is intended to promote the development and exchange of learning and teaching ideas, and personal and professional development through the support of review, reflection, self assessment and sharing of teaching practices and ideas. In conjunction with the Community of Practice, providing a forum for the articulation of qualities of good teaching and an opportunity to share and develop best practice of teaching across the Schools, a significant opportunity to network with peers and contribute to building a supportive university learning community is being put in place, assisting in addressing the particular learning and teaching issues in the Faculty as well as the professional development and support of Faculty members.

Peer review of teaching can be used for a variety of purposes, for quality assurance as well as quality enhancement. It can assist the development of a teaching portfolio; promotion; pedagogical research; management and development of academic staff in their teaching roles; and development and enhancement of pedagogical knowledge and skills for professional development. However, quality enhancement, through the development and enhancement of a holistic learning environment, is the primary purpose in this proposal. The proposal is to enable development and support of new ideas and processes in learning and teaching through a supportive, collegial and developmental process, not a summative or punitive one. Its essential process is the collaboration between Faculty teaching staff as both reviewees and reviewers, and its essential partner is the Community of Practice.

The Peer Review Proposal

Although adopting some of the processes proposed in the ALTC program, the Faculty process was for formative purposes only, and involved only internal review. While the ALTC processes are for the purpose of recognition of practices supporting, or demonstrating particular expertise in learning and teaching, both in classroom practice and non classroom curriculum activity, the Faculty process was limited to observation and discussion of classroom activity, with a focus on enhancement of teaching through the demonstration and sharing of good practice, with opportunities for critical reflection and discussion. The overall intention of this peer review process is to deliver and evaluate change and improvement in the quality of learning and teaching for all the participants. As a developmental process, it is

intended to provide benefits for the reviewer as well as the reviewee, through peer discussion, not just feedback, of teaching practice.

A pilot program of peer review commenced in semester 2, 2010, with two Schools participating (Law and Economics) with four reviewees from each School. Once the pilot peer review process is completed, it will be subject to evaluation and will then be modified as indicated by the evaluation outcomes. The process will be promoted, from the beginning of 2011, for use throughout the Faculty.

The Community of Practice in Learning and Teaching

The Schools in the Faculty comprise disparate disciplines, each School generally with its own self contained academic programs. For these and other (some historical) reasons, the Schools feel little natural affinity and there has been little cross disciplinary sharing of learning and teaching practices. At the same time the Schools share common learning and teaching issues, particularly relating to very large staff/student ratios; teaching to large classes (250+); a significantly international student body with varied levels of English language and other skills; frequent absence of students from classes; and a significant reliance on sessional staff for teaching delivery and the addressing of assessment tasks.

In each of the Schools, some academic and academic support staff have devised practices and techniques for addressing some of these learning challenges. However there has been no opportunity to share these ideas and developments, and despite belonging to the same Faculty, there was no regular venue or opportunity for formal or informal discussion, examination and sharing of the learning and teaching practices in all the Schools across the Faculty, so little sense of or opportunity to build a learning community among the teachers within the Faculty. Providing an opportunity to create some awareness of teaching practices and experiences in other Schools, of how other teachers addressed common challenges, was a challenge the Faculty took up to enable such a development and to provide opportunities to develop knowledge and support networks. Regular opportunities to meet and share learning and teaching experiences can greatly extend the pool of learning and teaching knowledge and provide an environment in which to cultivate and build an ongoing community of academics who choose to explore and develop new approaches to teaching and learning, especially through reflective practice, providing a forum for information sharing, support and ideas-generation

In June 2009 the Faculty promoted a Community of Practice in Learning and Teaching to enable interested Faculty staff involved in learning and teaching meet to talk about their interests, practices, experiences and challenges, as well as how they have addressed them, with colleagues. Sharing of experience is the central feature of the Community of Practice, enabling the exchange and extension and articulation of both developed and tacit knowledge on learning and teaching practice, with the main purpose to provide a forum for engagement with learning and teaching issues. The Community of Practice has become a regular informal opportunity to discuss learning and teaching issues and to interact on an ongoing basis to extend and share knowledge and expertise. It has not required a structure or an “agenda”, just a time and venue, with a guest or theme or discussion leader or leaders identified in advance in order to identify some learning and teaching issues to pursue more closely. It enables the

sharing of knowledge, expertise and practice, as well as the means of informing academic staff and working out and discussing new ideas.

In conjunction with the Community of Practice a Faculty learning and teaching web site was developed, drawing together tools, policies, links and information impacting on learning and teaching, including information about forthcoming learning and teaching opportunities, bibliographical material, and information and timelines on prizes, awards and grants to support learning and teaching in the Faculty, and the community of practice, both formal and informal, in learning and teaching.

The Community of Practice enables colleagues to build and share a scholarly approach to the enhancement of learning and teaching practice, as well as provide an environment for reflective discussion, and to embed this practice in the Faculty and Schools. The improvement of teaching – the improvement of learning opportunities for students – is a central focus for both the peer review project and the Community of Practice, harnessing, in both circumstances, collaborative, supportive and reflective peer activities: reflection, self assessment, and collegial discussion. The sense that teaching is a “private” activity, shared with students but not colleagues, is a major cultural barrier within universities which the Community of Practice and peer review of teaching addresses, and one which presents the main challenge to proposals for peer review of teaching.

The peer review pilot

The process adopted is planned as a mutual process, to deliver value to both the reviewees and the reviewers, enabling and encouraged to share the learning and teaching insights gained through the review process with the review as a sharing and collaborative process. As a pilot, involvement is voluntary, for both reviewers and reviewees. The Schools involved were proposed by their Heads of School, and participants both reviewer and reviewee, were sought by inquiry within the Schools.

Each review was conducted by two people, one a broad discipline expert (from the School), and the other, a learning and teaching expert. Both undertook some minimal training (provided through the ALTC materials) prior to the observations. The reviewers were senior experienced academic staff, well respected as teachers and researchers.

The reviewees selected the teaching session they wanted observed, and provided the reviewers with relevant material on the course (to provide a wider context) and class: the course outline, topic information, and a statement of their strengths and interests or concerns, or what can be improved or strengthened.

The plan was for the review team to meet with the reviewee immediately prior to the teaching session to be observed, for brief preliminary discussion, providing an opportunity to identify particular what was sought to be achieved in the teaching session to be observed; any issues with the class or topic content; and the rationale for the objectives of the teaching session. Sharing what is to be got out of the review session is very important to the formative aspect of the process., but this did not always occur

In each case the observation occurred in a single class, so observing only one form of teaching. The reviewers took notes, and the observation took into account the issues raised by

the reviewee in the documentation and in any pre class discussion, as well as the “Dimensions of Teaching” set out below. The reviewers left it to the reviewee to decide what should be told the class about the observers: in large lecture groups it was easy for the reviewers to be unnoticed, but in small seminar groups some explanation was necessary. Students seemed unperturbed, and indeed, being aware that teaching is being observed is something that most likely gives confidence to students that teaching is being taken seriously.

The intention was that the observation be followed by a post class debrief, with some general reflection from both sides, enabling the reviewee to identify any unexpected challenges (in one case, noisy and intrusive building work punctuated the lecture!) and some limited personal evaluation, and some immediate feedback and observation if appropriate.

A written report, incorporating the comments of both reviewers, should follow within two weeks, addressing the dimensions of teaching; the intentions of the reviewee for the class, as and any post class discussion. This is provided to the reviewee in a form useful to the reviewee (eg to include in their teaching portfolio). Shortly thereafter, the reviewers and reviewees meet to discuss the report and to share feedback.

The ALTC Project identified nine *Dimensions of Teaching* to inform the process of peer evaluation of teaching, representing qualities of good teaching and reflecting “best practice” teaching. These “dimensions of teaching” were adopted for the basis of the observations, which used these dimensions to provide a form of template for the report to the reviewee.

The nine “dimensions of teaching” identified are:

- Students are actively engaged in learning
- Students prior knowledge and experience is built upon
- Teaching caters for student diversity
- Students are encouraged to develop/expand their conceptual understanding
- Students are aware of key learning outcomes
- Actively uses links between research and teaching
- Uses educational resources and techniques appropriately
- Presents material logically
- Seeks feedback on students’ understanding and acts on this accordingly

The pilot undertaken in the Faculty has not yet been completed. An evaluative process using semi structured questions to all participants, is planned once the process has been completed. Already, before the completion of the pilot, it is apparent there are elements that will require careful evaluation and perhaps major reconsideration. The Community of Practice has a significant role to play in this respect.

Challenges

The pilot, even prior to formal evaluation, has exposed deficiencies and challenges to the effectiveness of the process, presenting numerous challenges.

Two connected challenges for the pilot were lack of commitment, and lack of time. The pilot commenced much later in the semester than had been planned, at a time when teaching was drawing to an end and review staff had other commitments. This placed constraints on the type of teaching that could be observed, and presented very significant logistical difficulties.

The observations had to be undertaken in a short time. One reviewer was common to all the reviews, and also coordinated the observations, meetings and reports. The time commitment was significantly more than anticipated: at least three hours for preparation, pre and post observation meetings, and actual observation; and another two hours for preparation of the report. For 7 observations, this presented 35 hours for the one common reviewer, and 5 hours for each of the discipline reviewers per review, in addition to more general preparation and training, and a further hour per reviewee scheduled for the discussion of the report. The commitment issue was also relevant here: one School, despite volunteering for the pilot, did not facilitate its commencement, leading to delay, which itself generated further difficulties and delays. Some benefits will be forgone as a result, with delays in reports and feedback.

Time available also negatively impacted on the observations. In some cases it was not possible to undertake the pre and post observation discussions. In some cases only part of a class was observed: this occurred where the class was a two hour class, and the reviewers only had one hour available. This necessarily also meant that the post class discussion did not occur, but perhaps more importantly it did not permit the reviewers to see how the class unfolded and concluded. This is a real limitation, especially as the process only operates to observe one form of classroom teaching. Clearly all learning does not occur in the classroom, and the teaching observed was thus not always able to be contextualised.

Commitment is fundamental to the success of the proposal. It was difficult to obtain participants for the process. This was partly because of the timing, but staff who offered to be involved as reviewees were in general junior, who might have both different motivations and expectations from involvement in the project. Obtaining senior staff as reviewers was difficult: no senior (professorial) staff volunteered as reviewees, and some initially prepared to be involved as reviewers withdrew at the point of training, considering this unnecessary for them, suggesting not only lack of commitment but lack of understanding and the sense of reflectiveness essential to any quality process. Even from those who proceeded as reviewers, reflective analysis was not necessarily forthcoming: casual, non rigorous comment not addressing the agreed “dimensions” does not address any cynical resistance about the process.

It is likely other challenges will reveal themselves. There has been no opposition to the proposal, but date all aspects have been voluntary. There is no suggestion that the process become less than voluntary, but the intention is that peer review as a collegial, formative and developmental process will become embedded in Schools as an aspect of the professional development of all staff, as well as course and program development. Such embedding entails significant cultural change, and once such an expectation is embedded it does become a requirement. Most likely there will be both active opposition to such change, or simply non involvement: perhaps in the name of “academic freedom”, as a threat to academic autonomy, a desire to keep teaching processes private from “outside” scrutiny; or perhaps simply regarding a focus on teaching as a waste of time which will not bring reward.

The way forward for peer review?

How do we address these challenges in order to realise the benefits of peer review with its How can opposition – active or passive - be addressed? How can the very significant time commitment be accommodated? Are these challenges so extensive and fundamental that

ambitions for the process are misplaced, and at best it should be relegated to an optional form of mentoring?

In positive terms, if a core of committed reviewers can be established, the time commitment will reduce, through experience and familiarity. If the process established is positive, rigorous, and transparent, opposition based on cynicism and suspicion may be allayed. These positive outcomes however require time, commitment, leadership and energy.

Three essential considerations present themselves.

The first is that any peer review process must address the realities of academic life for both the reviewer and reviewee, by adding value to academic work. It represents, inevitably, either additional or alternative work (which will have an opportunity cost, generally loss of research time), so there must be a value ascribed equal to that of the opportunity cost. Reward can include recognition for purposes of tenure or promotion, or more generally as recognition for the purposes of grants or study leave. It is only by making these rewards real through the repositioning of learning and teaching in university culture that engagement can be obtained. In all workplaces, cultural change can only be effectively driven from the top, with strong, clear and consistent messages.

To obtain commitment from the ground up, appeals to professionalism, commitment to students and colleagues, and to the fundamental “university” virtues of self reflection and collegiality and open-mindedness may all be effective, but will be best received, with the best chance of succeeding, in a context of ownership. Because the proposal is for quality enhancement not quality assurance, its processes can be flexible and groups can devise their own processes and foci, including what type of information is sought from the process, and how and where (or whether) the outcomes will be reported. The Faculty’s Community of Practice can be pivotal in facilitating discussion and generating ownership.

The third is the practical dimension of making the process workable, in particular on a practical basis to make it time and cost effective. Means to make the process more efficient to address the fundamental and difficult issues of the workload and time commitment required. need exploration. Development of better check lists, rubrics for the reports, efficient timetabling allowing a relatively long period for the complete process, with clear schedules to ensure timely feedback, are all essential.

Both the peer review process and the Community of Practice serve the same purpose, to provide a collaborative mechanism for the enhancement and development of learning and teaching processes. The Community of Practice is the principal forum for the dissemination of good practice and general development needs in learning and teaching in the Faculty. It is there that the formal evaluation of the process will be initially presented, and which will then provide the forum for assessment and development to inform future initiatives. The Community of Practice can provide a platform for participants to promote, develop and enhance the peer review process in their Schools, imbuing the process with both academic integrity and a sense of local ownership.

Conclusion

Peer review of teaching provides a powerful means of enabling professional development of the most transformative and far reaching kind in universities. However, alongside practical and logistical difficulties, the organisational culture of universities presents systemic barriers to its successful implementation.

Peer review and Communities of Practice enable and enhance scholarly discussion about learning and teaching, and provide collegiate and professional opportunities for learning and teaching development and enhancement. Practical and logistical difficulties can be overcome with planning, and ownership and commitment obtained through forums such as communities of practice. As a core university activity, and primary generator of university income, learning and teaching cannot remain a private excluding activity exempt from scrutiny. The principal systemic change required to support this relates to how learning and teaching in universities is recognised.

Copyright © 2010 *Kathleen McEvoy*. The author assigns to CETL, HKU the right to publish this document in full in the conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.