

Chapter 2

Collaborative Peer-Supported Review of Teaching

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Introduction

Academics are familiar with the idea of peer review within the context of research and in quality assurance but, traditionally, teaching has not been peer reviewed to the same extent. The forms of peer review deployed in higher education may be differentiated by contrasting assumptions about the purpose or function of peer review and the implications the function has for authority and power relationships between academics. Three broad ‘types’ of peer review may be distinguished on this basis—‘evaluative’, ‘developmental’ and ‘collaborative’. In this chapter I outline the arguments for ‘collaborative review’ as the most effective, and ethical, framework to support professional learning about teaching, learning and related issues such as course design and assessment.

Role of Peer Review in Higher Education

Peer review has been conceptualized as a social judgment process of individuals and their products within a defined social group (Bornmann 2008). Peer review is a key feature of self-regulation within the professions and is ‘an essential component of scholarly communication, the mechanism that facilitates the publication of primary research in academic journals’ (Ware 2008, p. 1). It plays a critical role in certifying knowledge and in the allocation of resources (through the review of grant applications) (Kihara 2003). Peer review is also used extensively in quality assurance processes to determine which courses are offered and to pass judgement on departments’ and institutions’ academic standards.

Peer review has been subject to criticism particularly in the context of determining which research proposals receive funding, which conference papers are accepted and which papers are published in peer review journals. The principle criticisms are that

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there is a lack of reliability between reviewers' judgements, it creates systematic bias in the system, and there is a lack of connection between review judgments and the quality of the reviewed work (Bornmann 2008; Ware 2011). It has also been said that peer review is inherently conservative and has a 'retrospective bias' (Kihara 2003; Ware 2011) because reviewers are typically using their existing frames of reference to judge new work, which can hold back genuinely innovative research. A 2002 metastudy in *The Journal of the American Medical Association* by Jefferson et al. concluded that 'Editorial peer review, although widely used, is largely untested and its effects are uncertain' (Jefferson et al. 2002).

Nevertheless peer review of research outputs continues to be supported by the majority of academics. Halsey found that 'there was general agreement that peer review is the best principle of evaluation' (1992, p. 199) and in a more recent survey Ware and colleagues found that some two-thirds of researchers described themselves as satisfied and only 12 % dissatisfied with the operation of peer review. Asked to consider specifically their last published paper, researchers overwhelmingly (90 %) said that it had been improved by peer review. (Ware 2008, p. 26).

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the value of peer review in the context of research and publication, it is a remarkable feature of higher education—until recently—that the processes relating to teaching and learning have not traditionally been subject to formal processes of peer review. This was noticed by one of the early proponents of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in the USA, Lee Shulman. He argues that, in 1993, there was no community of teachers within which ideas and experience about teaching could be exchanged. Rather, what he found was not a community of teachers, but isolation:

We close the classroom door and experience pedagogical solitude, whereas in our life as scholars, we are members of active communities: communities of conversation, communities of evaluation, communities in which we gather with others in our invisible colleges to exchange our findings, and methods and our excuses. (Shulman 2000 (1993), p. 24)

He went on to argue that:

For a scholarship of teaching, we need scholarship that makes our work public and susceptible to critique. It then becomes community property, available for others to build upon. (Shulman 1999, p. 16)

Shulman concluded that if teaching is to be deemed valuable then 'we have an obligation to judge' and that 'our judgements will be enacted within the disciplinary community'. This means that what he called the 'terrifying phrase' peer review must be applied to teaching (Shulman 2000 (1993), p. 25). In the USA, the success of the argument for making teaching more 'visible' has now produced a context in which peer review of teaching has become common in many routine activities at colleges and universities—for example, hiring faculty, establishing communities of practice, coaching faculty, reviewing faculty for salary increases, deciding on contract renewals, judging promotion and tenure cases, approving teaching sabbatical requests, choosing teaching award winners, doing post-tenure reviews (Chism 2007, p. 3). It is noticeable that most of these functions involve making a judgement about individuals' competence as a teacher.

In the UK teaching quality also became the subject of peer review judgements through the process known as ‘Subject Review’ (Harvey 2005). A feature that became particularly controversial was the evaluation of teaching quality based on the observation of teaching sessions. Many departments began to introduce peer observation of teaching in preparation for Subject Review, and as a result, in the UK, there is a tendency to associate the observation of teaching with the idea that a peer is judging the quality of the teaching observed. I will discuss the observation of teaching in more detail in the next section.

The judgements arrived at by reviewers of teaching quality have been called into question in a more fundamental way than the peer review of journal papers. Some issues derived from peers projecting their priorities on to the reviewed and some elite organizations resented having ‘peers’ thrust upon them (Morley 2003, p. 113). The dilemma of using peer review is well summarised by a philosophy lecturer cited by Morley who argued that peer review is valued because ‘we wish to be self managing’ but that there are ‘endemic problems’...

The fact that what appears to be a neutral and above the board process, thoroughly transparent process, in fact can turn out to incorporate judgements based on prejudice. (Morley 2003, p. 120)

Others have questioned whether it is right to assume that ‘a university is first and foremost an organisation whose performance as an organisation can be observed’ (Strathern 2000, p. 313). On this view, to reduce the educative process to that which is visible is inherently reductionist. The second challenge is to ‘the proposition that if procedures and methods are open to scrutiny, then the organisation is open to critique and ultimately to improvement’ (Strathern 2000, p. 313). These are critical issues to which I shall return later in this chapter.

A key word in the discussion of the ways in which peer review has been used in all the contexts discussed above is that of ‘judgement’. Whether the decision is to publish a paper or to award a grant or to assess teaching quality an evaluative judgement is made by those that have been given authority to pass that judgement. It is because peer review is understood as a *judgemental* process that Morley has said:

Peer review appears benign and collegial, but is underpinned with a set of values and hegemonies that are highly problematic. (Morley 2003, p. 112)

Chism (2007, p. 5) distinguishes between ‘*formative evaluations*’ where teachers are provided with ‘information that they can use to improve their teaching’, which may be offered confidentially and can be ‘informal, ongoing, and wide-ranging’ and ‘*summative evaluations*’ which are used to make personnel decisions for example, hiring, promotion, tenure, merit pay.

By differentiating between the central purposes of peer review processes, it is possible to distinguish between those forms of peer review that have evaluation or decision making as their central purpose—for example, whether to promote a staff member, to make an award or to publish a paper—and those which have professional development as their principal function. The models of peer review are shown in Table 2.1. ‘Development’ implies a value-laden judgement based on assumptions

Table 2.1 Models of peer review (revision based on Gosling 2005, p. 14)

Characteristic	Evaluation model	Development model	Collaborative model
Who does it and with whom? (peer relationship)	Senior staff, or chosen 'evaluators' or 'auditors' review other staff	Educational developers observe/review probationers; or expert teachers review others	Teachers/peers/colleagues
Purpose	Identify under-performance, confirm probation (tenure), appraisal, promotion, quality assurance, assessment	Demonstrate competency/improve teaching competencies; part of accredited course	Improve teaching through dialogue; self and mutual reflection; stimulate improvement
Outcome	Report/judgement	Feedback/report/action plan for improvement to teaching and learning	Analysis, reflection, discussion, wider experience, SoTL activity, improvement to teaching and learning
Status of peer review judgements	Based on authority, seniority, and/or expertise	Expert diagnosis based on experience and expertise	Peer shared understandings and perceptions
Relationship of observer to observed	Hierarchy of power/seniority	Hierarchy of expertise -expert/learner; tutor/student	Equality/mutuality. Peers share understandings and perceptions.
Confidentiality	Between manager, reviewer and the reviewee	Between reviewer and the reviewee, might include manager, or course tutor	Between reviewer and the reviewee—could be shared within learning set. Public outcomes with permission.
Inclusion	Selected staff, staff being confirmed in post, or applying for promotion, or teaching award	Staff on initial training course (eg PG Cert), staff identified as needing to improve teaching	All involved in supporting student learning
Judgement	Pass/fail, score, quality assessment, confirm tenure, or promotion	Feedback on how to improve teaching	Non-judgemental, constructive facilitated dialogue
What is reviewed?	Teaching performance, course design, learning materials, student feedback	Teaching performance, course design, learning materials.	Any aspect of course design, teaching, student learning and assessment chosen by reviewee.
Who benefits?	Institution, department	The reviewee (one way interaction)	Mutual benefits for both peers (two way interaction)
Conditions for success	Effective management	Respected 'developers' or senior staff	A culture in which teaching is valued and discussed
Risks	Alienation, lack of co-operation, opposition, resistance	No shared ownership, lack of impact	Confirms existing practice, passive compliance, perceived as bureaucratic

(whether made explicit or not) about what constitutes ‘improvement’ in the context of learning and teaching.

Both these forms of evaluation entail a power relationship between the one who makes the judgement and the other who is judged, or the one who is being ‘developed’ and the ‘developer’. This raises the question: is it possible to have a form of non-judgemental peer review? If so what would this look like? Could there be a form of peer review based on *collaboration* between the parties? The possibility of this third form of peer review or peer-supported review (Gosling and O’Connor 2006, 2009) is the main subject of this chapter.

Peer Observation of Teaching

The form of peer review of teaching that has become most common in the UK and Australia is peer observation of teaching (POT). Although, as we observed above, the growth of POT was linked to TQA and Subject Review, the process was typically promoted as a developmental tool (Brown et al. 1993). A considerable literature has grown up supporting the use of peer observation as a valuable tool for the development of teaching (Bell and Mladenovic 2008; Bell 2001, 2005; Hammersely-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004, 2005; Kemp and Gosling 2003; Kinchin 2005; MacKinnon 2001; Martin and Double 1995; McMahon et al. 2007; Washer 2006). There are many advantages to using the observation of teaching sessions as a basis for a dialogue about teaching. Providing that both parties are committed to valuing the process and trust each other, then, the immediacy of the shared experience of the teaching session, the direct observation of students’ responses, the opportunity to ask questions which promote reflection—all contribute to the value of POT.

In reflective practice the teacher is in control of the outcome, indeed it is the teacher who sets the process in motion. The observer is seen as an ‘enabler’, someone who helps and supports the development of the teacher. The enabler aids the reflection process by describing observations, offering feedback and asking questions. (McGill and Beaty 1995, p. 3)

And yet there have always been some reservations about peer observation. As Peel, (2005, p. 498) says ‘the potential discomfort of POT should not be underestimated’. Cosh (1998) referred to some ‘concerns’ about ‘the value to the observed, implicit judgements being made, and the effect on students, or the dynamic of teaching, of having observers in the room’ (p. 175). Cosh raised a more fundamental issue:

Given the subjective nature of notions of good teaching, different learner preferences, and the lack of proof of how students learn most successfully, it seems that none of us are qualified to make judgements on the teaching of our peers, and that our judgements are, therefore, of questionable value to anyone other than ourselves. (Cosh 1998, p. 172)

In response to the suggestion that notions of good teaching are ‘subjective’, it is possible to point to a large literature on what constitutes ‘good teaching’, (Biggs and Tang 2007; Chickering and Gamson 1987; Kember, 2007). However, as Chism has pointed out, ‘the literature on teaching effectiveness reveals a complex and often contradictory record of claims’ (2007, p. 50) and many of the characteristics

of good teaching use ‘high inference’ terms. For example, Ramsden’s list of the ‘key principles of effective teaching’ all require high levels of inference. For example, ‘making material interesting to students and providing clear explanations’, ‘concern and respect for students and student learning’, ‘appropriate assessment and feedback’, ‘clear goals and intellectual challenge’ (Ramsden 2003, pp. 96–103). Because these are ‘high inference’ terms, observers may agree that these are desirable characteristics of good teaching, but the judgements they make about some observed teaching behaviour can still differ. I have found that participants in workshops, when shown a video of a teaching session, make widely differing judgements about the ‘quality’ of the teaching observed. This supports the view that many staff are ill-equipped, without further training, to evaluate and provide effective feedback on the effectiveness of others’ teaching (Cosh 1998; Keig 2000).

Another range of issues concern staff responses to institutional POT schemes. Shortland (2004) has suggested that staff often engage in POT in order to comply with institutional policies rather than through a real desire to transform their practice. These problems typically occur when peer observation is introduced as an institution-wide policy. As Peel says ‘the normative aspects of POT raises a raft of philosophical issues about whether making POT compulsory would reduce its potential for supporting individuality and empowerment.’ (Peel 2005, p. 501). Although staff can be required to undertake a task (such as observing others or being observed) they cannot be required to benefit from the task, and arguably, as soon as a development task becomes a requirement its potential for development is reduced. When POT schemes include a standard ‘feedback form’ there seems to be an even greater likelihood that it will quickly become what has been called a ‘tick-box exercise’ driven more by compliance than a desire to improve teaching and learning.

Strathern’s concern about the reductionist tendencies inherent in focusing on what is visible or observable applies specifically to the observation of teaching. Placing the observed teaching session at centre stage emphasises performativity and takes attention away from other important aspects of teaching and learning. Keig (2000) suggests that observation of teaching has limited scope because it ignores the fact that students’ learning depends on a blend of tutor-led, tutor-directed and student-directed learning activities. Good course design, including reflection on goals, academic level and learning outcomes, as well as valid and reliable assessment of students and timely feedback, are critical for effective teaching and learning, but are not visible in a teaching session. Much of higher education is now ‘blended’, using combinations of distance and face-to-face teaching. POT has to be radically reconsidered to accommodate this form of delivery (Bennet and Barp 2008; Swinglehurst et al. 2008; also see the discussion by Applebee in this volume). This suggests a need to move to a model of peer review of teaching, learning and assessment that is more flexible and more inclusive of the complete range of activities involved: designing, delivering and assessing teaching and learning.

In most forms of observation of teaching the observer gives ‘feedback’ to the teacher who has been observed. In the traditional feedback model it is assumed that the reviewer is in a position to make a judgement about what is done successfully and what is less successful and is required to offer constructive advice to the teacher

about ways of improving their teaching. Guidance has traditionally been offered on ways of giving feedback sensitively, but the underlying reality of the power wielded by the observer remains. It is this fundamental realisation about feedback which causes many staff to be anxious, and ultimately alienated, by the process of peer observation, though it is fair to say that many welcome ‘feedback’ and feel strong enough in their professional identity to accept criticism.

These limitations of POT suggest that it is worth exploring the possibility of a form of peer review of teaching which (1) is not necessarily focused on the observation of teaching sessions (2) allows for collaborative dialogue between peers rather than one giving ‘feedback’ to the other and (3) is non-judgemental (though nevertheless based on a discussion of evaluative judgements). In the next section I elaborate on the principles underpinning collaborative peer-supported review.

Professional Learning through Collaborative Peer-Supported Review

The discussion of POT above is premised on the assumption that the goal of the activity is to promote professional learning that will contribute to the development of teaching and learning. Any proposal for ways of promoting professional learning must take into account what is known about how professionals learn and how that learning can impact on their professional behaviour. Professional development in universities has often been based on ‘event based’ learning—that is workshops, away days, courses, conferences and so on. While these are useful for promoting new ideas and practices, participants often have difficulty applying the learning to their workplace for a variety of structural and motivational reasons (Blackwell 2003).

There is good evidence to suggest that much of the most effective learning occurs in non-formal situations at the workplace (Brookfield 1985; Eraut 2000), not least because it is socially located or ‘situated learning’ (Knight and Trowler 2000; Wenger 1998). But there is nothing automatic about work-based learning. Knight et al., in their discussion of the professional learning of teachers in higher education, concluded that three conditions were necessary to have workplaces that ‘evoke learning’:

Firstly, spaces need to be found for this activity, for the creation of shared meaning. Secondly, power relationships within activity systems need to encourage collegiality and participation. Thirdly, appropriate procedures and practices are needed; in higher education this is often represented by the capacious notion of ‘reflection’. (Knight et al. 2006, p. 332)

The idea of peer-supported review (P-SR) has emerged as a ‘space’ which meets these conditions. The first important point about P-SR is that it seeks to avoid the problems with ‘evaluative’ and ‘developmental’ reviews and seeks to be based on ‘collaborative’ principles—while recognising that there is permeability between the three approaches (Boyd 2009, p. 34).

The key features of collaborative review are that it:

- promotes reciprocal learning
- recognises professional autonomy of all parties
- is based on dialogue, or more simply conversation
- is non-judgemental
- focuses on changing or developing professional practice
- incorporates enquiry or investigation.

The goal of collaborative review is that all participants stand to learn from the process of talking to each other about a chosen topic or issue relating to student learning or teaching problem—where ‘problem’ is understood to be like a research problem—a feature worth investigating (Bass 1999). They have the opportunity to learn from each other through dialogue and by investigating the focus of the review in a systematic way (reciprocal collaborative learning). The intention is to facilitate ‘A non-judgemental dialogue where staff feel safe to reflect on their established practice and underpinning values’ (Kell 2009, p. 38) and to develop their professional practice to supporting student learning.

Observation of teaching can still take place in P-SR schemes and in some cases seems to have remained the normal expectation (Barnard et al. 2011), but in other cases there is an active attempt to move away from the limitations (discussed above) of observation-based schemes (O’Connor and Gravestock 2009; Purvis et al. 2009). P-SR opens a wider space for learning which can include those aspects teaching and learning not accessible to observation, but which through conversation can be discussed, investigated and critiqued.

In order to create the ‘space’ within which collaborative reviews can occur, some parameters are typically laid down—agreed at an institutional or departmental level. These parameters, for example, might seek to define the range of topics that are regarded as relevant to a scheme aimed at developing professional knowledge of teaching and learning. Some schemes allow the staff member being reviewed to have a free choice of the aspect of teaching, learning, course development or assessment s/he wishes to review, whereas others have found that focusing on themes allows greater opportunities for post-review discussions at department and institutional level. Discussions of research would typically be excluded unless it was to discuss how research can be incorporated into teaching (Healey 2005; Jenkins et al. 2003).

In order to ensure that participants have personal agency within the P-SR process it might seem preferable for individuals to be able to choose a topic for the review. But evaluations of existing P-SR schemes suggest that staff do welcome some guidance on themes for the peer review of teaching. There may be key concerns at an institutional level—for example, internationalisation of the curriculum, feedback to students on assessed work or blended learning. Where there are agreed themes, individuals or groups can investigate related topics and bring their findings back to department seminars each contributing to increasing the collective knowledge of the department (Maguire 2009, p. 51).

Professional Conversations

Although there are variations in the details of how P-SR schemes operate (Barnard et al. 2011; Byrne et al. 2010; Gosling and O'Connor 2009) the fundamental assumption on which they are based is the same, namely that reflective practice based on dialogue is an effective form of professional development.

Reflective practice based-dialogue, occurring in an environment of trust and mutual ownership, will help both parties 'unpack' their practises as instinctive teachers and go beyond the assumptions both take for granted in their approaches to teaching (Kell 2005, p. 10)

But are claims like this based on evidence? The value of 'dialogic engagement' is sometimes based on a vision of ways in which academics can, and should, work together, based on collegiality. This is found in the writings of scholars who are in the tradition of 'critical theory' such as (Brookfield 2005; Walker and Nixon 2004) where dialogue is linked to ideological commitments to 'liberation', democratic ways of working, re-envisioning possible futures

It is through dialogue that the space of the possible can be worked with. Through dialogic engagement and inquiry, academic staff development may be viewed as a space of possibility, a process of becoming, understanding and engaging with teaching and learning in increasingly critical, creative and co-constructive ways—a pedagogy of possibility. (Southwood, 2013 (forthcoming))

The most common approach is to look for evidence in the form of statements made by staff who have been involved in peer review. There is good evidence that once the evaluative, or judgemental, element is removed from peer review, respondents report that they have found peer conversations 'useful' for their professional development. Purvis et al, found in their evaluation of a P-SR scheme, that '90 % of responses thought that their LTA practice had improved as a result of P-SR' (Purvis et al. 2009, p. 26). Barnard et al. quote respondents saying that peer-partnership is 'one of the most valuable tools we have to offer staff' and 'It's been really useful to have another person who is fairly impartial and supportive looking at what's going on' (2011, p. 441). Similar responses have been reported by others such as O'Connor and Gravestock (2009) and Bell and Mladenovic (2008).

Few studies have attempted to measure the 'impact' of schemes in terms of either changes to teaching behaviours or improved student learning. One of the few international studies which reviews research into the impact of educational development activities, looked at '29 faculty communities of practice, defined here as groupings of a cohort of faculty members engaged in dialogue about teaching for a semester or more.' According to Chism et al. (2013) these 'studies document solid gains for participants; some even are able to trace these to impacts on student learning.'

While there is evidence that professional conversations within the context of peer review can promote learning, there is no guarantee that teachers talking about their teaching will generate new learning. Palmer has suggested that:

We rarely talk with each other about teaching at any depth—and why should we when we have nothing more than 'tips, tricks and techniques' to discuss? That kind of talk fails to touch the heart of the teacher's experience. (Palmer 1998, p. 11)

In contrast to the ‘technicist’ language of ‘teaching tips’ which inevitably fails to inspire or challenge, there is the type of conversation discussed by Haigh (2005, p. 14) ‘about my emerging ideas’ which ‘have also helped ensure that they have been subject to on-going critique’ and which have ‘also allowed me to explore ways of articulating those ideas’. Haigh quotes Zeldin:

Conversation is a meeting of minds with different memories and habits. When minds meet, they don’t just exchange facts; they transform them, draw different implications from them, engage in new trains of thought. Conversation doesn’t just reshuffle the cards; it creates new cards. (Zeldin 1998, p. 14)

To enable peer review to achieve its potential as a vehicle for professional learning, attention must be focused on finding ways of promoting dialogue between teachers that maximise the benefits to everyone involved.

Two Principles: Parity and Reciprocity

There are two important principles underpinning collaborative peer review that I would like to comment on further. The first is parity of power relations and the second is reciprocity of learning.

We may approach the first issue through a consideration of the work of Jurgen Habermas (1984) who has suggested that successful communication is that which is not distorted by imbalances of power or other blocks to open and rational discussion. When there are no distortions to communication resulting from unequal power or from differences in the participants’ orientation to the communication, we can achieve what Habermas refers to as ‘the ideal speech situation.’ Failures to optimise communication are due to ‘communication pathologies’ when the intentions of the parties to the conversation fail to match each other:

Communication pathologies can be conceived of as the result of confusion between actions orientated to reaching understanding and actions orientated to success. In situations of concealed strategic action, at least one of the parties behaves with an orientation to success, but leaves others to believe that all the presuppositions of communicative action are satisfied (Habermas 1984, p. 332).

The ‘ideal speech situation’ is one in which *all* the parties have an ‘orientation to understanding’ and are committed to rationality, openness, equality and to finding truth. In Habermasian terms, this is the way to arrive at shared truth.

A communicatively achieved agreement has a rational basis; it cannot be imposed by either party, whether instrumentally through intervention in the situation directly or strategically through influencing the decisions of opponents. (Habermas 1984, p. 287)

Using this analysis, peer review would be seen as a learning process in which both parties (reviewer and reviewed) must be jointly engaged in a search for truth which is only achievable when the communication between peers is open to challenge from either side, and not distorted by power relations which inhibit criticism.

Power can be exercised in peer review in a number of ways. Some use their personal power deriving from a dogmatic or over-bearing manner to dominate the

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