PEER SUPPORTED REVIEW OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

This paper will discuss some of the principles of peer review and different models that can be used, including the introduced at the authors’ institution in the last academic year. Some of the positive aspects of peer review will be outlined as well as concerns that engaging in this process raise. During the first year of implementation an evaluation of 48 anonymised reflections submitted online were analysed thematically to assess the scope of activity participants had engaged in for their peer reviews and to identify how engaging in this process had influenced their individual practice. The results demonstrated that the full range of practice had been used including teaching, review of course materials and assessment feedback. The results also demonstrated that participating in a dialogue about each other’s practice for the review had indeed led to deeper reflection on practice and plans to make changes/enhancements in the next year. The paper will then conclude with reference to future plans for further evaluation of the peer review process drawing on additional data collected through other sources. Recommendations for enhancing the peer review reflection process will also be made.

Keywords: Peer review, Peer supported review, Higher Education, Enhancing Education

# INTRODUCTION

Over many years the evaluation of teaching has been discussed and debated with a range of views about what this is and who should be involved (1). The main approaches to evaluation of teaching include self-assessment, student feedback, peer feedback and a review of student achievement (2). This paper will focus on peer review which, whilst having been common in UK Higher education for many years, is still met by staff with mixed views. Shulman (3) discussed the importance of peer review when referring to the solitary nature of teaching behind closed doors and that academics should share their teaching within their community as they do with other scholarly activities. Peer review provides an opportunity to enhance the quality of teaching and learning, improve student learning, share good practice, provide feedback and enhance academic commitment and confidence (2 & 4). It is no longer confined to just face to face teaching but includes the scope of an academic role and so encompasses learning materials developed for students, teaching strategies, online activity and assessment practice (2). Having dialogue with another peer about academic practice has been recognised as very valuable (5 & 6). However, despite the many positive aspects to this process staff remain skeptical and see this as an intrusion into their classroom, a threat to academic freedom and a form of surveillance (6, 7, 2 & 8).

At the authors’ institution, a peer review scheme had been in place for more than eight years but there were only pockets of staff really engaged in the process and, whilst it was seen as important to have an opportunity to engage in dialogue about teaching, it was believed that the model used did not encourage this (6). An across institution group was set up and led by a Senior Lecturer undertaking this project on a secondment to the Department for Learning Enhancement and Development (LEaD). The group undertook a review of the literature and explored a range of models that were published and those being used across institutions as well as taking account of feedback from individuals across the institution which had been gathered informally. The group considered all the options and chose a collaborative approach based on Gosling’s (9) model. Although the principles of the process concerning dialogue and being non-judgmental were the same, here was a focus in the new process on being reciprocal and supportive so that there was learning from each other (7). The revised process required a pre-meeting, the review and post review discussion. As with the previous scheme the model was inclusive in terms of practice and so extended beyond classroom activities to include online engagement, teaching materials and assessment feedback. One additional key feature of the scheme was to ask each person involved in a review to complete a short reflection in addition to the forms that are part of the process. The reflections are submitted anonymously except for which School individuals work in, via an online form. These reflections include reference to how engaging in the review has influenced an individual’s practice. The purpose of this was that this would enable good practice to be shared as well as professional development needs. Following a consultation process across the institution the scheme was approved and launched in 2016-2017. The remainder of the paper outlines the evaluation of a sample of the reflections submitted for the first year of the scheme, to identify the scope of the focus of the reviews, any good practice that could be disseminated and, an indication of the value of participating in this reciprocal process.

# METHODOLOGY

It was essential that as this was the first year of the new peer review scheme, we undertook an evaluation of the new process through feedback via School Boards of Studies, through the authors’ observation of any issues when providing development for staff around the process and undertaking reviews and, through analyzing some of the anonymous reflections that had been submitted via the online form.

The aims of the evaluation were to:

* Explore if those being reviewed had chosen to use a range of practice
* Evaluate if the reciprocal scheme was seen as valuable
* Evaluate the process for positive aspects and any areas for future development

The methodology used for this evaluation was documentary analysis which requires the systematic analysis of the documents and their content (10). Documents used in evaluation can take many forms and could have included the peer reviews as well as the reflections but because the peer review process was supportive and developmental we did not want those engaged in the reviews to feel constrained in their discussions and so we chose not to ask for submission of those documents for analysis. Instead, because the process had included the voluntary submission of anonymous reflections on the individual peer reviews we chose to use these for the evaluation in addition to verbal feedback provided on the process through Boards of Studies and other feedback provided to the authors. Documentary analysis requires the data in the documents to be reviewed and then placed into categories or themes and quotations are often used to illustrate views from the documents (10). Documentary analysis as an evaluation approach is less time consuming than some other data collection tools such as interviews, they are readily available and are not affected by the researchers (10). There are however some disadvantages which include documents occasionally lacking detail and, as was the case, with this evaluation they can have bias selectivity which for this evaluation was true due to the submission being voluntary. However, the authors believed that through using these documents for this first year evaluation there would be enough data to provide enable the aims of the evaluation to be met.

The reflections were submitted via an online form which then enabled the data to be drawn into a Microsoft excel © spreadsheet. The authors were then able to analyse the data. Each reflection was reviewed and then themes were drawn out of the data with quotations used where the authors felt significant comments were made which demonstrated achievement of the second aim which was to evaluate if the reciprocal scheme was of value. The total number of reflections analysed for this paper was 48.

# Discussion of the findings

The findings from the reflections are discussed first in 3.1 and 3.2 and relate to the first two aims of the evaluation. Feedback provided on the process is provided in 3.3 and was gathered from the feedback provide to the authors via comments from peers and chairs of Boards of Studies.

## Scope of focus of the review

The first aim was to explore if those being reviewed has chosen to focus on a range of practice. As illustrated in table 1 there was a range of practice used and this included classroom teaching which was present in 50% of the reflections but there were also reflections on teaching and learning materials and assessment feedback.

*Table 1. Focus of the Peer Reviews*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Classroom Teaching | 24 (50%) |
| Teaching and learning materials | 16 (33%) |
| Assessment feedback | 8 (17%) |

## Value of participating in the reciprocal practice

The reflections were varied with some providing very brief comments but others provided some rich data about the practice being reviewed. The data led to three themes which included positive feedback about having a review, good practice that was highlighted and suggestions for future practice. These will each be discussed with quotations to illustrate the themes.

### Positive feedback about the process

There were many comments from the reviewees about how the process had enabled *“the opportunity to talk to another colleague about my practice” (Reflection 1)*, and that the *“positive feedback was encouraging” (Reflection 3)*. The reviewers also noted positive aspects to undertaking the review such as one reviewer who *“found it was very helpful to observe other styles of interaction with the students” (Reflection 24)* and another who noted *“it enabled me to reflect on my own pedagogy of practice” (Reflection 32).* These comments support the fact that peer review, rather than being an intrusion and a threat. is actually a valuable process (5 & 6). The data also provided comments from the reviewers about being able to support colleagues with aspects of their practice.

### Good practice

There were many examples of good practice in the data which both the reviewee and reviewers highlighted in their reflections. This included classroom practice where there was reference to engaging with students such as *“I was impressed with the way that he transmits his own voice and so manages to make a personal connection between himself and the student” (Reflection 5)* and *“the interactive nature of the tutorial and knowing the name of every single student” (Reflection 15).* In relation to teaching and learning materials there was confirmation of the materials being good such as *“module materials are well designed in terms of clarity, assigned reading, learning objectives etc” (Reflection 4).* The focus on assessment feedback also confirmed that seeing how another colleague does their feedback is valuable. One reviewer noted that *“I found it a useful reminder that when marks are lower it is important to be encouraging and to offer feedback which helps students improve” (Reflection 27).*

### Suggestions for future practice

There were suggestions from both reviewees and reviewers about how the review has made them consider changes for their own future practice. There was reference for the classroom practice *“to try to engage students in more peer discussions and recommend additional reading prior to lessons as preparatory work” (Reflection 17).* There was also some advice about remembering the nature of diverse students and how this meant reflecting on the materials you used such as powerpoint and ensuring the style, colour and font size were inclusive. Advice was also provided on *“creating spaces for questions and reflection within the lecture itself” (Reflection 22).* There was advice about teaching and learning materials such as *”pruning my reading list which is rather overcrowded and possibly daunting for students” (Reflection 34).* In relation to feedback there were references to *“taking a more consistent approach” (Reflection 6)* and *“I will strive to be a bit more detailed and provide more examples” (Reflection 6).* Peer review was seen by many of those who submitted the reflections as an opportunity to enhance learning and teaching which would then enhance the student experience (2 & 4).

Whilst we know anecdotally there are some who see this process as surveillance and a box ticking activity, it is clear that many find this both positive in terms of having the discussions with a colleague and gaining positive feedback, but also for reflecting on personal practice and gaining suggestions about how you might enhance aspects of your practice in future. In addition, some of those that had submitted reflections also referred to the fact that they would ask a colleague to undertake a review on other aspects of their practice thus demonstrating the value they placed on this process.

## Evaluation of the process

The authors, in the main, received very positive feedback about the process and the value of the reciprocal arrangement so that they were able to engage in a fuller discussion about practice through both being reviewed and reviewing. There were some concerns about who might look at the review documents which the authors reminded individuals was between just those involved in the review. Line managers could ask if the review had taken place but not for the documentation. This concern also justified the authors’ decision to use the reflections rather than ask for documents to be submitted for evaluation. However, this could be seen as a weakness in this evaluation because only those who were happy to submit the reflections were able to provide any views.

The only feedback that has led to a change was that the original documentation, whilst referring to a range of practice being used for the review, had provided forms to be completed that were very classroom focused. The original group had been aware of how colleagues do complain about lengthy policies and complex documents and so had tried to produce one set which was to cover all practice. This has been raised by many in the feedback provided and it was felt guided the review towards choosing classroom practice.

The authors’ own reflections on the process do agree with the above view of the documentation and so will make changes to this. In addition, the reflections have been useful for evaluating the first year but due to the voluntary nature this has meant there was less data to review. Whilst there has been reference to future practice changes this was not included in all reflections. The authors will therefore make changes to the reflection but will also include other approaches to data collection for next year.

# Recommendations and implications

The implications of this evaluation have been that there is mostly positive feedback provided however as noted above a limitation is there was limited data obtained from the one source. In addition, there have been suggestions to change both the peer review documents and the reflection form. The following recommendations should enable the implications arising from this evaluation to be acted upon.

The first recommendation is to increase the data sources for the second year evaluation which will include continuing with the reflection form but also asking if any of those involved in the peer review process will submit their peer review documentation anonymised to us. In addition, we will ask if any colleagues are willing to be involved in some interviews about the process.

The second recommendation is that the peer review documentation is revised so that the forms are include all aspects of practice. This has already been undertaken and there is now a review form for classroom practice, one for reviewing teaching and learning materials and one for assessment feedback.

The third recommendation is that the reflection form has one heading added which asks those who complete it to provide one aspects of their practice their will review or change as a result of engaging in a review.

# CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation of this first year has confirmed the value of the peer review process and has enabled some examples of good practice to be highlighted as well as suggestions for future practice. The authors believe that peer review is a useful process for professional development and would like to encourage more colleagues to see this as an ongoing process that can enhance their practice through engaging in dialogue with others. It is hoped that through undertaking further evaluation of this process next year, but with the additional sources of data, it may be possible to produce some case studies of the impact of peer review on academic practice.

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