

Peer review of teaching: Collegial support to develop instructional skills

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Feedback is essential for the development of instructional skills, but many teaching staff do not have access to relevant feedback on their teaching. The most common feedback instruments for teaching staff in Australian higher education are student results and end of semester surveys, which are limited in their capacity to provide meaningful information for instructional skills development. Evidence indicates that an appropriately structured program for peer review of teaching provides valid feedback and has a positive effect on learning and teaching. However, peer review of teaching is not commonly used in Australian higher education, mainly due to concerns relating to performance management and role identity. This paper argues that with a suitably structured program these concerns can be overcome. To support this claim, the peer observation platform from Curtin University's peer-led academic support program (UniPASS), is described along with considerations from the literature. The UniPASS peer observation framework and other models from the literature are offered for contextual adaptation by schools wishing to provide developmental support for teaching staff.

Introduction

Given the challenges posed by the changing higher education environment including widening participation, globalised competition and regulatory pressure (Hobson & Morrison-Saunders, 2013; Devlin & O'Shea, 2011) much of the literature has called for innovative strategies for continued instructional development. A strong focus on transformative, innovative and engaging teaching skills has benefits for students, academic teaching staff and departments (Gosling, 2002; McMahon, Barrett & O'Neill, 2007; Bell & Cooper, 2011; Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2013). In order to develop their teaching methods, tutors and lecturers need appropriate feedback and a non-threatening environment in which to reflect and develop their teaching skills. Current feedback instruments, like student surveys and results, are generally inadequate for developing instructional skills (McMahon et al., 2007; Stes, De Maeyer, Gijbels, & Petegem, 2011; Beleche, Fairris & Marks, 2012).

This paper will argue that an appropriately structured peer observation program is a vital strategy for supporting academic teaching staff. The validity of current feedback instruments (student results and surveys) used to evaluate teaching is discussed. Reasons for the underuse of peer review of teaching are presented. The observation model used in the Curtin University peer-learning program is offered as a working tertiary framework that can be adapted to specific school requirements. Additional considerations from the literature are also discussed to enable effective contextual adaptation.

Current feedback instruments

Most universities appear to operate on an implied logic that good teaching can be evidenced by good student results (McMahon et al., 2007). However, there are too many factors that influence student results to make them valid indicators of good teaching. For example, unit structure, assessments, entry requirements, student demographic, support services, student motivation and instructional quality all affect student learning. Further, students within a unit commonly have several different people teaching them, usually the lecturer, tutor and laboratory demonstrator are all different. Therefore, it is difficult to determine to what extent an individual's level of teaching quality contributes to student results overall; hence, the questionable validity of student results as an indicator of teaching quality (McMahon et al., 2007).

Another common instrument used to provide feedback to teaching staff is an end of semester student survey. However, the validity of using student surveys to indicate teaching quality is being challenged (Stes et al., 2011; Beleche et al., 2012). Beleche et al. did find a weak positive correlation between student evaluations and student learning, but their results acknowledge that the students who take the time to complete end of unit surveys are not representative of the total cohort. This might indicate that any feedback would also be less-representative so less valid. While student surveys might be able to provide some indication of student learning the feedback detail is usually too general to be a useful guide for practical teaching skill development. The timing of this feedback also impacts its usefulness. Survey feedback tends to come at the end of the semester so teaching staff lack the opportunity to use the information in a timely way to develop their instructional technique.

Effectiveness of peer observations

Research clearly indicates that peer observations are an effective teaching development strategy. Some of the benefits to instructional quality include; improved teaching practices, more confidence, pedagogical development, reflective skills, and motivation to engage in scholarship of teaching and learning (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; McMahon et al, 2007; Bell & Cooper, 2011; Barnard, Croft, Irons, Cuffe, & Bandara, 2011; Sullivan, Buckle, Nicky, & Atkinson, 2012). The developmental support provided by peer observation programs not only improves instructional quality of the tutors and lecturers but gives wider benefits to the school or faculty. These wider benefits include improved collegial culture, respect for alternative approaches, closer integration of casual staff into the department, and dissemination of teaching methods (Bell & Mladenovic, 2007; Bell & Cooper, 2011).

Further evidence for the effectiveness of observation programs could be that they are common within other professions. Some of these professions include teachers, vocational instructors, and psychologists for example (“Psychology Board of Australia”, 2012). Interestingly, many degrees for the professions also require some form of observation to develop and evaluate applied techniques in students. For example, physiotherapy, medicine, psychology, counselling, teaching, and the performance arts all have some form of observed evaluation (“Certificate in English Language Teaching to Adults”, 2013; “UWA Handbook”, 2014). Yet, the tutors and lecturers who are teaching these courses probably do not have access to support from a peer observation program.

Resistance to observations

Peer observations of teaching are not prominent in Australian university policies nor are they commonly practised (Harris, Farrell, Bell, Devlin, & James, 2008). This is despite the previously mentioned studies on the effectiveness of peer observations in supporting improved learning outcomes (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; McMahon et al., 2007; Bell & Cooper, 2011; Barnard et al., 2011). Bell & Cooper (2011) indicate that resistance to embrace observations seems particularly apparent in Australian higher education.

The role identity of academic teaching staff is a factor in the reluctance to adopt observation programs. Some research suggests that academic staff may not see themselves as teachers. Hobson and Morrison-Saunders (2013) quote two research participants, who highlight core themes in relation to training and identity;

I did not set out to be a teacher and after 20 odd years of teaching at university I still have no qualifications as a teacher... At first, I resisted the naming of my work as ‘teaching’; I was an academic and taught alongside my research and other duties (p.775).

[I] literally ‘fell’ into this role with no training or preparation whatsoever... It is fair to say that teaching is equally as beguiling a subject to me as my [academic discipline area] (p.776).

These insights demonstrate that academic teaching staff often do not usually have specific training in teaching, nor do they necessarily identify as teachers. The identity conflict comes from the pressure to

learn teaching theory and methods when their expertise lies in their field of study (Hobson & Morrison-Saunders, 2013). Not identifying as a teacher could explain the reluctance of teaching staff in higher education to adopt professional practices, like observation programs, from other professions that teach.

Academic teaching staff are also concerned that any form of observation program will be used as a performance management tool (Bell & Cooper, 2011). Such a motive could be seen as intrusive, generate fear and restrict academic freedom (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005). McMahon et al. (2007) builds on these concerns by highlighting that any information gathered from observations needs to be carefully treated or an observation program could become evaluative and result in resistance from academic staff. He argues that the definition of ‘peer’ is often blurred in academic contexts; this finding is also supported by Gosling (2002). Both researchers note that it is more useful to think of who has control of the information than whether someone is a peer. Staff resistance due to role identity and fear of performance management can potentially be remedied by a suitably structured peer observation program.

UniPASS peer observation: An adaptable model

UniPASS (University Peer Assisted Study Success) is Curtin University’s academic peer-learning program. The program runs group study sessions in units with high fail rates. Currently 22 units are supported, with 34 peer educators, and 1015 students attending per semester (Pereira, 2013b). The peer educators are successful current students who are trained in collaborative learning techniques (Pereira, 2013a). The UniPASS peer educators are not dissimilar to final year students who are also sessional tutors. The main distinction with tutors is that the peer educators do not introduce new content, conduct any assessment, or define themselves as content experts (Australasian Centre for PASS, 2010). While the peer educators are not tutors or lecturers they are significant element of the learning environment with similar skills and experience to sessional tutors. Hence, the relevance of the UniPASS observation program to other academic staff.

Measuring success

For the UniPASS observation model to be a valid consideration, its effectiveness needs to be evidenced. The data below (Table 1) indicates the quality of instruction from peer educators, which was primarily developed by the observation program. The effectiveness of UniPASS is measured by the increase in learning that occurs, the number of students who attend, and the student experience.

Table 1: UniPASS 2013 Semester 1 results

Indicator	Benefit of peer observation	Usefulness of peer obs. feedback	Increase in grade	Reduction in fail rate	Regular attendance rate	Attendance rate
Result	96.43%	95.83%	10.54% higher	67.40% lower	9.44%	19.33%
Explanation	n=28 Peer educators who strongly agree/agree that the observations developed their skills	n=24 Peer educators who strongly agree/agree that the observation feedback from their senior colleagues was useful	n=428 Aggregate grade data comparing students who attended 5 sessions or more and students who did not attend UniPASS	n=428 Same as previous. If 30% of students failed a unit, only 9.78% of UniPASS regular attendees in that unit would have failed.	n=428 Students who attended 5 sessions or more as a percentage of total enrolled students in supported units	n=1015 Students who attended 1 session or more as a percentage of total enrolled students in supported units

Note: Our data indicates that 42% of regular attendees were at-risk students. This counters the argument that the 10.54% increase in grade is because strong students attend (Pereira, 2013b). Data is descriptive and indicative only.

These indicators are measured by three different means. Learning is measured by comparing grade data between attendees and non-attendees and the reduction in fail rate, which are gathered from the university's internal student database. Attendance is collected via an attendance register, which is completed by peer educators for every session and records the student identity number. Student experience and perceptions are captured through an online survey administered at the end of every semester. The results below indicate the success of UniPASS (Pereira, 2013b) at Curtin and would not have been achieved without the UniPASS observation program as it is the main staff development tool.

Two observation models

The UniPASS observation program uses two peer observation models in parallel (see Tables 2 and 3 below), which are both adapted from Goslings observation models, the Australasian Centre for PASS (2012), and from operational experience at Curtin university. The first model incorporates features of what Gosling (2002) defined as the Development Model, where expert senior teachers conduct evaluative observations on other teachers, while the second one is a form of the Peer Review Model, where colleagues observe each other (see Table 4).

Within UniPASS the Development Model observations are conducted by senior peer educators. These senior colleagues can be defined as peers because there is no hierarchy (i.e. no line management or supervisory relationship). These observations are formative and supportive with the purpose of encouraging reflection to aid peer educator development. Feedback is evidenced based and is in the form of detailed notes with quotes and observations, socio-grams and timings. The observed peer educator is encouraged to reflect on their own perceptions as well as the perceptions of the observer. The observed peer educator then decides what areas they would like to develop.

Table 2: Features of UniPASS Development Model observation

Characteristic	Feature
Purpose	Formative evaluation to enable development of peer educators.
Participation	Required twice a semester for new staff, once a semester for experienced staff.
Accreditation	Required by PASS National Centre.
Experience	Only experienced peer educators can observe (seniors).
Training	Senior peer educators receive six hours training in conducting observations, evidencing and giving feedback.
Moderation	Program supervisor moderates with each senior peer educator each semester.
Feedback	Half hour discussion and reflection based on observation notes.
Development goals	Peer educator decides own development goals. Senior peer educator supports and enables the achievement of goals.
Information	Program supervisor keeps and reviews observation record.

Table 3: Features of UniPASS Peer Review Model observation

Characteristic	Feature
Purpose	A non-threatening way to reflect on instructional technique; enable observational learning; create a collegial learning culture.
Participation	Required once a semester for all peer educators
Accreditation	Not required for accreditation
Experience	All peer educators can observe
Training	No training apart from an informative email with requirements
Moderation	No moderation required
Feedback	No feedback given to observed peer educator. Observer writes a short reflective summary.
Development goals	Optional
Information	Program supervisor keeps a copy of the reflective summary for administrative purposes

Table 4: Models of peer observation of teaching

Characteristic	Evaluation model	Development model	Peer review model
Who does it and to whom?	Senior staff observe other staff	Educational developers observe practitioners; or expert teachers observe others in department	Teachers observe each other
Purpose	Identify under- performance, confirm probation, appraisal, promotion, quality assurance, assessment	Demonstrate competency/improve teaching competencies; assessment	Engagement in discussion about teaching; self and mutual reflection
Outcome	Report/judgement	Report/action plan; pass/fail PGCert	Analysis, discussion, wider experience of teaching methods
Status of evidence	Authority	Expert diagnosis	Peer shared perception
Relationship of observer to observed	Power	Expertise	Equality/mutuality
Confidentiality	Between manager, observer and staff observed	Between observer and the observed, examiner	Between observer and the observed - shared within learning set
Inclusion	Selected staff	Selected/ sample	All
Judgement	Pass/fail, score, quality assessment, worthy/unworthy	How to improve; pass/fail	Non-judgemental, constructive feedback
What is observed?	Teaching performance	Teaching performance, class, learning materials,	Teaching performance, class, learning materials
Who benefits?	Institution	The observed	Mutual between peers
Conditions for success	Embedded management processes	Effective central unit	Teaching is valued, discussed
Risks	Alienation, lack of co-operation, opposition	No shared ownership, lack of impact	Complacency, conservatism, unfocused

UniPASS also employs a form of Peer Review Model observation (Gosling, 2002). The form used is free of any evaluation, which is intended to provide a non-threatening environment for reflecting on instructional technique, and to make observations more collegial. These peer review observations require the peer educators to observe but not to evaluate each other; instead, the observation process is a vehicle for the observer to reflect on their own instructional technique. The observer writes a reflective summary describing what they learnt about their own style through the observation of a peer, which they can choose to discuss with a colleague.

The considered omission of peer evaluation is a key difference between the UniPASS Peer Review Model and other models described in the literature (Bell & Cooper, 2011; Bell & Mladenovic, 2007; McMahon et al., 2007). Omitting the evaluative aspect of peer review provides logistical and developmental benefits. Removing the evaluation reduces the need for training staff in the difficult skill of giving evaluative feedback to a colleague. Such training needs to be expert and could be resource and time intensive (Bell & Cooper, 2011), both scarce commodities in the current higher education environment. The potential interpersonal difficulties or issues that could arise from giving feedback to a colleague are also negated with the UniPASS model. Replacing the peer evaluation component of Goslings Peer Review Model (2002) with a non-evaluative reflective summary could be an adaption that is compatible with academic culture. Future research into the use of a reflective summary instead of peer evaluation may prove useful in determining the nature of any possible benefits.

Other considerations from the literature

Gosling's three models

Gosling's three models of peer observation (2002, p.5) provide useful framework for considering the structure of an observation program. This model highlights the impact hierarchy has on the observation process and infers that managerial involvement could lead to performance management. However, managerial involvement may be required if teaching performance is to be linked to promotion.

Reframing the concept

Peer review is not a new concept within academia; in fact it is a core practice. Bell and Cooper (2011) see peer review of teaching as an extension of peer review of research, which is commonplace within higher education. Like peer review of research, peer review of teaching provides feedback from colleagues which can be used to improve instructional skills. Reframing peer review of teaching could reduce anxiety around observations to some degree.

The power of information

McMahon et al (2007) argues that in addition to who actually conducts the observation be that; manager, external expert, or peer - consideration needs to be given to who has control over the information generated, namely feedback and evaluation. McMahon et al. (2007) recommend that the person observed needs to have total control over the information from the observation – the relationship needs to be one of equals. Bell and Cooper (2011) indirectly attest to this with their peer observation framework, which requires any coordinator of the observation program to be outside of the department and not able to influence career progression or conduct performance management. This structure clearly recognises the power of information and the need for it to be separated from management. This equalising of power relationships is essential to create a fear free culture where “teachers actively seek the help of colleagues in improving the learning experience of students” (McMahon et al. 2007, p.511). Considering who controls the information from an observation is clearly significant when establishing a suitable structure for any peer review of teaching program.

An Australian framework

Bell and Cooper (2011) discuss and offer a university peer observation framework that could be readily implemented. It reiterates many of the features found in Gosling (2002), McMahon (2007) and the UniPASS model. Peer observation also facilitates strong collegial cultures within departments (Bell & Cooper, 2011). The main components of Bell and Cooper's (2011) framework are:

1. Educational leadership by the head of school (especially in being the first to be observed)
2. Voluntary, opt-in/opt-out process at any stage
3. Forming groups of new and experienced academics as equal partners
4. The observation program coordinator is external to faculty to ensure no link to performance management

The implementation of this framework involves preparatory training and workshops to communicate the purpose and processes but also to teach staff crucial skills in giving evaluative feedback to colleagues (Bell & Cooper, 2011). The idea of senior academics, specifically the head of school, leading by example and being the first to be observed can build trust and goodwill amongst staff. Voluntary participation ensures that participants can “work at their own level of comfort and workload” (Bell & Cooper, 2011, p.62). The framework attempts to instil a sense of equal status of peers between junior and senior academics so that collegiality will enable honest and safe dialogue. It is suggested that sizeable peer observation programs may require a coordinator, and such a role needs to be external to the department and have no capacity to influence career or report to management. The UniPASS peer observation program employs most of Bell and Cooper's recommendations. Senior

staff lead by example as they are observed via the peer review component of the program. The roles and relationship boundaries are defined in the position description and monitored by the supervisor to ensure collegiality. The observation program within UniPASS is formative and not linked to performance evaluation. Bell and Cooper's framework provides demonstrated structural considerations that relate to the Australian higher education context.

Conclusion

The challenges of the changing tertiary environment make it more important to support teaching staff in developing their instructional skills to improve student learning. Although student results and student surveys are used to give feedback to tutors and lecturers, these metrics do not provide adequate feedback to develop teaching skills. However, the effectiveness of peer observations to develop teaching skills is well reported in the literature and this strategy is underutilised in Australian universities. Two significant obstacles in implementing peer observation programs are that academic staff may not readily identify as teachers, and secondly, that observation data could be used for performance management. One method of overcoming these problems includes designing a suitable peer observation structure to suit the specific school or subject context. The observation model from Curtin University's peer-learning program is offered as an adaptable format that is successfully operating in a tertiary context. One of the main distinctions it offers is the replacement of peer-evaluation, common to the peer observation models found in the literature, with a reflective summary. Further adaptations can be made by considering: Gosling's (2002) Peer Observation Models with its different conceptions of peer; McMahon et al.'s (2007) notion of observation data as power, which he suggests is most appropriately controlled by the observed; and Bell & Cooper's (2011) framework which emphasises the importance of senior academics leading by example, and voluntary participation in observations.

Considering the dynamic environment that higher education in Australia is facing, a focus on teaching quality is especially relevant. Building a supportive, developmental and collegial academic teaching culture through a suitable peer observation program is an effective way to enhance teaching quality.

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