

Peer review of teaching in higher education: a literature review

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A total of 28 articles and sections of two electronic books were reviewed. The terms 'peer observation' and 'peer review of teaching' (PRoT) were often used interchangeably in the literature. However, Hendry, Bell, and Thomson (2014) argue that 'peer observation' is different from peer review as it may not involve judging a colleague's teaching or require any feedback. Instead, peer observation is a one-way process where the observer benefits from the observation through self-reflection. Peer review of teaching, on the other hand, is collaborative and may involve a variety of approaches depending on the aim of the PRoT programme.

The practice and acceptance of PRoT varies from a well-established and supported process in North American HE institutions, to a growing level of support in the UK, and a varied, inconsistent programme in Australia.

Different purposes of peer review of teaching (PRoT)

The main purpose of peer review of teaching (PRoT), according to Lomas and Nicholls (2005) is to facilitate self-improvement and good teaching practice with the aim of enhancing student learning. The aims of a PRoT programme may also include establishing a culture of collegiality around teaching approaches, encouraging reflective teaching practice, and providing specific development advice or feedback (Drew et al., 2017). In some cases, peer review of teaching is used alongside student evaluations to guide effective teaching practices and student learning (Farrell, 2011; Lomas & Nicholls, 2005).

Gosling (2002) describes three models of peer review of teaching based on their specific purpose and outcomes:

1. Evaluative model – senior staff observe teaching staff
2. Developmental model – educational developers or ‘expert’ teachers observe teaching staff
3. Collaborative – teaching staff observe each other.

The *evaluative model* is used for assessment, appraisal, promotion, etc. For example, in their book, Klopper and Drew (2015) describe a very regulated evaluative model involving two expert observers (a discipline/topic expert and a teaching expert) who observe a teacher, gather feedback from the students, and then provide a formal evaluation report.

The *developmental model* involves educational experts who assess academics’ teaching and make recommendations for further development in teaching. The evaluative and developmental models involve power differentials between the observer and observed which Gosling (2002) contends, will undermine the learning process.

The *collaborative peer review model* is considered the most effective if the aim is to improve teaching quality and encourage self-development. Collaborative peer review has a collegial intent and clear purpose (improve teaching through dialogue and reflection, and stimulate improvement) and outcomes (analysis, reflection, improvement of teaching/learning, shared knowledge). The feedback (or data produced) remains the property of the participants. McMahon, Barrett, and O’Neill (2007) argue that only Gosling’s collaborative model of peer review of teaching can truly be called a ‘peer’ approach, because the evaluative and developmental models involve third-party observations.

If the aim of PRoT is to enhance teaching and allow for personal development, then according to Gosling (2002), it must not be linked to the appraisal system, used to determine promotion, or determine performance-related pay. For example, M. Bell and Cooper (2013) believe a PRoT programme introduced in an engineering school

in an Australian university was successful because no formal assessments of teaching were used. Instead the purpose of the PProT programme was to develop the quality of teaching, share skills, build collegiality (and trust), and develop shared goals and objectives rather than having these imposed upon the department (M. Bell & Cooper, 2013).

PProT approaches

The most common approach is paired peer review, but some models include groups of three or four participants. A common structure is a three-step process involving a pre-observation meeting, observation, and post-observation meeting (Murphy Tighe & Bradshaw, 2013). Some include a meeting with students when the observation takes place. Farrell (2011) outline a four-step approach used at the University of Melbourne: 1. Plan observation time and discuss pre-observation details, 2. Review/observe teaching, 3. Meet post-observation and provide verbal and written feedback, 4. Respond to feedback in written form. Below are some of the approaches used at higher education institutions. Not all the approaches can be considered a *peer* review of teaching because the observer was often a teaching expert and not a true peer of the teacher being observed. The approaches presented below follow a gradient from more voluntary and collaborative to more regimented and evaluative.

Byrne, Brown and Challen's (2010) describe the concept of voluntary peer development as one approach to PProT. They propose the use of groups of peers who share ideas and focus on a shared development goal. The process may include staff observing each other's teaching, attending workshops, participating in shared teaching, and sharing resources/knowledge. The groups exercised autonomy and decided on what aspect of teaching they wished to develop. Teaching encompassed all aspects including supervision, online teaching, developing course materials, and providing tutorial support.

The 'Teaching Squares' model by Grooters (2008) at Stonehill College in the USA has a similar focus to Byrne et al. (2010). It consists of a "non-evaluative process of reciprocal classroom observation and self-reflection" based on four participants (Grooters, 2008, p. 3). The 'Teaching Squares' approach aims to spur personal self-reflection rather than peer evaluation. Participants self-reflect on their own practice based on their observations of others. It does not involve assessing a colleague, but rather learning from observations for one's own practice and development (i.e. no direct feedback is given). The participants engage in a dialogue based on their reflections after observing their colleagues.

M. Bell and Cooper (2013) assess a PRoT programme introduced in an Australian university. The programme involved a preparatory workshop for staff on observation and feedback skills; trial observations of HoD and discipline leaders' classes; observation of peers (in groups), followed by feedback; and staff evaluation of the PRoT programme. The authors argue that the success of the program was dependent on four critical elements: (1) educational leadership; (2) a staged, voluntary, opt-in/out-out process involving a hands-on preparatory workshop and trial observation of HoD/leaders; (3) partnering early-career and experienced academic staff; and (4) an 'external to faculty' coordinator. The coordinator was knowledgeable in teaching and peer review, and helped coordinate the partnerships and facilitate the feedback sessions.

Curtin Learning Institute (2014) at Curtin University has four types of observations that make up their three-phased model of peer review of teaching. Phase 1, Step 1 focuses on developmental peer review of teaching where staff are observed by trained reviewers who provide formative feedback. Phase 2, Step 2 is collaborative peer review of teaching which is conducted in pairs of colleagues who provide feedback to each other. Phase 2, Step 3 includes open-door classrooms where experienced teachers invite colleagues to observe nominated lessons, followed by informal discussions. Phase 3, Step 4 is an evaluative peer review of teaching

encompassing observations by trained reviewers who provide summative feedback. This approach covers both professional development and quality assurance, including evidence for rewards/promotion.

Likewise, Fernandez and Yu (2007) from the Southern California University of Health Sciences operate a very prescribed, regimented process of peer review of teaching. Their approach entails six steps:

1. Review course materials
2. Pre-observation consultation
3. Teaching observation
4. Post-observation consultation
5. Written evaluation
6. Monitoring of the review process

Steps 1 and 6 differ from most other peer review processes (although some PRoT programmes encourage a review of course materials and other elements of teaching). Step 6 involves an 'exit survey' where the observed teacher provides feedback to the department head regarding the review process. Chism (2007) also suggests that staff evaluation of the programme should be encouraged after the initial round of PRoT. This will allow staff to express their views regarding the process and allow management to make necessary changes if required.

The benefits of a PRoT programme

The benefits of a PRoT programme are: the development of a culture of staff collaboration or collegiality, increased self-reflection for development purposes (Martin & Double, 1998; Murphy Tighe & Bradshaw, 2013; White, Boehm, & Chester, 2014), teaching enhancement is overseen by colleagues and not externals, and peer feedback can supplement student evaluations (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005). A. Bell and Mladenovic (2015) state the following benefits:

improvements to teaching practice, enhanced commitment to teaching,
development of confidence, application of theory to practice, increased awareness

of student learning experiences, affirmation of good teaching practice, improved skills in giving and receiving feedback, transformation of educational perspectives, development of collegiality, reflection on teaching, an alternative perspective to student feedback, accumulation of evidence for promotion, and modelling peer and self-assessment for students. (p. 25)

Regarding staff development, the reviewer (or observer) also benefits from the review process (Torres, Lopes, Valente, & Mouraz, 2017). In her article, Cosh (1998) focuses specifically on the benefits gained by the observer, who through observing others teacher, is able to self-reflect on their own teaching. By observing others, academics are made aware of different teaching approaches, are encouraged to question their own knowledge, and reassess their own teaching approach. This leads to active self-development, according to Cosh (1998).

Challenges to implementing a PRoT programme

The foremost challenge reported was staff anxiety. Academics often felt anxious about having their teaching peer reviewed (Farrell, 2011; Fernandez & Yu, 2007; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Lomas & Nicholls, 2005; McMahon et al., 2007; Murphy Tighe & Bradshaw, 2013; White et al., 2014). Although, Farrell (2011) notes that this anxiety is generally contained to the initial experience, and that the event is usually viewed as positive and productive (if conducted in a supportive/non-judgemental environment).

Other challenges mentioned are a lack of evaluation resources, overburdened faculty, time constraints (timetabling restrictions), teacher pessimism, lack of peer review training, observer subjectivity, and lack of a reward system for teaching achievement (Chism, 2007; Fernandez & Yu, 2007). Lomas and Nicholls (2005, p. 140) add that:

- peer review of teaching can be seen as challenging academic freedom;

- perceptions of the representativeness, accuracy and generalisability of what is reviewed;
- concerns about the objectivity of those who review;
- academics' values relating to the institution's rewards and incentives: incentives are perceived as far greater for research than teaching; and
- staff regard peer review of teaching as yet another time-consuming management initiative

A. Bell and Mladenovic (2015) add that academics believe that the process benefits only the individuals involved. However, this issue can be addressed by encouraging staff to record and then share their feedback or experiences at departmental seminars, workshops, and through informal collegial dialogue (Cosh, 1998).

To overcome some of the challenges, Chism (2007) suggests that management articulate clear goals and procedures, and address the emotional and practical concerns of staff, and that staff be allowed to choose their own peer review partner(s). The choice of one's own peer observer affected how teachers approached the observation process. If there was trust between the participating colleagues, then the participant being observed often felt more inclined to teach a challenging lesson in order to gain insightful feedback from their peer (McMahon et al., 2007).

It is also important to embed a culture that values and openly discusses teaching (Gosling, 2002). Murphy Tighe and Bradshaw (2013) believe that if PRoT is conducted in a supportive and respectful manner, then the process can affect change by fostering a culture of reflection and personal development. In turn, this can have a positive impact on staff morale. A teaching culture based on PRoT can be instilled if time is allocated for professional development, and leadership support is clearly demonstrated (Wingrove, Hammersley-Fletcher, Clarke, & Chester, 2017)

Conclusion

If done correctly, peer review of teaching is viewed as safe and supportive; leading to professional learning and improvement. If done incorrectly, it can become a management tool to control and assess teaching practice (Sachs & Parsell, 2014).

“The purpose of peer review of teaching should be to provide effective feedback to continually improve teaching in a collegial manner and thus ultimately enhance student learning” (Klopper & Drew, 2015, p. 239). If the aim is teaching development, then staff should have control over the choice of their observer, the focus of the observation, the form and method of feedback, and the use of resultant data (McMahon et al., 2007). Specifically, feedback should be constructed as a collaborative dialogue between peers, which is not based on judgement or evaluation (Sachs & Parsell, 2014). Other important elements include strong academic leadership and participation; voluntary opt-in/opt-out process; clear goals, definitions, and procedures; adequate resources (including time and training); and a culture that values teaching. Murphy Tighe and Bradshaw (2013) add that compulsory PRoT programmes will meet resistance by staff who view compulsory programmes with apathy and cynicism.

A final consideration concerns who of the teaching staff will be included in the PRoT programme. For example, tutors also benefitted from participating in a PRoT programme (A. Bell & Mladenovic, 2015), and thus highlight an important point about who will be included in a peer review of teaching programme.

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