

Guidebook for Individuals Embarking on Peer Review of Teaching

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Introduction to peer review of teaching

What is peer review of teaching? Peer review of teaching occurs whenever one (or more) peer(s) observes, examines, discusses, analyses, dissects, or just talks about the teaching practices of a colleague, with that colleagues express consent and blessing.

Peer review can be conducted to rate a colleague's performance against standards or criteria, but here at UQ peer review is a way of getting and giving structured feedback to each other in order to improve teaching practices. The name 'peer review' sometimes sounds too much like an assessment of performance, so in some departments and faculties peer review is called 'peer development'. Peer review can be done in pairs, or in small teams. Either way there are important things to keep in mind about how peer review ought to be conducted. Some of these are discussed below.

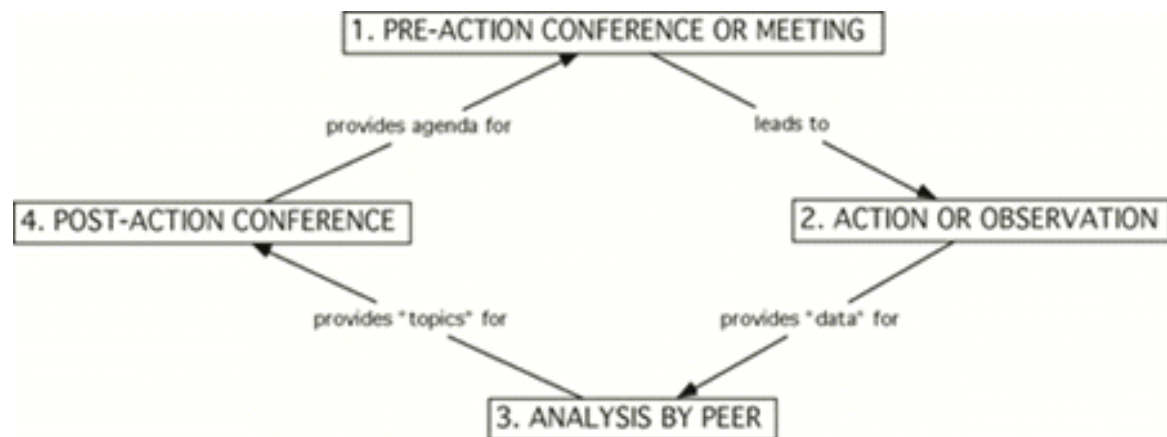
Relationship matters

What makes a peer review relationship different from other relationships? Several things distinguish the peer review relationship from others. Most importantly, the peer review relationship is structured. By that I mean that meetings between peers to discuss the teaching of one or more of the group don't occur on a haphazard timetable, and what goes on in them is not driven by the norms of informal interaction. Meetings of peer pairs or teams occur

according to an agreed timeframe, with specific goals (an agenda, if you like) and outcomes that are agreed on in advance by the parties involved.

It is important that the questions "What shall be reviewed?" and "How shall it be reviewed?" be answered in advance of any peer review process (such as observation) by negotiation between reviewer and reviewee. In conceiving peer review as clinical supervision (Goldhammer 1969), Weeks and Scott (1992) and Smyth (1984) recommend that reviewer and reviewee 'conference' together before a teaching episode and again after. They propose the following four-stage model.

Figure 1: Clinical Supervision Cycle



Now there is an obvious emphasis or assumption in this model that the thing reviewed is a teaching 'episode' and so the 'observation' involves attendance at a lecture or similar teaching situation. Nevertheless, it is evident that this model can be applied for any material or performance for which review is being proposed.

In the first stage of this process the reviewer and reviewee agree on the substance, goals and processes of the review episode being proposed. Other authors (Gottesman and Jennings 1994) have argued for the existence of a fifth phase in the process, one dedicated to the review of the process itself. This can be a very useful adjunct procedure in which reviewer and reviewee meet to discuss, analyse and negotiate the process itself, paying attention to communication protocols or standards, the adequacy or fit of this model, satisfaction of the parties with working together, the need for third party intervention and the like.

There are some finer points made in certain texts about conferencing. For instance, where it is the teaching episode that is being reviewed (observed), it is probably better practice, in the post-observation conference, to let the reviewee offer their own self-evaluation first, before the reviewer proceeds in giving feedback (Gibbs et al. 1989:104; Ramsden and Dodds 1989:40).

In other models students are interviewed by reviewers, after observations of teaching episodes, and questionnaires are developed on the basis of the observations and student interviews. Reports of the results obtained by these procedures are then co-written with reviewees for presentation at teaching colloquia (Mathias and Rutherford 1982). This kind of integration provides a model for the comprehensive use of peer evaluation data and process that benefits reviewee, reviewer and department alike. In such cases the process is linked to teaching scholarship.

Troubleshooting relationship problems

Since the conduct of the peer relationship is central to the success of peer review, you should agree in advance on exactly what aspects of teaching are to be reviewed by a peer, what you want them to observe and comment on (and, if you want them to rate your performance against criteria or standards, exactly what those criteria and standards are going to be), and what you expect to be the outcomes of the review. You should agree that the process is confidential. You make sure that your department has a grievance policy or at least that there is someone to whom you can go to help sort out any grievances.

Deciding what to review

This is really down to each individual. It is not recommended that every semester or every year you have a peer or peer team look at every possible aspect of your teaching practice. This would be too onerous for your peers and would probably not result in worthwhile outcomes since if every aspect of your teaching was in need of improvement you would probably not have the resources to respond appropriately to the review outcomes anyway.

Some guidance can be obtained by looking on the web at:

- <http://www.uq.edu.au/hupp/contents/view.asp?s1=3&s2=10&s3=1>, which gives an account of the essential components of university teaching,

In 1998 a guidebook containing suggestions for peer review that follow these criteria was written and a copy should be available from your faculty office or through your department. The details of that guidebook are: Smith, C. D. (1998). *Peer review of Teaching at UQ: Proposed Framework for Implementation*. Brisbane, University of Queensland.

One can easily produce a list of the things that might be considered or examined by peers. The list would include, but is not limited to, the following:

- Course outlines
- Course materials
- Current curriculum and curriculum development documents
- Course syllabi
- Teaching performance
- Consultation performance
- Supervision performance
- Scholarship on teaching
- Statements of teaching philosophy
- Assessment programs
- Marking schemes

There may be a wide variety of reasons for you wanting to have a peer look at some aspect of your teaching. You might have had a TEVAL result that you want to improve. Students may have made some comments about the way lab sessions were run. You may have been dissatisfied for a while with your course outline.

It does not really matter what you decide to review so long as you approach the task systematically and use the opportunity to critically reflect on your practices, so that they may be improved where necessary.

Reflective practice - why it is important and why it is more than navel-gazing

It is considered good practice in all professions that practitioners reflect on their practice, upgrade their skills, and continue to develop themselves in their professional capacities. But engaging in reflection is not merely a matter of lying around on a lazy afternoon reminiscing about the week just gone. It involves a concerted effort to gather data about our performances from as wide a variety of sources as is possible, and then acting on that information, and then gathering more data to reflect upon those actions. This is a cyclic process, and it is never-ending.

Planning for intervention

Since a peer (or peer team) can review any aspect of teaching practice, it is a good idea to make a plan for what you want to have reviewed. The scope of the plan should go well beyond the present review occasion; it should cover several months (up to two years) of teaching and reflecting. In this way a comprehensive strategy can evolve that covers a great deal or even all of the aspects of teaching practice in which you engage. Your plan should detail what is going to be reviewed, when, and if changes are needed when it would be reviewed again to assess the impact of those changes. In this way your plan assumes that you will be engaged in some or other intervention. An intervention is just a conscious, pre-planned change in the way your approach some aspect of teaching.

Evaluating an intervention

Interventions can be justified because you have had some less-than-satisfactory feedback about some aspect of your teaching from students or from a peer. But interventions can also be innovations of your own creation that are justified because you believe, for whatever reason, that things would be better done a different way. Interventions should always be evaluated; you never know whether they have "worked" unless you gather some evidence about them.

Data collection and publication - making teaching a research exercise

In this manner, reviewing (evaluating) teaching (gathering data about teaching), planning to change teaching practices (on the basis of the data or innovative ideas you have), and evaluating teaching (gathering data to start or complete the cycle), is a process of ongoing research into your own teaching. This kind of research can lead to publication. For a list of publications in your discipline that deal with teaching in that discipline, visit this webpage: <http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/teaching/toolbox/journals.html>

Planning for promotion and tenure

Of course the other reason why peer review of teaching is important is that it can provide you with the opportunity to develop a relationship with a peer who can subsequently be your teaching referee for the purposes of promotion or tenure. Your peer reviewer is obviously in a good position to comment authoritatively upon your teaching practices, including the degree to which you take reflection and improvement seriously.

Other results of peer review of teaching

Peer review of teaching ought to result in a variety of material products. These can be of intrinsic value to you as a practitioner (e.g. a reflective journal) but they can also be manifestly useful to others (e.g. seminars reporting innovations and evaluations of innovations in teaching) and to yourself (e.g. teaching portfolio materials).

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