

Peer Review of Teaching for Decision Making

Geoffrey Thomas Crisp

RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

We have introduced a whole of university approach to the peer review of teaching for internal teaching awards and for academic promotion. This paper will examine the issues that must be considered when implementing a high stakes process for peer review of teaching where the peer review reports are used for decision making purposes. We will also discuss why we chose to separate peer review of teaching for self-improvement from peer review of teaching for decision making.

Introduction

What is rewarded in promotion in universities influences how academics will allocate their limited time to the different parts of their academic workload. If research is privileged over teaching and service in academic promotion, then academics will see that their time is more profitably spent on publishing peer reviewed papers and applying for peer reviewed grants. Recent work has shown that academic can be being promoted on the basis of effective teaching when universities have good processes in place to evidence the effectiveness of the teaching process and related student outcomes (HEA, 2013).

Peer review is a commonly accepted quality assurance process for research output; but it has not been systematically applied in a similar way to measuring the quality of teaching in universities. Although formative peer feedback for individual development and practice improvement has become more widespread and acceptable in universities (Bell, 2012), the use of peer review of teaching for summative or decision making purposes has met resistance from many academics (Iqbal, 2013).

The use of student feedback in academic promotion applications is widespread but there are still contested issues with the use of this data for high stakes decision making as students' responses to the typical survey are dependent on a number of factors, some of which are beyond the control of the individual academic seeking promotion (Alderman, Towers & Bannah, 2012). Nevertheless, student feedback will continue to be used for high stakes decision making as students have a key part to play in measuring the impact of an academic's teaching. However, there are important areas of academic practice, namely curriculum design, currency of course content and examples, and the breadth and depth of assessment tasks where academic peers are able to provide more informed feedback (Iqbal, 2013).

This paper examines the introduction of a whole of university approach to peer feedback of teaching for internal teaching awards and academic promotion.

Method

We have used the outputs from an Office for Learning and Teaching project (OLT, 2006) to construct a whole of university process for the implementation of summative peer review of teaching (RMIT 2013). The implementation process involved an initial round of stakeholder

consultations across the institution in responses to mixed reactions from academics to the initial proposal.

The University had already introduced a formative process of peer feedback of teaching called peer partnerships and this had proved to be successful and engaging for many of our teaching staff (Chester, Clarke, Wingrove & Denny, 2013). The process was voluntary with individual teachers choosing their peer partner and, through mutual discussions, deciding which areas of their practice they would like to have feedback on from the reviewer. The peer partnership reports were not formally part of the selection process for teaching awards or the academic promotion process.

When stakeholder discussions took place in preparation for the introduction of peer review of teaching for decision making processes there were questions asked about the role of peer partnerships and this new proposed activity. The decision was made to have two separate and distinct activities and specific nomenclature was used to distinguish between them. The generic term peer feedback was used to encompass any form of feedback from academic peers and to align with the term student feedback that was used in our institution for our regular student surveys. We have also chosen not to use the term evaluation with respect to student feedback as evaluation implies a set of commonly understood criteria where the evaluators are trained or qualified to undertake the evaluation.

Having established the generic term peer feedback, we then used peer partnerships to refer to formative peer feedback that was used for any form of self-improvement or professional development activity and to use peer review to specifically refer to peer feedback that was to be used for summative or decision making purposes.

The documents derived from the previous OLT project (OLT, 2006) were used as the basis for a series of workshops in which key learning and teaching staff from both the central support group and the schools and colleges made suggested modifications so that the documents would be more aligned to the language and processes used within our institution. The final peer review template for the observation component of peer review is shown in Attachment 1. The document is framed around nine core dimensions of teaching; these are relatively standard and would be found in many lists of effective teaching practices. We did not want a simple numerical scale to be the output from the peer review as this would not be an appropriate measure of teaching effectiveness and it is subject to significant personal interpretation by the reviewer. We also wanted to highlight that effective teaching is a nuanced activity and not based on quantity of examples or activity but a combination of specific activities and their contextual effectiveness. The format of the reviewer report (Attachment 1) shows that reviewers record whether they have observed examples of activities related to each dimension and then whether the examples appeared to be effective for student learning. The reviewer then documents some specific examples to justify their selection.

The appointment of peer reviewers was the next task that needed to be organised. Since academic promotion is a high stakes activity and involves senior academics within the institution the selection process for peer reviewers was seen as an important part of the quality assurance of the overall process. The decision was made that staff could not self-select to be peer reviewers; they were nominated by senior college or central staff on the basis of their evidence of scholarship in learning and teaching, publications and grants in learning and teaching, the receipt of teaching awards or fellowships or they held positional responsibility

for learning and teaching within schools, such as Deputy Heads Learning and Teaching. The act of being nominated as a peer reviewer of teaching was seen as a measure of esteem within the institution and we maintain a public list of the approved peer reviewers to show transparency in the selection process.

Nominated peer reviewers then attend a workshop where a series of videos of different teaching situations is viewed and the peer review report templates are filled in individually. Then responses from the different reviewers are compared and table discussions take place until broad consensus is reached about what was observed during the teaching session and what evidence this provided against the dimensions of teaching in the review template. A minimum of two videos and often three are required before broad consensus is reached.

Peer reviewers are then approved by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) and are available for peer reviews. Staff remain on the register as long as they complete at least 2 peer reviews annually and attend an update session once every two years. We have provision for peer reviewers to be removed from the register if their reviews continually differ significantly from their peers over a period of time.

Individuals cannot choose their peer reviewers although they do have the right to request that any individual on the approved list is not assigned as their reviewer. This was seen as an important part of the process as decision making committees who will use the peer review reports need to be assured that the reviewers are able to deliver independent reports of their observations against the criteria. Two peer reviewers are assigned for each peer review, one reviewer is allocated as the "learning and teaching expert" and the other is from the "broad discipline area" of the reviewee, but not from the same school. The reviewee liaises with the two reviewers to determine which session will be observed – the reviewee has complete choice about the session to be reviewed. Only one session has to be observed unless there is an unforeseen disruption to the teaching session in which case a new session is reviewed. We have provision in the protocols that if the two reviewers differ markedly in their reports then another session will be organised with new peer reviewers. We have not had to enact this provision but it is important for the reviewee to know that we expect general agreement between the two reviewers so that their reports are able to inform decision making.

The peer review of teaching process was introduced on a trial basis in 2013 for internal teaching awards and is mandatory for individual teaching award applications from 2014. Staff applying for academic promotion in 2014 may use the peer review process but it will be mandatory in 2016 for all promotion applications aside from research only staff. Peer review reports are current for two years and the same review report may be used for teaching awards and academic promotion. Details for our process and the various templates may be found at RMIT (2014).

Findings

The selection of the peer reviewers and the training process for both reviewers and reviewees proved critical to the acceptance of the overall process. The workshops for the peer reviewers typically lasts two to three hours and to date we have found that the majority of peer reviewers agree within our margin of tolerance after completing at least two practice reviews using the videos. Our margin of tolerance is that peer reviewers should be no more than one box different when judging the examples and their effectiveness for each dimension of teaching outlined in Attachment 1. We do not expect every peer reviewer to agree exactly since each reviewer sees the teaching activity through their own lens. However, through the

workshop process reviewers come to understand that they are not applying a personal judgement about whether this is an appropriate way to teach. They are making a judgement as to the evidence they observed during a particular teaching session and whether this (or these) example(s) appeared to be effective from the students' perspective. The peer reviewers are advised that they are not to give formative feedback for the session observed as this would undermine the purpose of summative peer review for decision making. Peer reviewers also do not comment about whether a reviewee should receive a teaching award or be promoted. The reviewer is providing independent evidence that they observed a teacher do particular things and stating whether these were effective in the circumstances for student learning.

The definition of effective teaching has been discussed widely as part of the implementation process for peer review at our university. We have recommended that for the purposes of the peer review of teaching, effective teaching means that students were actively engaged in a process that enhanced their learning. The peer reviewer is asked to avoid making a subjective judgement about whether they thought the teaching examples were effective, but rather we ask the reviewer to watch the students during the observed session and make a judgement about whether it appeared that the students found it effective in the context of the session.

We have found that three contact meetings between reviewee and the assigned reviewers are required. There is a short preliminary meeting in which the reviewee goes through the dimensions of teaching (Attachment 1) and highlights if the particular session to be observed will only incorporate some of the dimensions. To date only dimension 6 (Actively uses links between research or industry and teaching) has been highlighted by some reviewees as sometimes not being relevant for a particular session being reviewed. There is no implied hierarchy in the dimensions and reviewees usually provide more examples for some dimensions compared to others, depending on the discipline and year level of the session. This initial meeting usually only requires thirty minutes and reviewees are recommended to not give reviewers large amounts of pre-reading to do in relation to the course or session to be observed. The main issues we recommend reviewees address are the diversity within their class in terms of students and whether the session will introduce significant new concepts or is reinforcing previous concepts. The second session is the actual review and the third session is again of short duration and is an opportunity for the reviewee to state whether there were any circumstances that disrupted their session and prevented them from undertaking their planned activities. This third meeting is often not required, or completed by email, as it is usually obvious to the reviewers if there has been a major disruption to the teaching session. We do not allow reviewees to request a second review session on the grounds that they could have done a better performance; only unforeseen disruptions trigger a second review.

Discussion

There was initial discussion at our university about using the peer partnership reports for teaching awards and academic promotion applications. This was seen as a way of managing the workload of peer reviewers and also using the reports more efficiently for teaching improvements and promotion applications. This approach has been used by many universities that have introduced peer review process. However, we thought that a single process with two quite different purposes would lead to confusion for all stakeholders, including the decision making panels. Our academic promotion panels have been concerned in the past with the use of peer review reports because they were conducted under voluntary conditions where reviewees are able to choose their own reviewers and where the reviewer was making personal judgements about how the reviewee could improve their teaching. The act of seeking

a peer review was often seen as a commitment to good teaching and used as evidence in promotion applications. We thought again that this was not an appropriate form of evidence of impact of teaching, but rather one of intent to have an impact. Our current process makes very explicit the purpose of the peer review and the conditions under which the evidence is collected. The promotion panel can have confidence that the reviewer is an independent observer and is not making subjective judgements but observations against specific criteria.

We have found that having two peer review reports, one from a "learning and teaching expert" and one from a "discipline expert" is important to the award selection and promotion panels. There was initial concern from academics that peer reviewers who did not have specific discipline knowledge would not be able to make a valid judgement about their teaching. This has not proven to be the case in practice and our peer reviewers have expressed confidence in being able to judge the effectiveness of the teaching in the observed session when using the dimensions specified in the template. The reviewers have all indicated that the training session using the videos is a crucial component of the process as it allows them to align their approach to the peer review with the observation of evidence against the dimensions. We choose peer reviewers who are familiar with the teaching approach being used by the reviewee. For example, we have studio teaching approaches in some disciplines, so we select peer reviewers who are familiar with this mode of teaching. Likewise, we have some staff who teach predominantly online and we appoint peer reviewers who are experienced with online teaching. We have found the alignment of reviewer and reviewee in terms of the teaching methodology is more important than the alignment of discipline area.

We have also found it very beneficial to bring the peer reviewers together for an annual refresher and debrief session. Those staff who have completed a number of reviews are able to provide important insights for their colleagues who are new to peer review of teaching. One of the interesting observations made by peer reviewers is that taking part in this activity has improved their own teaching. Being a peer reviewer is a form of professional development in its own right as the peer reviewer is engaging with the dimensions of teaching and observing how effective particular approaches to teaching are in enacting these dimensions. The peer reviewers have commented that they have adapted some of the approaches of the reviewee in their own teaching. So although we have stated that peer review was for decision making purposes and not for professional development a consequential outcome of the process is an improvement in teaching practice.

One area of peer review we have not yet implemented is the review of curriculum documentation. In the original OLT project (OLT, 2006) the team investigated two components for the peer review of teaching, one being the peer observation component that we have implemented and discussed above and the other was the external peer review of curriculum documentation. An academic's teaching workload has a significant component allocated to curriculum design, benchmarking of learning resources with current discipline expectations and the setting of appropriate assessment tasks. Many promotion applications include evidence of impact at the curriculum level in addition to quality classroom delivery practices. We are working further on adapting the OLT project documentation on evidencing quality curriculum design and assessment tasks to further complement our use of peer review of classroom practices. The peer review of curriculum documents can be done internally by specialist reviewers or can be undertaken as an external benchmarking exercise with partner institutions. It is this latter approach that we are investigating at present.

Practical implications

Universities are required to evidence their quality assurance practices through a variety of national auditing or review mechanisms and the means by which we promote our academic staff is a key measure of our internal quality assurance processes. The means by which universities measure the research component of an academic promotion application have been generally stable and grounded in the accepted use of common metrics, namely peer reviewed scholarly output in highly ranked journals and peer reviewed external competitive grants. One area subject to ongoing discussion for research output is in the area of creative outputs for disciplines such as music, art, architecture etc.

Common metrics for describing the impact of teaching in promotion applications have been less universally accepted, except for the use of student feedback. By using a rigorous process for the collection of independent evidence of the effectiveness of teaching, the peer review of teaching approach described in this paper has provided a useful means of giving promotion panels independent verification of the quality of an applicant's teaching. This evidence is only one component within the promotion application but it does allow a decision making panel to triangulate evidence provided by the applicant with that provided by independent colleagues and complements the data provided by student feedback.

References

Alderman, L., Towers, S. & Bannah, S. (2012). Student feedback systems in higher education: a focused literature review and environmental scan. *Quality in Higher Education*, 18, (3), 261-280. doi:10.1080/13538322.2012.730714

Bell, M. (2012). *Peer Observation Partnerships in Higher Education*. 2 Edn, Higher Educational Research and Development Society of Australasia, Milperra.

Chester, A., Clarke, A., Wingrove, D. & Denny, B. (2013), *Talking about teaching: empowering staff through peer partnerships*, in Andrea Nolan (ed.) Proceedings of the 10th Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education conference, Glasgow, United Kingdom, 11-13 June 2013, pp. 568-575.

HEA (2013). *Promoting teaching: making evidence count*. Higher Education Academy Retrieved from <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/rewardandrecog/making-evidence-count-web.pdf>

Iqbal, I. (2013). Academics' resistance to summative peer review of teaching: questionable rewards and the importance of student evaluations. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18, 557-569.

OLT (2006). *Peer Review of Teaching for Promotion Purposes: a project to develop and implement a pilot program of Peer Review of Teaching at four Australian Universities*. Retrieved from <http://www.olt.gov.au/project-develop-implement-pilot-program-unsw-2006>

RMIT (2014). Retrieved from <http://www.rmit.edu.au/teaching/peer-review>

Attachment 1. Reporting template for peer review of teaching

Peer Review Observation Session Template for Teaching Awards Applications

Dimensions of learning and teaching activity:	Quantity and quality of evidence			
<p>1. Students are actively engaged in learning</p> <p>Your examples and comments</p>	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>2. Students' prior knowledge and experience is built upon</p> <p>Your examples and comments</p>	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>3. Teaching caters for student diversity</p> <p>Your examples and comments</p>	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>4. Students are encouraged to develop/expand their conceptual understanding</p> <p>Your examples and comments</p>	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>5. Students are made aware of key learning outcomes</p> <p>Your examples and comments</p>	No evidence <input type="checkbox"/>	Some evidence <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive evidence <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>6. Actively uses links between research or industry and teaching</p> <p>Your examples and comments</p>	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>
<p>7. Uses educational resources and techniques appropriately</p> <p>Your examples and comments</p>	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>

8. Presents material logically Your examples and comments	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>
9. Seeks feedback on students' understanding and acts on this accordingly Your examples and comments	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>
10. Other areas relevant to institutional priorities Your examples and comments	No apparent examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Some examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Many examples <input type="checkbox"/>	Extensive examples <input type="checkbox"/>
	Effectiveness not clear <input type="checkbox"/>	Effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Very effective <input type="checkbox"/>	Exceptionally effective <input type="checkbox"/>