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## Beyond peer observation of teaching

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# Beyond Peer Observation of Teaching

Alison Purvis, Dave Crutchley and Abbi Flint

## *The Institutional Context*

Sheffield Hallam is one of the UK's largest post-92 universities with around 30,000 students and 4,100 staff. 75% of students are undergraduates, 68% are full-time and 89% are UK/EU students. It has approximately 610 courses delivered from 4 faculties and two campus locations in the city of Sheffield. The University has a good reputation and profile in learning and teaching, particularly around e-learning. It was successful in bidding for two Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, and is partner in another; six National Teaching Fellows; many nationally funded projects; and was commended in the last institutional audit for five specific areas of practice, including the use of the Virtual Learning Environment, and validation processes (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2005).

The process of transition from a University-wide programme of peer observation of teaching to the adoption of a new process of peer-supported review of learning, teaching and assessment (P-SR of LTA) began in 2004. The University was at the early stage of reorganising from 10 schools to 4 faculties. The need for a change in peer-observation was prompted by criticisms of the process by staff from across the University. These criticisms were reflected in the literature (Cosh, 1998) which added impetus to the agenda for change. The transition to a small number of large faculties helped enormously to establish peer-supported review of learning, teaching and assessment. The responsibility for the new process was vested in four Heads of Learning, Teaching and Assessment who could easily share their experiences with one-another.

## *The Rationale*

Despite the fact that the deployment of a fairly standard version peer observation of teaching had contributed to successful subject review (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2000), there was almost universal disapproval of the system by teaching staff. Peer-observation at Sheffield Hallam was seen as threatening and judgemental (Bell, 2001; Cosh, 1999) with some staff feeling intimidated by the process, others finding ways to subvert the process. In many cases peer-observation had become an administrative process rather than the reflective development activity that it was originally intended to be.

The move to 'Peer-Supported Review' (P-SR) was intended to allow more flexibility in approach to the development of learning, teaching and assessment. P-SR allows for like-minded colleagues to work together to develop a specific area of learning, teaching and assessment practice and then to reflect on the developments made. The use of reflection in reviewing LTA practice is a cornerstone of continuing the development of teaching staff in higher education (Clegg et al., 2002). P-SR encourages the development of skills for reflective practice as both reviewee and reviewer are invited to reflect upon their experiences as part of the process, on the assumption that more reflective teachers can lead to more effective learning experiences for their students (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2005).

P-SR does not preclude the option of peer-observation if the reviewee chooses to be observed, but the individual and supportive nature of the process of P-SR, with its collegial, reviewee-centred approach, was believed to have the potential to be more transformative than the preceding peer-observation scheme.

### ***Process of adoption***

In 2002-03 the new process of peer-supported review was piloted in the School of Sport and Leisure Management and at the end of its first year of operation P-SR was revealed to the wider University community at the annual university LTA conference. Subsequent discussions at the University's Academic Development Committee convinced senior staff of the value of a new process and in 2004 the revised process was approved by Academic Board for adoption across the University.

The implementation of P-SR coincided with the final year of the University's 2002-2005 learning, teaching and assessment strategy and the writing of the 2006-2010 strategy. P-SR was aligned with the principles underpinning the 2002-2005 strategy: the notion of staff as reflective practitioners. In the context of the 2006-2010 strategy, P-SR is seen as a component within the aim "*to introduce a comprehensive professional development framework that raises the base, improves practice and promotes excellence in learning, teaching and assessment*" (Sheffield Hallam University, 2006).

The model of peer-supported review of learning, teaching and assessment was developed by a collaborative project with the University of Gloucestershire supported by the Fund for the Development of Teaching and Learning Phase 5 (FDTL5) entitled "Effective Learning and Teaching Enhancement (ELATE)". (Crutchley, Nield and Jordan, 2005).

What emerged as a result of the ELATE project was a completely new, reviewee-focused and individual process designed to enhance professional practice by addressing specific needs of teaching staff with the aid of a supporting colleague.

### ***Implementation of Peer-Supported Review of LTA***

#### *The Principles Embedded in the P-SR of LTA*

The new process was designed to ensure that the perceived needs of the reviewee were paramount. The reviewee was encouraged to focus on any aspect of learning, teaching or assessment that they wished to. The review process required that teaching staff would undertake an annual review of their professional practice in order to identify an area for development. Once they had chosen their personal area of development they would then identify a colleague who would assist in some way with the review process and decide the type of assistance to be provided by the supporting colleague. The initial phase of the reviewee-reviewer relationship would involve the formulation of an appropriate collaborative review process to support the particular area of focus. This approach ensured that the reviewee retained control over the way in which the outcomes of the process were reported and control over whether or not aspects of their review should be disseminated for the benefit of colleagues.

No restrictions were put in place in terms of who is able to act as a supporting colleague and no specific training was provided for supporting colleagues though the materials that were produced in support of the new process emphasised the role of supporting colleagues as supporting as opposed to assessing the reviewee and allowing the reviewee to lead the development of the review methodology. This approach was taken to avoid the enforcement of particular strategies, attitudes or behaviours and to allow flexibility in the review process.

#### The Operation of the New System

An outline of the process and an indicative timeline are shown in Table 1. The timeline assumes

that the review process extends over a full academic year though in many instances the process is completed in a much shorter timeframe.

**Table 1.** Key Stages of the P-SR Process and an Indicative Timeline

Key Stage	Timeline
Identifying the focus for the review	July to early September
Selecting a supporting colleague	July to early September
Planning the review process	September
Undertaking the review	September to May as appropriate
Reporting procedures	June to July
Disseminating outcomes (Optional)	Anytime after the completion of the review
Staff development (Optional)	The session following the review

**Identifying the Focus for the Review:** Between the end of one session and beginning of the next, teaching colleagues identify an aspect of their professional practice that they wish to review. Topics typically emerge from module and/or course review that take place at the end of the teaching year. The focus for a review might centre on a particular module or it might relate more generally to the way in which learning is facilitated. It is important to stress that the focus for a review need not centre on face-to-face student - teacher engagements. This allows aspects of learning facilitation such as assessment or feedback to be selected as review foci.

**Selecting the Supporting Colleague:** Once the focus for a review is established, the reviewee identifies a colleague who will provide the desired support. The expectation is that reviewees will select a colleague with whom they can work effectively and who will be able to contribute positively to the process. The fact that reviewees are not required to justify their choice of supporting colleague allows those less confident about sharing aspects of their professional practice to select a colleague with whom they feel comfortable. The expectation is that as tutors gain confidence in themselves they will begin to adopt more mature selection strategies.

**Planning the Review Process:** The reviewee leads the planning of the review process with assistance from the supporting colleague. This is important in ensuring that the reviewee is happy with the process and does not feel intimidated by it. The details of the review process are determined to a large extent by the focus of the review. There is no requirement to engage in peer observation of teaching though that may be appropriate in some cases.

**Undertaking the Review:** The review process is undertaken any time between October and May according to the agreed methods. Reviewees take responsibility for ensuring that the planned activities actually take place as experience has shown that, even where colleagues are fully committed to the process, slippage can occur due to pressure of work.

**Reporting Procedures:** Reporting procedures were devised that were just sufficient for institutional review or audit processes. Initially, this was done via short report forms completed by the reviewee at the beginning and end of each annual process. At the end of the first year of operation it became apparent to the project team that even this level of reporting was excessive and that the process could be effectively recorded on a simple spreadsheet. The use of a spreadsheet to record P-SR of LTA began in the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing in 2005 - 6 and in the other three faculties in 2006 - 07.

Details of the spreadsheet used to record the process in the Faculty of Health and Wellbeing are shown on table 2. During the autumn term all 400 plus teaching staff were asked for information relating to the first four columns of the spreadsheet. The topic code was then added in order to provide a readily available summary of the areas of practice in which reviews are taking place.

**Table 2.** Details of the spreadsheet used to record peer-supported review activity

FACULTY OF HWB: PEER-SUPPORTED REVIEW					
2005 - 06					
Reviewee	Subject Group	Supporting Colleague	Review Topic or Focus	Topic Code	Outcome

**Dissemination:** The outcomes of some P-SRs will be of interest and benefit to colleagues in subject groups, faculties, or externally. However, the reviewee-centred nature of the process determines that reviewees are the final arbiters of whether and to whom outcomes are shared.

**Staff Development and Appraisal:** The process of P-SR could highlight areas for further development for the reviewee. These identified development needs could be shared at appraisal but the decision to discuss development issues at appraisal rests solely with the reviewee due to the core principle that P-SR should be a reviewee-centred process.

### *The Management of the Process*

The management of the process is devolved to faculties with the Heads of LTA taking primary responsibility. At Sheffield Hallam University, each of the four faculties is made up of between 15 and 25 subject groups containing anything from 15 to 35 teaching staff. With faculties of between 400 to 600 staff, it is necessary that day-to-day management of P-SR of LTA occurs at subject group level. Subject group LTA Coordinators or in some cases subject group leaders take responsibility for the following:

**Awareness raising:** via an explanatory handbook that is available electronically as well paper-based. In some cases workshops or discussion groups are organised to promote the process and provide further explanation and discussion.

**Resource management:** In order to avoid situations in which certain individuals are overcommitted to supporting their colleagues some groups have established a maximum number of P-SRs in which a member of staff can be involved.

**Monitoring:** this is perhaps the key role for managers at the local level. Given the pressure of work experienced by most teaching staff in Higher Education, it is necessary for local managers to monitor progress ensuring that colleagues are actually undertaking the process. Experience suggests that reminders and a degree of persistence are required even where colleagues fully accept the value of the process.

**Recording:** Recording is undertaken using the spreadsheet shown in Table 2. Responsibility for this stage of the process reverts to the Head of LTA who maintains the spreadsheet with the aid of an administrator. Here again, reminders are necessary to ensure that details of each P-SR process are recorded.

### *Lessons Learned*

The evaluation of the ELATE project took a staged approach, with each subsequent stage of the evaluation building upon and enquiring more deeply into the insights from previous stages. The first stage was an online staff survey to establish a general picture of the perceptions of and degree of engagement with P-SR across the University (113 respondents). From the survey individuals self selected to attend follow-up focus groups (14 participants), which led to a smaller

sample of individual semi-structured interviews (10 participants). Four of the semi-structured interviews were with senior faculty staff who had responsibility for the implementation of the process in their faculty.

The aims of the evaluation were to:

- assess the take up of P-SR
- identify factors that supported or assisted effective implementation
- identify barriers to effective implementation
- review the perceived value of the process to the professional development of teaching staff
- describe the way in which the process was interpreted locally
- evaluate the way in which the process was managed and what needs to be done to further embed or enhance the process

The approach to the focus groups and interviews was informed by *appreciative inquiry* (Cooperrider, Whitney and Stavros, 2003). Experiences of using this strength-based approach to evaluation indicate that it is an effective technique for collaborative learning from evaluation processes and creating motivation to constructively and positively use this learning (Webb, Preskill and Coghlan, 2005). This approach felt appropriate as the project team wanted to explore what people *valued* about the P-SR process and how they would like to see it develop in the future. It was also felt the deliberately strength-based approach, valuing and sharing individuals' experiences, was in-keeping with the supportive ethos of P-SR.

The findings of the evaluation suggest that P-SR has been more effective in terms of professional development than the previous system of peer observation (90% of responses to the online survey thought their LTA practice had improved as a result of P-SR). P-SR was recognised as enabling colleagues to explore all aspects of learning, teaching and assessment, whereas peer observation focuses exclusively on face-to-face teaching. This was reflected in the range of topics that were selected as the review foci which addressed aspects of assessment (e.g. formative multiple choice questionnaires and assessing practical elements of performance modules), e-learning (e.g. using the online environment to manage self-directed learning) and looking at the overall learning and teaching approach taken (e.g. reviewing teaching methods to encourage student motivation and performance).

*"I used the process to analyse my use of guest lectures. In the end the review expanded beyond this and we discussed the module as a whole and how it could be better delivered next year. This more 'informal' route was really helpful."*

The factors identified as having a positive impact in supporting colleagues to engage with P-SR were: the awareness raising activities (workshops, presentations, e-mails) and the P-SR handbook; the level of personal autonomy built into the process; and, the fact that the process was seen to make a positive difference to professional practice.

*"Last year, I had someone else review my assessment approach. I realised the approach I had taken was flawed, produced some ideas for improving the approach, and the reviewer gave me feedback on these ideas. As a reviewer myself, the P-SR gives me chance to see what other people are doing, and to potentially adopt their good practice."*

The on-line survey, carried out at an early stage in the implementation of P-SR, found that over 50% of respondents had actually participated in P-SR (most as both a reviewer and reviewee). This was already better than the take-up of peer observation, but did indicate there was not full engagement. Lack of time to engage properly with the process and difficulties in finding suitable times for reviewer and reviewee to meet were the main reasons given for non-participation. In contrast to this, those that participated in the process actually found it to be relatively light touch: a little over 80% of reviews were completed in between 1 and 3 meetings between reviewer and reviewee, plus whatever development activity was undertaken between the meetings.

Another issue in the take-up of P-SR was that it was perceived by some to be a formalisation of an informal professional development activity. In focus groups many participants indicated that the kind of conversations they had with colleagues as part of P-SR may have taken place as part of informal work-related discussions. In interviews, senior faculty staff reported engagement with the formal P-SR process was around 50%, but they estimated that around 90% of colleagues were probably engaged in informal P-SR like discussions. Indeed, those colleagues who had not engaged in the formal P-SR process reported undertaking it informally once they understood the nature of P-SR, but without prompting would not have identified this as a form of professional development. This is consistent with Eraut's (2004) recognition that informal learning is largely invisible because it is often not recognised as learning. Although a small number of colleagues felt that the reporting associated with P-SR represented a bureaucratisation of professional development, most welcomed the legitimisation that this formalisation gave to taking time out to reflect on learning and teaching issues with a colleague.

The management and embedding of P-SR was a key focus for the evaluation. There was high level support for P-SR within the institution; with the University's Academic Board agreeing the process was a high priority and that it should be implemented across the faculties. The four senior faculty staff interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the process and felt it would result in real benefits for professional practice, as the quotes below indicate.

*"The essence of this process is about individuals' own professional development"*

"It has given a focus for people to talk about, and think, and put some energy into learning, teaching and assessment developments"

"It is an essential part of maintaining the quality of what we do, never mind enhancing it"

"P-SR is taking module review that step further"

In line with the advice offered by Sharpe, Beetham, and Ravenscroft (2004) it was made explicit that there was room for a degree of local interpretation of the process, provided that the key principles were not compromised. The way in which the process was managed and implemented across the faculties reflected this. Three of the four faculties had tailored the P-SR handbook to better suit their context and approach and the implementation varied. In one faculty the process was managed at the subject group level, with the subject group collaboratively developing a broad area of focus for their individual P-SR topics. In another a half day workshop had been used to introduce participants to the idea of P-SR then carry it out in pairs during the session. This local interpretation worked well and, in all but isolated cases, the principle of reviewee autonomy in selecting both the topic for review and the reviewer was adhered to.

There was no consensus around linking the P-SR process to other formal processes. In some areas making links between subject Annual Quality Review (AQR) and P-SR was strongly encouraged but the link between appraisal and P-SR was more contentious. Many people felt there was a tension between a process that is focused on individual professional development being linked to institutional processes, policy and drivers. Overall, where appraisal already worked well people were more inclined to make a formal link with P-SR.

Each of the faculties had taken a proactive approach to promoting P-SR: using existing channels such as committee meetings and specific roles within subject groups; making materials available; providing workshops on the process; and, regular e-mail reminders. Even with this concerted effort one of the main reasons given by those who did not engage in the process was lack of awareness and perceived low priority given to P-SR.

The suggestions made for how the implementation of P-SR could be improved relate to the two main reasons for non-participation: time and lack of awareness/importance. Calls to have a more flexible approach to the timing of P-SR were unnecessary as there is already full flexibility for

when and how colleagues undertake it (the timeline in table 1 is only suggested). Suggestions that time for P-SR be built into the annual work planning round are encouraging, as they indicate the value participants saw in the process and the need for it to be presented as a core part of professional practice rather than an additional task. Similarly calls for more local awareness raising, and demonstrated commitment from line management, are encouraging and in line with the University's future strategy for embedding P-SR.

### ***Future developments***

The P-SR of learning, teaching and assessment marks a significant shift from peer observation of teaching and, in our experience, is a much more effective and rewarding professional development process. It shifts the emphasis and control back to the reviewee, and provides considerable autonomy in the nature and focus of the review.

Pennington (2003) observed that it is difficult to win universal approval for new professional development process and the evaluation of P-SR at Sheffield Hallam confirms that view. The process succeeded in gaining the approval of colleagues and institutional level support. In particular the reviewee-centred nature of the process was highly commended. However, just under half of those surveyed had not engaged with the process giving reasons unrelated to the perceived quality of P-SR: lack of awareness of the process and a perceived lack of time to undertake it.

Addressing these factors has been challenging and is likely to continue to remain so. The ELATE project provided a central stimulus for continued action around the implementation of P-SR, and now that the project has ended the University has had to consider other approaches to embedding the process. Talking to colleagues informally, it is apparent that P-SR has been most successful when colleagues have a professional impetus, often external, to engage: for example, where an issue has arisen that is a collective responsibility. It is through using P-SR to address these 'pivotal issues' that colleagues get to see the benefit and value of the process. This agrees with Ferman's (2002) findings that lecturers find professional development activities that are collaborative and work-place embedded the most valuable.

Possible linkages to other processes, such as appraisal and AQR, may provide an impetus to engage with the process but may distract from the core values of P-SR: that is about individual professional development and collaborative reflection on practice. This is a tension common to many areas of educational development. Organisationally, the intention at Sheffield Hallam University is to bring together all professional development activities across the University into a broad coherent framework and place P-SR as a core part of that framework.

One area that may be addressed more readily is the variability in the perceived importance and priority placed on the P-SR process. It is vital that senior managers actively promote the process by ensuring high visibility and assigning responsibility for monitoring and archiving. To do this, it may be necessary to consider the role of subject group leaders and line managers in taking responsibility for promoting P-SR. Comments from the evaluation indicated that unless there was active support for the process locally it is unlikely to become part of the fabric of professional development.

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