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Book Reviews

Peer Review of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: International Perspectives

Judyth Sachs and Mitch Parsell

Springer (2014)

Review by Nicola Darwood

This collection of essays, edited by Judyth Sachs and Mitch Parsell, is focused on the research behind, and the practical application of, peer review in higher education. Many of the contributors are engaged with peer review in Australia but there are also essays from academics from the UK, North America and South Africa which add to the international perspective of the study. One common belief that the contributors all hold, however, is that ‘collegial review could be a powerful force for improving teaching and thereby student learning’ (p.v).

Arguably, not everyone in academia is convinced of the efficacy of peer review and, as this book suggests, much depends on the motives of management as they encourage peer review. As Sachs and Parsell note in their introduction,

[a]t its best, peer review opens the classroom to review in a safe and supporting way with a focus on improvement and professional learning. At its worst, it becomes a management tool to monitor and control the practices of teachers. (p.2)

A number of contributors reiterate this point, and in chapter two (the chapter which effectively sets the tone for the rest of the book), David Gosling identifies three different types of peer review which might be used in higher education: 'evaluative', 'developmental' and 'collaborative'. He sees the latter 'as the most effective, and ethical, framework to support professional learning about teaching, learning and related issues such as course design and assessment' (p.13), emphasising the need for a form that is 'based on *collaboration* between the parties', that is a 'non-judgemental' form of review that benefits both reviewer and reviewee (p.17).

In the fourth chapter, Jemma Napier, Mehdi Riazi and Christa Jacenyik-Trawoger examine the culture of management in Australian higher education. Their study found that, in general, the academic staff at Macquarie University want 'a culture of leadership that encourages peer review as quality enhancement' but instead found that the leadership of the university favoured a 'formal, management based form of peer review' (p64), highlighting possible tensions when staff feel that peer review is forced upon them. The need for university policies on the issue of peer observation/review is discussed by Maureen Bell and Paul Cooper (chapter ten) who argue that the attitude of management to peer review can affect the perception of both the status of the process and the motives behind the implementation of such policies. How senior management communicate their ideas about peer review is discussed in chapter five where Trudy Ambler, Meena Chavan, Jennifer Clarke and Nicola Matthews look at notions of collegiality, highlighting their belief that 'an open environment' is needed for effective peer review, one which is 'built on trust, support and common goals' (p.71).

William Buskist, Emad Ismail and James Groccia (chapter three) offer a practical model for peer review which might prove useful for those who are new to the process, but they also advocate formal training for peer reviewers which seems to suggest that they perceive peer review as an evaluative process, rather than one which is collaborative, with both the reviewer and reviewee benefiting from the experience. Further practical advice is offered by Michael Hitchens (chapter six) who, drawing on a number of previous studies, provides guidance for participants (both reviewers and reviewees). Reflection is obviously a crucial element of our development as lecturers and this is particularly highlighted by Marina Harvey and Ian Solomonides who describe the benefits of peer review in achieving 'an enculturation of ongoing and sustainable reflective practice' (p.146). The use of an electronic course portfolio which 'provides a window into what occurred during a particular course, highlighting what worked and what did not, showcasing the student learning that resulted and outlining modifications and goals for future iterations of the course' (p.168) is championed by

Amy Goodburn (chapter eleven); her advice could be invaluable for anyone embarking on the process of application for Fellow or Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

A holistic approach to peer review is suggested by Wendy Kilfoil (chapter seven), one which enables the reviewee to identify elements of their practice which could be improved and then to choose a colleague with whom to work. While this collaboration could include an observation, it could also focus on, for example, the design and implementation of assessment tasks or the development of reflection. The holistic nature of peer review is also alluded to by Bell and Cooper who state that '[p]eer observation of teaching is one of several strategies available for peer review of teaching' (p.154). This highlights one of the negative aspects of this book: the emphasis by many of the contributors on observation of teaching rather than the mechanisms by which academics can support each other through the review of, for example, teaching materials, assessment briefs, the format and content of virtual learning environment or course design.

There is some useful advice in this book about the practicalities of peer review, but Kilfoil also emphasises the need for a professional learning community where junior and senior staff learn good practice from each other and where management encourages both developmental activities and a departmental ethos which is built on an atmosphere of trust. As one of Napier *et al's* interviewees stated:

[Peer review] can't just be a tick box [...] It has to have a human side of it. So to be able to have this human side, we have to have relationships and to be able to have relationships, we have to be given opportunities to create [those] relationships. (p.61)

English and Reflective Writing Skills in Medicine
Clive Handler, Charlotte Handler and Deborah Gill
Radcliffe Publishing (2011)
Review by Carol Parker

For medical students, as well as postgraduate clinicians, reflective writing is challenging as it is emotive, personal and subjective. Engaging with subjectivity is often (but, I acknowledge, not always) a new experience for those from a medical background. Writers frequently wrestle with a fundamental shift in approach/perspective, from seeing the world 'objectively' (that is, in terms of hard facts or as entirely evidence-based), to acknowledging the need to trust their own thoughts and feelings through grappling with the notion of subjectivity.

Reflecting on learning experiences through clinical encounters, peer-to-peer or supervisory discussions, practical procedures, self-directed learning or conferences remains an essential part of continuing professional development for healthcare professionals. Reflection also feeds into appraisals and job applications, and is a central characteristic of meeting the requirements of revalidation. Enhancing the contribution an individual might make in medicine requires the capacity to reflect on performance.