

Peer Review in Teaching: the Strathmore Experience

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by

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Introduction

Peer reviewing is a process that has become popular around the world over the last 10-15 years. It can be used in different professional environments, as well as by students who make use of the collaboration of their peers to improve their academic performance. Given the parameters of this Conference, our paper focuses on peer review in the teaching context. Many third level institutions in the Western world are now using this method for evaluating the teaching performance of their academic staff. It is a system that has given rise to a lot of debate¹ as many lecturers are not willing to have colleagues enter their class-room to analyse their teachings skills; at the same time, Faculties, Departments and Schools need to be able to evaluate the performance of their staff for various reasons². Searching the Internet one can find many sites that offer information, experience, and advice on how to create and implement a peer review system in

¹ “...in the evaluation of teaching process, the pros and cons of having other faculty review a classroom have been widely debated. Proponents argue that peer reviews can provide the teacher with insights into the classroom learning environment unattainable in other ways, and that these reviews also strengthen the faculty's voice in personnel decisions. Opponents maintain that political and personal factors sometimes enter the evaluative process and the opportunity for misuse and abuse is real. While the debate continues, it is not uncommon that by default, the burden of evidence for arriving at a judgment of a faculty member's teaching effectiveness may fall entirely on student assessment”, Peer Review of Teaching, [Pao-sheng Hsu, University of Maine: http://www.maa.org/saum/maanotes49/275.html](http://www.maa.org/saum/maanotes49/275.html). Viewed 20-09-06.

2. “What kinds of information would the group like to get from a peer review process? Common responses: information on “How good is my teaching, and how could I make it better?”; information for promotion, i.e. a description of teaching and teaching development for an individual; information on what students have learned in a class/curriculum; information on relevance/interest/utility of course/curriculum”, <http://www.provost.wisc.edu/archives/ccae/MOO/design.html>. Viewed 20-09-06.

teaching³. In this paper we would like to transmit some experience that we have recently gained at Strathmore University regarding the peer review system in teaching.

The Strathmore Policy

Our *Guide to Quality Assurance of Teaching and Learning (May 2005)* contains the following words dedicated to peer review: “The University's Learning and Teaching Committee is anxious that a peer review scheme is sufficiently developmental to assist both the individual member of staff and the School at large, and wishes to emphasize that class observation is only part of a wider process of staff and educational development. A scheme should aim to encourage staff to continue to reflect on their teaching - style, content, learning outcomes, use of resources, etc - and the reaction of their students, both in class and through subsequent coursework and assessments. It is also hoped that the peer review process of sharing information on good practice in teaching, and on the enhancement of practice, will make a valuable input to a School's strategy for maintaining high quality learning opportunities for its students”⁴.

As may be understood from this extract, the University does not require any specific method of peer review to be implemented. Each School and Faculty is free to develop its own system as long as there is some form of evaluation of the lecturer taking place.

As you may well have experienced in your own institutions, although there may be a clear policy regarding peer review, it is not so easy to obtain the agreement of lecturers, as many may object to a colleague analysing their performance in class. As has been observed at the University of Wisconsin, “Effective implementation requires that an entire department discusses and, in some sense, agrees on why and how peer review is to be performed. It is particularly important that faculty who are likely to be reviewed have significant input into how and why such a review is to be performed”⁵. Experience would seem to show that, for peer review to be effective, the active and willing collaboration of the lecturers involved is very necessary.

With this in mind, the Teaching and Learning Committee at Strathmore University came up with the proposal which is explained below.

The Strathmore Model

An initial informative session was organized by the Teaching and Learning Committee for lecturers in January 2006. In this session, the importance of reflecting on our practice as lecturers in order to be able to improve, was underlined and we were encouraged to

³ See, for example: <http://www.maa.org/saum/index.html>; <http://wsuonline.weber.edu/faculty/PeerReview.html>; <http://main.uab.edu/shrp/default.aspx?pid=90753>; <http://www.courseportfolio.org/peer/pages/index.jsp?what=rootMenuD&rootMenuId=3>; <http://www.provost.wisc.edu/archives/ccae/MOO/design.html>. All viewed 20-09-06.

⁴ Cf. Strathmore University, *Guide to Quality Assurance of Teaching and Learning (May 2005)* in the Appendix to this paper.

⁵ <http://www.provost.wisc.edu/archives/ccae/MOO/design.html>. Viewed 20-09-06.

take part in a small scale research project that would facilitate such reflection. The main idea was that the lecturer be a reflective practitioner, a person who reflects on their work as a lecturer. This process of reflection was to involve capturing one's experience in the lecture theatre, together with the research and preparation that goes into a lecture. It was proposed that we reflect on our lecture style, the content of our delivery, and the response of students. To facilitate the recording of our thoughts and self-assessment we would use a personal journal, which would be of assistance to us throughout the project. The aim was to challenge our assumptions about our abilities as lecturers, identify areas that we consider need changing and convert these points into teaching objectives that would be reviewed by a colleague.

The first step was to think about and list down in the journal the ten qualities that one considers a good lecturer should have. This process was interesting and important as it required the lecturers to stop and think about their own lectureship style and to consider specific points that an effective lecturer should foster in his or her work. These could vary quite a lot, depending on the particular lecturer, his or her character and personality, teaching and learning experience, and so on. The qualities identified included the lecturer's punctuality in starting and ending class, class control, capacity to make the lecture interesting and motivating to students, being able to detect if students were understanding the concepts, recapping the previous lecture at the start of the next session, knowing the students names so as to conserve a personal touch in the class-room, etc. Other qualities taken into consideration were the use of teaching aids; movement of the lecturer in the class-room and class discussions. One lecturer highlighted the importance of respecting freedom: "Education can only take place in an environment which fosters a sense of freedom. Students should feel free to give their views without feeling intimidated or inhibited; in this way the students will be encouraged to personally reflect on what they are taught, guided by the lecturer in the effort to lead the students to attain the truth, which is the object of university learning".

Having noted down the chosen qualities in the journal, each lecturer was then to consider how many of those qualities he or she already had, which qualities were lacking and choose one or two of these qualities as goals to be achieved during the research project. We also took note of these points in our journals.

At this stage each lecturer personally chose the colleague they wished to act as their peer reviewer. The lecturer then had a private work session with the peer reviewer to discuss the qualities noted in the journals and explain the points to be worked on so that the peer reviewer would have these guidelines to observe in their assessment. At this point, each participant in the project sent a written brief to the Teaching and Learning Committee about their areas of assessment, and indicating the name of the chosen peer reviewer.

The lecturer then agreed with the peer reviewer on the date and time to come to class in order to carry out the assessment. The reviewer came to the lecture hall for a one hour class and tried to find clear indications in the lecture of those good qualities we felt that a lecturer should have and which we considered that we already possessed. They were also to take note of those objectives for change which we felt we could improve on in our teaching style. After the lecture, we had a briefing session with the reviewer who gave an honest and frank assessment of the class based on the guidelines we had given. In some cases, they confirmed the good qualities the lecturer had and agreed on the points that he

or she could work to improve on in the following months; at times they offered new ideas regarding areas that the lecturer could improve on which he or she had not already seen. By the end of the meeting, the lecturer and the reviewer had set clear objectives for change in the lecturer's teaching. This session was recorded by the lecturer in the journal and was then signed by the peer reviewer in order to confirm that both persons agreed on the contents of the meeting and the objectives for change.

At this stage, the first part of the project required that each lecturer reflect on and write his or her own assessment of the experience so far, including the assumptions about our teaching that we had had to challenge, the comments made by the reviewer and our personal reactions to these comments, and the areas of change we were set to work on. Over the next five months, each lecturer then worked on trying to implement these objectives in the classroom.

At the end of this period, each lecturer met again with the peer reviewer to report on the efforts to improve their lectureship style and to indicate clearly the points to be assessed in the next review. We also agreed on the time and place for this assessment. At this stage we were again required to inform the Teaching and Learning Committee regarding the date of the second review so that the members could keep track of the implementation of the project by each lecturer. After the reviewer had again attended a one hour lecture and observed the lecturer, we had another briefing session in which the colleague commented on the class, and the points the lecturer had actually improved on. In some cases the reviewer made further suggestions for change that the lecturer could keep in mind if he or she was interested in doing so. This meeting was recorded in the journal by the lecturer who was doing the project and this report was signed by the two parts, lecturer and peer reviewer.

The second part of the project was for the lecturer to analyse his or her experience of reflective practice using the peer review system which had been carried out over the previous six months. Did the second review confirm a change in practice? Did it bring up other areas of change that one could adopt? In what ways had the exercise broadened one's approach to lecturing? We were then to make a write up of our findings and submit it to the Teaching and Learning Committee by a certain date a few weeks later.

Outcome

Regarding the results of the project, many lecturers found that there had been changes and improvements in their teaching practice. Most of the objectives had been attained and those remaining were being worked on by the lecturer and so, were in the process of being achieved. Some lecturers realized that certain qualities may be easily achieved, whereas, there are others that are not so easy to develop and which require more time. They also found that, in some cases, new objectives for improving their teaching skills had emerged. The exercise in reflection on their teaching practice had broadened the approach of many to lecturing. For example, being one of the Ethics lecturers, I discovered the importance of using the Ethics units themselves to teach the students how to behave in an ethical and professional manner in the classroom. This would contribute to preparing them for the professional world later on. I also confirmed an intuition that I had had regarding the need to deal with fewer points in class, going over the main concepts more slowly so that the students could understand the ideas better. I have also

introduced more practical sessions to give the students the chance to think again about these ideas and to learn to apply them in practical circumstances and ways.

Other lecturers noted that there were points which they had not considered as important and which the peer reviewer brought to their attention as important for the good lecturer. This broadened their understanding of the qualities that a good lecturer should have. As one person said: "I found the peer review exercise very helpful especially because there were things I was doing wrong which I was not aware of and which were pointed out to me. This is due to the fact that an objective person, more experienced in lecturing than I am was able to sit in my class and observe me. I would never have become aware of my faults were it not for this exercise".

The project was a useful introduction to reflecting on one's lectureship from the point of view of the style and content and regarding the student's response to our teaching. After a number of years, one can tend to assume that he or she knows how to teach and has nothing more to learn, but this experience shows that one can always improve, even in little things. The requirement of keeping a journal about day to day teaching activity is a useful tool for recording ideas, impressions, etc., which may otherwise be lost or forgotten. Having them written down permits one to return to those experiences in order to reflect further on them. This exercise was also an incentive to developing a teaching portfolio which, again, can contribute to reflecting on one's teaching activity.

Finally, many participants found that the experience of being reviewed by a peer, while initially daunting, was not so unpleasant in actual fact. It proved to be positive, enthusing and helpful. At the same time, it was challenging, constructive and encouraging to receive objective feedback regarding one's classes from someone other than the students themselves. All in all, the outcome of the project showed that the peer review system can lead to improved performance on the part of the lecturer as it opens up new horizons and possibilities regarding his or her professional development. One lecturer who has been teaching at university level for ten years noted in the final report: "This entire exercise (...) has been beneficial and has broadened my approach towards teaching. It further confirms the fact that the process of continuous improvement is necessary, keeping in mind that though the improvement may be slow in some areas compared to others, with determination and dedication, the weak areas of a lecturer can be overcome".

Through the small scale research project involving reflection on one's teaching practice, the lecturers had the opportunity to experience the peer review system in a free and non threatening environment. We feel that this will probably encourage them to continue having recourse to this method as a way of furthering their professional development.

Merits and demerits of the Strathmore Model

This first experience of the peer review system at Strathmore University through the use of a small scale research project may be analysed as follows:

Positive factors:

1. The project was not imposed on lecturers, but rather, it was an opportunity offered to those who wanted to make use of it.
2. The project counted on the free collaboration of the lecturers and encouraged that freedom by permitting each lecturer to choose their peer reviewer.
3. It also stimulated lecturers to analyse their teaching skills personally and create objectives for improvement themselves, rather than having such goals “imposed” on them from outside, so to speak.
4. The project worked due to the fact that the lecturers themselves wanted to change and were willing to accept assistance from their colleagues.
5. Through this project the concept of ongoing Staff Development, far from being a threat to one’s job, has appeared to be an attractive proposal to those staff members who genuinely wish to grow and improve in their professional activity.
6. It is now more likely that the lecturers who participated in the project will be willing to continue making use of peer review as a way of ensuring ongoing improvement in their work.

Elements for improvement:

1. It was observed that at times, the presence of the peer reviewer in the classroom was a cause of distraction for the students. Although, one lecturer noted that “the students themselves were motivated to see that lecturers also need to improve!” As the use of the peer review system continues, the students will become more accustomed to the process and will be less distracted by the colleague’s presence.
2. Some lecturers observed that, at times, the peer reviewer would indicate points that could be improved or kept in mind by the lecturer, but which he or she was already putting into practice in other classes; the occasion to use them had simply not arisen in the specific classes that the reviewer had attended.
3. After handing in the report on the research project, there was no further feedback from the Teaching and Learning Committee to the lecturers who participated in the programme. For the future, it may be interesting to return the projects with commentaries offering more suggestions to the individual lecturers on how they could continue to improve their teaching skills.
4. Peer review is a policy that must be implemented according to Strathmore’s *Guide to Quality Assurance of Teaching and Learning*. The model used this year relied on the free participation of those lecturers who were interested in carrying out the small scale research project. The challenge still remains regarding how to get all academic staff members to accept and use the peer review system. Should we continue to use the research project as a stimulant in encouraging staff members to try out peer review, or, relying on the experience, encouragement and enthusiasm of those who successfully completed the project this year, should peer review now be implemented in an obligatory manner by the various Faculties and Schools?

5. It may now be possible for each School and Faculty to gather its staff and discuss the peer review experience with the collaboration of those lecturers who participated in the project. In that context, it may be possible to come up with a peer review system that would be accepted by all faculty members, once the aims and methodology to be used are agreed upon by the majority. This possibility may be confirmed as feasible, based on the experience of other universities. "Our group supports the idea that to overcome resistance to change, people involved in the change need to be involved in the development of the process from the beginning, and need to have a real voice in what will happen. "Change" in this case may be changing how some of the information regarding teaching and learning is gathered, or "change" may expand to changing how teachers and students perceive their roles in a learning environment"⁶.

In summary

The peer review system has proven itself to be a positive and motivating factor in staff development when it is used counting on the free collaboration of the lecturers. To achieve a consensus regarding this policy, it may be useful for each School or Faculty to gather its own members and work out together the objectives to be achieved, and the method to be employed in implementing such a system in each department. The professional benefits to the lecturers themselves as well as to the University must be clearly identified and emphasized as these will also serve as a motivating factor for the staff that will be assessed using the peer review system. In the long term, this system contributes to creating an awareness regarding the importance of on-going professional improvement in a competitive world, as well as emphasizing the fact that the search for excellence is an accessible and attractive challenge which should be embraced by every academic institution.

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**Strathmore University
Guide to Quality Assurance of Teaching and Learning
May 2005**

XXX. PEER REVIEW OF TEACHING

- 1 All faculties, schools and other teaching units should implement a system for the peer review of teaching. Schemes should relate to all teaching staff, not just those at the start of their careers.
- 2 Internal and external academic audit processes will certainly want to explore how effectively peer review has been adopted by Schools.
- 3 The University's Learning and Teaching Committee is anxious that a peer review scheme is sufficiently developmental to assist both the individual member of staff and the School at large, and wishes to emphasize that class observation is only part of a wider process of staff and educational development. A scheme should aim to encourage staff to continue to reflect on their teaching - style, content, learning outcomes, use of resources, etc - and the reaction of their students, both in class and through subsequent coursework and assessments. It is also hoped that the peer review process of sharing information on good practice in teaching, and on the enhancement of practice, will make a valuable input to a School's strategy for maintaining high quality learning opportunities for its students.
- 4 Schools should ensure that their peer review schemes involve teaching staff being subject to at least one class observation a year, more where circumstances suggest that a teacher's development will benefit from a greater sharing of experience and advice. Particular attention should be given to the needs of staff new to teaching and of those where student feedback and/or class observation suggest enhancement would benefit the students' learning experience. Schools should establish at the start of each session a clear schedule for the completion of class observations and a list of observers and those whom they have been allocated to observe. Note that it is not normally good practice for staff to observe each other reciprocally.

