

Research Basis for the PRO-Teaching Project

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Research domains addressed: Academic practice, work and identities; Learning, teaching, assessment and curriculum

Problem: As part of a research Masters in Higher Education it was endeavoured to develop a course such that it better engaged students with learning. After several action research cycles it was apparent that there was only so much that curriculum design could do, so formative ideas were needed for improving teaching. However, in a “closed-door” teaching culture, in a research oriented discipline area, without ready access to education development help, these were difficult to obtain. After initial consultation with the literature and ALTC project dissemination, the “Peer Review and Observation of Teaching Project” was created as a developmental resource for academic colleagues. It was formulated as a research project so that it was goal oriented and so that participants’ data were protected by ethics approval.

Context: Quality of teaching has links to student success and thus retention (Biggs, 2003; Tinto 1993; Zimitat 2006). By providing developmental direction for effective course design and delivery it is possible to promote a staff-centred enabling culture within the organization. Standard student evaluation mechanisms provide limited information about individual teaching performances. Peer review of teaching is recognised as an effective method for assessing quality and generating developmental information for improving teaching (Bell, 2001; Brinko, 1993; Donnelly, 2007; Lomas & Nichols, 2005). Taking part in peer review encourages the observee to actively consider how to practice the principles of good teaching. Over multiple sessions developmental feedback from peers is implemented in a peer supported “action learning” cycle. Observers also engage in deep analysis in the process of providing developmental feedback. Observing different interpretations and implementations with a critical eye is a developmental exercise in itself (Bell, 2001).

Research Questions: How can peer review and observation of teaching be best used to improve quality of teaching at GU? What constitutes valid evidence to support outcomes of this investigation? How can peer review be used to facilitate academic cultural change in a research oriented organization?

Design constraints: The peer review method must undertake a rigorous approach producing validated evidence from multiple, triangulated sources. Building upon this the project must also have multidisciplinary academic input to expand disciplinary cultural practices. Peer review design must be based on best practice – referring to literature, ALTC project outcomes; and, it must address executive criticisms of peer review that it uses informal, buddy system as evidence. To ensure confidence in the process access to observation data must be restricted to only the academics involved and this must be protected by comprehensive ethical clearance.

Methodology: Pilot design was refined in Education Faculty to produce a collaborative, developmental peer review (Harris et al., 2008) process that engages academics in two action learning cycles at least two weeks apart. The current project phase was based in Science, Environment, Engineering and Technology discipline areas and attracted an internal, GU L&T grant. Data triangulation was achieved using teacher reflections, discipline expert observation, external L&T expert observation, student evaluation of class, and student learning outcomes through minute tests to create validated evidence through each action learning cycle. Project evaluation to improve the process is undertaken each semester using a PIRI cycle to collect data from participant experiences, student perceptions of effect, and project reference group input.

Participation activities: Academic staff that wish to participate in the project first enlist a peer from their discipline and attend a workshop where training on the peer review process and instruments is done experientially in a real classroom. The PRO-Teaching project office then timetables two observation sessions and allocates an external L&T expert peer as a second observer to make up an observation triad for the duration of the process. At each observation the observee supplies a briefing document with learning outcomes designed for that class and activities that students will engage with. The triad meets 15 minutes before each observed class, if possible, to discuss the process and expectations. The observers find a place at the back of the class and make observation notes about the teacher's curriculum design and pedagogical approaches, in particular noting the things that seem to work best and those that might be improved by implementing a different approach. At the end of each observed session the triad meets to discuss the lesson. Before any feedback from the observers, the debrief starts with the observee's reflection on what they thought worked well, did not work well, and ideas for change. At this point the observers build upon the teacher's reflection to build confidence in a supportive, collaborative environment, and build upon the observed strengths of the teacher's performance and to offer insights into what the observation revealed. In this discussion a number of developmental ideas are discussed and agreed between observers and observee. Developmental ideas are then addressed in the following observation session or included into continuing teaching practice if applicable.

Outcomes: So far: 75 participants in 3 semesters have contributed extensive qualitative and quantitative data. By engaging L&T "expert" academics from different faculties, participation has included academics from all discipline groups. Growing confidence in peer observation process as a useful process is evidenced by increasing numbers of participants each semester suggesting an increasingly "open door" teaching culture. Operational plans for the University and some Groups nominate peer review of teaching as a key activity to help meet strategic goals. Several teaching focused communities of practice have adopted the peer review of teaching model as part of their regular activities. Outcomes include use of peer review generated evidence to support successful ALTC awards, promotion applications, and job applications. Dissemination of practice has been invited widely within the organization and beyond.

Limiting factors: Limited management commitment to involve poor performing teachers to participate (union agreements) reduces potential for organizational improvement. Absence of national and organizational learning and teaching standards to use as benchmarks makes it difficult to focus at goals to develop towards. As the current peer review model is data intensive in order to create evidence, it inhibits more regular staff involvement.

Ongoing work: Project to embed peer observation of teaching sustainably within the wider organization. A flexible suite of peer review and peer mentoring mechanisms to support different academic needs, degree designs and teaching environments is under development. Research papers are in process.

Selected References:

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