Piloting a Peer Feedback Program in the Faculty of Business at UTS

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ABSTRACT  This paper outlines the trial and development of a peer review program for teaching improvement in the Faculty of Business at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). It first explores some of the key issues in the purpose and design of peer review schemes. It agrees with a strong theme in the peer review literature that peer review is most effective when used for quality enhancement rather than quality assurance in the sense used by Lomas and Nicholls (2005). It also recognises the possibility of resistance from academic staff to the idea of peer review and scepticism about its usefulness. A methodology for the conduct of a pilot peer review scheme is outlined drawing on the work of Bingham and Ottewill (2001) and Puget and Schubert (2008) in which peer review is voluntary, confidential and reciprocal involving a mutual arrangement with a trusted colleague to observe each other’s teaching and to offer private constructive feedback within agreed parameters. The experience of participants in the pilot scheme is reported and observations made about both the process of peer review itself and of attempting to establish a peer review program in a Faculty not previously used to such methods of professional and educational development.

Keywords: peer review of teaching, educational development, reciprocal observation.

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Introduction
The potential for feedback from colleagues to supplement other forms of feedback on teaching, especially that from students, in the process of professional development has received increased attention in recent years. Lomas and Nicholls (2005), for example, explore the theoretical issues associated with peer review of teaching and present a case study of the implementation of a peer review program at a pre-1992 university in England. Bingham and Ottewill (2001) report on a pilot peer review project at Sheffield Hallam University designed to add balance to the teaching evaluation process by more effectively utilising the “professional expertise of tutors in the evaluation process” (Bingham and Ottewill 2001, 33).

The present authors’ awareness of the potential for peer review in academic development was heightened when they attended the first residential module of the International Teachers Program (ITP) at Bocconi University in January 2008. One of the sessions in this module modelled the peer review process with a role play of pre- and post-class observation interviews and a related teaching session in which participants in the program played the role of the class which was peer-observed. Participants thus experienced the teaching of the observed instructor and were privy to the role-played interviews between the peer and the observed instructor. The session highlighted the potential effectiveness of the peer review process for providing high quality feedback on teaching characterised both by the detachment of a third party observer and by a perspective shaped by years of teaching experience. The authors could see value for their own institution in trialling a peer review program and then to offer interested colleagues the opportunity to participate in the program once any implementation problems had been resolved.

This paper thus provides a case study in the introduction of peer review into the Business Faculty at the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) where it had not previously been used. It outlines some of the key issues raised in the literature about peer review, the precise method used to pilot the peer review program and some of the authors’ reflections on the project as well as plans for its future development.

The Issues Surrounding Peer Review
A key issue raised in the literature and in discussion between the authors and the ITP instructors concerns the purpose of the peer review exercise. Lomas and Nicholls (2005, 138) distinguish two potential purposes: a quality enhancement purpose and a quality assurance purpose. The first they define in terms of self-improvement and the establishment of best practice and enhanced student learning. The second they define in terms of “conformance to externally imposed standards”. The problem with this second purpose is that it has significant potential for gaming by those observed and abuse by those using the results of the review, and both of these can reduce the effectiveness of peer review for self-improvement and enhanced student learning. If observed teachers know that negative reviews may reduce the likelihood of promotion, higher salary or other forms of institutional recognition they may be less likely to identify problems on which feedback might be sought or to try high risk teaching innovations that may eventually result in better learning experiences for their students once any problems have been addressed.

A second issue raised in the literature is the potential for resistance from academic staff. This may simply reflect a general resistance to educational development given its perceived opportunity cost in terms of lost research time. Walstad (2001, 283-285) argues that an incentive structure that strongly favours the accumulation of refereed publications over improving the educational quality of teaching is bound to have this
kind of effect, a perspective echoed across the literature (cf. Lomas and Nicholls 2005, 141; and Hudson 1999, 400). Lomas and Nicholls (2005, 142) in fact suggest that part of the implementation process surrounding a peer review scheme may require exploration and potential challenging of academic values surrounding this teaching/research bifurcation.

Two perspectives, however, argue against the view that academics are likely to be inherently resistant to investment in educational development. The first is offered by Hudson (1999, 400-401) on the basis of his experience as Head of the Department of Geography at the University of Durham and the department’s explicit objective of managing the teaching-research balance so that both teaching and research were enhanced. He argues that significant synergies exist between teaching and research and he describes a departmental strategy where academics formed groups to collaborate on teaching as well as research. The second perspective is offered by Ramsden (1992, 251-252) who cites evidence that academic motivation is characterised by intrinsic features such as the value of better teaching or the nature of research itself rather than incentives built into promotion and salary structures. Academics will thus be willing to engage in educational development activities even at the cost of reduced time for research if they believe the activity will genuinely enhance their teaching and improve their students’ learning.

The purpose for engaging in peer review and the possibility of academic resistance are thus likely to have important implications for the effectiveness of peer review systems and the UTS program attempted to take these issues into consideration.

Methodology

The pilot program at UTS was thus designed to build on the insights gleaned from the literature and from discussions with ITP instructors. Its characteristics were:

(i) A Quality Enhancement Purpose

The first feature of the program was that it was designed for self-improvement and not as part of any quality assurance process in the sense used by Lomas and Nicholls (2005). This, of course, assumes that this purpose is superior to the quality assurance purpose and that the importance of facilitating improvements in teaching and of creating or supporting a culture in which this objective is intrinsically valued is paramount. Of course where this objective is achieved extrinsic rewards are likely to follow. An institution known for the quality of its teaching is more likely to attract better students, be able to charge higher tuition fees and thus pay its staff higher salaries than one which has a poor reputation. But explicitly structuring an environment around such extrinsic objectives was judged to be counter productive.

(ii) A Collaborative Approach

A second feature of the program was that it was designed to be collaborative. This collaboration operated at two levels. At the first, reviews were undertaken in collaborative partnerships where A observed B and provided feedback, and B subsequently observed A and provided feedback. In this kind of approach, power is allocated and structured reciprocally rather than in a way that makes either party feel inferior. It also suggests that academics at the same level of appointment should observe each other rather than that senior academics pair with junior colleagues. It reflects the ‘critical friend’ approach (cf. Lomas and Nicholls 2005, 138) or the ‘someone you trust’ principle of Pugel and Shubert (2008).

At the second level of collaboration, the approach to be taken by each collaborative pair was discussed and negotiated by a larger group of four. This reflects Hudson’s
(1999) strategy of having groups collaborate on teaching approaches to facilitate the sharing of ideas for teaching delivery, assessment, use of technology, curriculum design and so on.

(iii) Modelling the Intrinsic Benefits of Peer Review

The third feature of the program was designed to overcome the potential for academic resistance noted in the previous section. Since the program was to be voluntary and was designed for self-improvement, the danger of academic non-engagement was a major concern. Thus the peer review process was trialled in full by the pilot group of four and then showcased in a regular seminar slot to one of the Schools within the Faculty of Business. In this presentation, the overall process was outlined, with some stress on the first of the features described above, the intrinsic benefits were enumerated in terms of the participants’ experience, and a realistic assessment was offered of the time costs involved. The idea was to provide adequate information on which better decisions could be made about involvement in the program and to reduce the cost of involvement to some extent by demonstrating that some of the kinks in program design had been ironed out and that a workable system was already in place.

(iv) A Voluntary, Confidential and Reciprocal Review Structure

The methodology followed for the review process itself was similar to that outlined in Pugel and Shubert (2008) and Bingham and Ottewill (2001, 34-35). The approach was comprised of three elements:

- **A pre-observation meeting** provided the observer with some context for the observed class, allowed the observed teacher to set no-go areas for which feedback was not wanted, and identified key issues for which feedback was particularly sought;

- **An observed class** where the observer paid particular attention to the issues on which feedback was particularly sought but also made general observations on other features of the class outside the no-go areas. Here the larger group decided two aspects of the overall approach to be taken in the observation process: feedback was only to be given on teaching method and classroom management and not on content; a full class was to be observed rather than only a segment. Given that classes were 2 hours in duration this was not an inconsequential decision but observation of the flow of the class from beginning to end was regarded as important for effective overall feedback;

- **A post-observation meeting** soon after the observed class where the observed teacher first reflected on how the class had gone and then the observer provided feedback on the specific items identified by the observed teacher in the pre-observation interview as well as on any other areas outside the no-go zones. The larger group of four stressed that feedback should be constructive, should address what worked as well as what did not, and when dealing with problems should be couched in specific terms with tangible suggestions for improvement.

Once the review structure was agreed, the pilot team of four was allocated into pairs for observation and feedback. This was done by discussion and mutual agreement. The pairs are referred to below as the A-B pair and the C-D pair. Pre-observation meetings were then held, classes observed and feedback provided to observed instructors. To provide data for later consideration the pre- and post-observation
Table 1  Characteristics of the Two Classes Observed in the A-B Pair

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of Lecturer A’s Course</th>
<th>Characteristics of Lecturer B’s Course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• New teaching assignment;</td>
<td>• Established teaching assignment;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2nd year subject dealing with</td>
<td>• 2nd year subject dealing with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quantitative techniques;</td>
<td>macroeconomic theory;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Large class of around 250 students;</td>
<td>• Large class of around 250 students;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Student interest and expectations low</td>
<td>• Reasonably good rapport with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>making class management difficult;</td>
<td>students but not as good as past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• History of technology problems;</td>
<td>classes;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Class would deal with data volatility</td>
<td>• Class would deal with construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and how this must be taken into</td>
<td>of some complex diagrams that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>account when testing hypotheses.</td>
<td>build progressively.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2  Feedback Provided in Relation to Feedback Sought: B Observing A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feedback Sought by A</th>
<th>Feedback Provided by B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness in dealing with a few concepts thoroughly rather than a larger number of</td>
<td>The few concepts did not come across as clearly as they might have and a number of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>concepts more superficially</td>
<td>concepts seemed to be rushed a little to fit them into the lecture. This made it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>hard to work out where they fitted into the big picture. More time needed to be</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>taken over these concepts and they needed to be sign-posted more clearly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication of interest in and excitement about the topic</td>
<td>Lecturer A’s competence and grasp of the subject was clearly apparent as was his</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>enthusiasm and excitement for the material. This was likely to be a positive influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>on student learning and to increase student interest according to B.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treatment of students in a large class with respect and professionalism</td>
<td>Lecturer A treated students with a high degree of professionalism throughout the class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and especially during a series of interactive activities. The most challenging point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in terms of how students were treated was when incorrect answers were offered by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students and an individual student might be in danger of losing face in a large group.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
meetings were audio recorded, the teaching sessions were video-recorded and notes were taken at the pre-observation meeting and during the observation itself. In addition, each participant made two or three pages of notes about their reflections on the process in keeping with seeing peer review in the context of “reflective practice” as stressed by Bingham and Ottewill (2001, 33). From all of this material a presentation was put together for delivery to the School of Finance and Economics as outlined above.

**Observations and Reflections**
The peer review trial outlined above thus provided a rich source of qualitative data about the process and the observations below were drawn from reflection on this data. These observations are divided into those about the peer review process itself and those about the attempt to establish a system of peer review in the Faculty of Business.

(i) **Peer Review Process Itself**
The characteristics of the two classes discussed in the pre-observation meetings for the A-B pair are outlined in Table 1. This material provided much of the context for the lecturers in this pair in their role as observer of their colleague. In this case, class sizes were similar for the two lecturers as were the places of the courses taught by them in the degree structure. But Lecturers A and B had taught for different periods of time in these courses up to that point and reported slightly different types of interaction with students in previous classes that semester.

The feedback requested by A in the pre-observation meeting and the feedback provided by B in the post-observation meeting are summarised in Table 2. Information about the reciprocal observation case is summarised in Table 3. In each case the lecturer being observed asked for feedback on very specific aspects of their

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Feedback Sought by B</th>
<th>Feedback Provided by A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ability to teach a complex set of diagrams clearly.</td>
<td>Lecturer B’s exposition was very clear for all except one diagram (on clarity, links were made with previous lectures, questions in the break were taken on board in the following discussion, the ‘pointer’ on PowerPoint and the reference to equation numbers was very helpful).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pace at which lecture delivered. Concern was that pace was too slow to maintain student interest.</td>
<td>The pace was appropriate for students who wanted concepts repeated several times, but he wondered if they could be challenged a little more, and if this lead to getting behind in lectures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management of video/discussion sequence in large class setting.</td>
<td>The AV session and the discussion that followed was successful, albeit time consuming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
teaching or classroom management, and in each case the observer provided feedback which dealt relatively directly with these aspects of the observed lecturer’s teaching. In each case the tone of the feedback provided was positive and encouraging to the observed colleague but also identified teaching strategies or segments of the lecture that were not very successful and provided suggestions for improvement.

For example, Lecturer A requested feedback on how effectively the overall strategy of attempting to focus on a small number of concepts in the observed lecture was implemented. The observer pointed out that this implementation could be improved. Some of the important concepts were rushed over too quickly and it was hard to see where they fitted into the big picture. But suggestions for how this might be improved were also made. From Table 3, Lecturer B requested feedback on the clarity with which complex theoretical diagrams were explained to students. The observer pointed out that the treatment of one particular diagram was very unclear and also suggested strategies for how this might be handled differently. In each case, the teacher made notes for improvement based on their colleague’s suggestions and reported finding the experience a useful one. This perception was shared by both members of the C-D pair as the following comments from their post review reflection notes indicate:

I thought this process was helpful . . . . I didn’t think D saw my best side, and part of me would love to present that again, however I don’t think that that mattered too much in the end. I learned a lot about how students saw me, and the impact of some of my well intentioned decisions on them. I also learned a lot about the physical limitations of [the] particular teaching space.

Lecturer C

C’s comments drew my attention to some aspects of the class that I had not been aware of, and were generally very encouraging. My attitude towards C afterwards was that he was genuinely helpful and that I would like to ask his teaching advice in the future.

Lecturer D

Additional reflections on other specific aspects of the process that might inform the structure that future peer review at UTS could take included:

- An observation that the Hawthorne effect (see Clegg, Kornberger and Pitsis 2007, 463) seems to operate in the context of peer review, perhaps not surprisingly. Most participants reported either putting in additional work in advance of the observed class or being “off their game” because of distractions associated with the observation itself. It may thus be sensible to make several observations in an attempt to get some idea of a teacher’s “normal” teaching practice. It certainly further underscores the importance of not using peer review for quality assurance purposes;

- The difficulty of taking notes with little structure and that a note taking template could be developed to overcome this problem;

- The importance of the pre-observation interview for reducing the chance of giving unwelcome feedback as an observer;

- The effect of the exercise beyond improving a single lecture or topic. For every member of the project group the potential was created for building long term professional relationships that encourage intellectual creativity in a sector where teaching is often an individualistic pursuit conducted separately but in parallel with colleagues.
(ii) Implementing a Program of Peer Review

The reflections outlined above concern the peer review process itself. A second objective of the project was to establish or contribute to the establishment of a peer review program in the UTS Faculty of Business. As outlined above, the initial strategy adopted with respect to this objective was to model peer review and then to showcase its structure and benefits to colleagues. This was done in the form of a teaching and learning seminar conducted within the normal research seminar slot in the School of Finance and Economics at the end of semester. The underlying rationale for this approach was to maintain consistency with the voluntary mode of peer review. Thus the presentation aimed to convince colleagues of the net overall benefit of being involved. It demonstrated the particular benefits of peer review including that an established structure was on offer with many of the associated fixed costs already paid, and it was realistic about other costs of involvement. The overall picture presented was that the benefits of peer review well outweighed the costs and that involvement would be beneficial for teaching development.

The seminar was well attended by colleagues many with a clear research focus. Three members of the project team outlined much of the material in the previous section and the first sub-section of this section of the paper to explicate the objectives, methodology and procedure for peer review. A two-sided single page information sheet was also distributed at the seminar summarising peer review methodology and procedure (which is reproduced in the Appendix). The benefits discussed by the presenters were partly cast in terms of improvements to teaching made or planned as a direct result of the peer review experience, for example:

- Lecturer A decided to switch to using a radio microphone for large classes despite his previously strong preference for using a fixed microphone when at the lectern and relying on voice projection when away from the lectern. The observer felt that the voice modulation produced when Lecturer A moved from mike to voice projection and back was a big distraction for students and detracted from the content being dealt with at the time;
- Lecturer B revised the explanation of a slide dealing with a key technical diagram that the feedback indicated was unclear and confusing;
- Lecturer C decided to get into the core content more quickly at the start of the lecture rather than to contextualize it via a long series of examples;
- Lecturer D paid increased attention to reducing the use of defensive body language when responding to questions and to draw on Silberman’s (2004) inclusion rules to a greater extent. In addition, Lecturer D decided to work on the reinforcement of new concepts using some additional immediate application.

The costs were cast in fairly neutral terms and are shown in Table 4. As suggested above, the message was that a full working day was a reasonable price to pay for insights and feedback that would balance feedback from student surveys.

Two observations may be made about the attempt to promote peer review:

- While some resistance was present to the idea of investing time and resources in this type of academic development, there was also significant interest and lively discussion after the seminar including from younger colleagues who might be thought of as research-focused. This included a request for the power point slides used in the presentation to be posted on the School intranet;
• While the quality enhancement mode of peer review was stressed, the seminar was attended by the Associate Dean for Teaching and Learning who suggested in discussion that even if involvement in peer review was voluntary and the feedback between colleagues confidential, the fact of involvement itself in peer review and enumeration of the changes made to teaching as a result of involvement could be used in applications for promotion and in salary negotiations without comprising the integrity of the peer review process for quality enhancement. This perspective potentially adds to the benefits of peer review and is worth further reflection.

Table 4 Time Commitment for Aspects of Peer Review Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Approx Time (Hours)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Preliminary Interview</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Lecture Observation</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Feedback Interview</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Time for Observation Pair (above × 2)</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peer Review: The Way Forward at UTS
The observations and reflections presented in the previous section provide some guidance about how a peer review system might be established in a context where it had previously not been used. They also provide some indication about the next stage in the development of the peer review program in the UTS Business Faculty. While this development is still in the planning stage, the following features represent sensible extensions given the pilot scheme experience:

• Creation of structure and momentum for peer review by having the four foundational members of the pilot scheme undertake a regular review cycle each semester that colleagues may slot into when they wish to obtain feedback as part of their own professional development program;
• Preparedness of the four pilot team members to pair with new participants in the peer review program to share their experience; or preparedness of existing pairs to form new large groups with new entrants to the program;
• The establishment of a peer review website on the faculty intranet to provide resources, references, procedures and discussion forums for peer review and teaching issues;
• Design of a template to guide note-taking during observed classes.

These measures have the potential to grow the peer review scheme at UTS organically in response to its perceived usefulness for academics in their professional development rather than as an imposed system with a much smaller chance of enhancing teaching and learning. In this way the benefits enjoyed by the authors from their participation in the International Teachers Program and their research into peer feedback might be shared with other faculty members and students at UTS.
References
Appendix

PEER FEEDBACK ON TEACHING: A SUMMARY

Gordon Menzies, Jonathan Pratt, Susan Thorp and Peter Docherty
6 June, 2008

What Is Peer Feedback on Teaching?
Peer feedback on teaching involves entering into a voluntary, confidential and reciprocal relationship with a trusted colleague to observe each other’s teaching and offer private constructive feedback within agreed parameters. It is primarily about the development of teachers and their teaching; it is NOT a performance review.

Why Peer Feedback?
Every teacher receives some level of feedback every time they teach. Teachers make their own assessments of their teaching based on their personal experience of interacting with students and delivering material. They also collect information from students, ranging from observations of indirect body language through to the receipt of explicit comments or questions.

Formal feedback mechanisms are also provided by the university towards the end of each semester. Surveys are completed by students present in class that week, and ask generic open and closed questions relating to their educational experience.

There are a number of shortcomings associated with relying exclusively on these forms of feedback alone in developing as a teacher. Teachers frequently do not see themselves or their teaching as students do. This can result from not observing or hearing informal student feedback, or challenges interpreting and/or applying it. Formal student feedback is primarily subject rather than teacher-orientated, and is usually received too late to respond within the same semester it was collected.

There are a number of significant benefits associated with peer feedback. Peers who are teachers in the same faculty or school:

- understand the context in which the teaching takes place;
- are likely to have some level of familiarity with the content and ways it could be taught, particularly if they are in the same school; and
- can offer concrete, specific comments on teaching strengths and opportunities for further improvement.
A Suggested Method

1. Identify a colleague you trust and with whom you could enter a reciprocal peer feedback relationship. Avoid direct reporting relationships. Peers do not necessarily have to be in the same discipline.

2. Meet informally to discuss the class to be observed:
   a. Discuss the context and history of the class and teaching.
   b. Agree on two or three specific areas on which to offer feedback, as well as areas in which feedback is NOT sought.

3. Observe the class:
   a. Arrive early to observe pre-class behaviour and to find an unobtrusive place to sit.
   b. Introduce the new member of the classroom as an observer of the teacher, NOT the students.
   c. Make notes, organizing them chronologically with the actual time of observation recorded beside each. Record teacher comments/questions, and how many students responded, as well as notes relating to the specifically agreed feedback topics.
   d. Record clear and specific observations of the things that worked well, questions raised for the observer, and things that could be improved or changed.

4. Meet informally to discuss the observed class
   a. Meet as soon after the class as possible at a time and place of the teacher’s choosing.
   b. Allow the teacher to offer their feedback on their own class first. Discuss the issues the teacher felt went well, was disappointed with, and was surprised by.
   c. Offer S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Relevant and Timely) feedback around the agreed issues.
   d. Work hard at offering significant positive feedback before offering suggestions for improvement.
   e. Opt for a ‘less is more’ approach to the quantity of feedback.

5. Make arrangements for the observer to be reviewed by the teacher.