

Critical Friends: Reflections on Peer Review of Teaching

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Abstract

Specific examples of peer reviews of teaching in business disciplines are limited in the literature, yet peer review helps academics improve their teaching practice, develops collegial and collaborative relationships and engenders reflective practice.

This paper provides a case study action learning example of a critical friend peer review of teaching practice over one semester. Instead of focussing on standard classroom teaching practice, this peer dialogue differed from more traditional approaches by focussing on those students outside the classroom: external and transnational.

An emergent framework for peers to reference in conducting their own peer review of their teaching practice is presented. Limitations in the scope and scale of the review are noted and implications for future peer reviews are discussed.

Peer review by critical friends is seen as a way to reinvigorate teaching and is espoused as beneficial (Baskerville & Goldblatt, 2009; Handal, 1999; Laverie, 2002) however demonstrated practice examples are limited. Benefits such as providing a supportive network, embedding a self reflective process for ongoing development, creating a cycle of continuous improvement in teaching practice are espoused (Cohen and McKeachie, 1980; Cosh, 1998; Foulger, 2010). Australian university websites advocate the benefits of peer review and provide 'how to' advice (e.g. Murdoch University, nd). Despite this little has been documented about how a peer review process is conducted in action. This paper seeks to demonstrate an action learning peer review dialogue and provide an exploratory framework suitable for use by other academics. It builds on a paper presented at ANZMAC last year which charted a one way peer review, and demonstrates the reciprocal benefits of a two way process.

Barriers to the peer review process include time factors, workload pressures, lack of suitable peers, resistance to change and lack of institutional support but trust in the 'peer' is seemingly paramount (Bell, 2001; Caterall et al, 2002; Handel, 1999). Career aspirations often force changes to teaching approaches and as academics seek promotion, peer review often becomes a necessary component to improve teaching practice and demonstrate collaborative ability (Cohen and McKeachie, 1980; Laverie, 2002).

Classroom practice, teaching proficiency and the peer evaluation are often discussed (Bell, 2005; Handel, 1999; Laverie, 2002) but the broadening use and scope of the internet as a teaching medium and the growth in transnational teaching, peer review of these growing areas of teaching is scant. This peer dialogue differed from more traditional approaches by focussing on those students outside the classroom: external and transnational.

The reflective journey of the two academics involved is explored as their peer review dialogue unfolded. It details the processes used and the preliminary outcomes. The major focus was on the action learning component and the reflection on action taken by both participants. The peers come from different disciplines within business: marketing and management.

Methodology

The action learning research nature of this research project is based on an emergent methodology which was developed as the peer dialogue progressed. The initial conceptual framework for this project was derived from Stark and Latucca (1997) but this proved limiting so a different model evolved as the peer review process unfolded. Winter (1989, p.43) provides a comprehensive overview of six key principles for action research projects, whilst Greenwood et al (1993) describe it as a "process and as a goal". The comprehensive Action Learning Framework by Young (2009) provided further insights along with the academic success factors detailed by Oppewal (2008).

The peers had already formed a critical friendship of some twelve months standing having commenced employment at the same university at similar times to each other. A peer relationship had already been established due to collaboration on the earlier one way peer project. As per Baskerville and Goldblatt (2009) many 'corridor conversations' had occurred that had bonded and created space for each others' passion for self improvement. Colleagues as critical

friends and the increased professionalism in teaching gained from this as discussed by Handal (1999) was a notion both peers favoured.

Each peer brought different experience and knowledge to the process. One is a “pracademic” having worked in another country in several industries as a professional commercial facilitator for over 20 years in sales and marketing, before joining academia some six years previously. The other had industry experience in the public sector at both state and local government levels, and in welfare, childcare and retail prior to 15 years in academia as a lecturer. Both peers were relatively new to their current university and were adjusting to the cultural and procedural differences of their new employer.

One marketing and one management post graduate unit were selected as the focus of the peer dialogue over one semester. To provide definition, boundaries and focus, whilst still allowing for scope and reflection the following were agreed as the areas for review.

1. Listen to the one of each others’ recorded lectures where the required assessments were detailed. Give feedback from the perspective of an external student listening to the lecture, to see if the assessments were clearly detailed and could be understood.
2. Overview the Learning Management System (hereafter LMS) site of each others’ unit and provide feedback from an outside perspective as to first impressions and ease of use.
3. Maintain a reflective dialogue via email as the peer review process unfolded over the semester.
4. Incorporate changes based on reflection on the peer’s comments as the semester progressed.

It was agreed that the learning was not all about saying what was ‘wrong’ but about improvement and an open acceptance that there was more to learn from each others’ approaches. The review dialogue was conducted with a truly positive constructive approach. The ability to do this was seen as being dependent on the right choice of peer (Baskerville & Goldblatt. 2009, Handal 1999).

The peers agreed to keep a reflective journal on their practice describing “how it felt” and “what was changed”. This was undertaken to further develop reflective practice and a cited benefit of peer review (Cohen and McKeachie, 1980; Cosh, 1998). In practice we found that a methodological variation emerged being dialogue via emails to help capture our thinking, reflections and observations. This allowed us two places to stand – one of participant and the other of reflective practitioner/academic. The critical friend dialogue via email enabled a distance and time for thoughtful crafting of feedback and a place for standing outside the process when reading and reflecting on the feedback.

Reflective practice was a large component of this peer review exercise and has been demonstrated to assist in developing teaching best practice and used in case study examples (Bell, 2001, Rigano and Edwards, 1998). It is also cited as a skill necessary for leadership and as a teacher (Brent and Matheny, 2000). Peltier et al (2005) discuss the importance of reflection for marketing educators and note the lack of empirical research in this area. Peer review is also seen as a way of embedding the process of self reflection within teaching practice for ongoing development (Murdoch University, nd.)

Peer Review Framework

From the semester long peer review process a framework emerged which comprised of six elements: Reasons, Respect, Reciprocity, Review, Reflect and Reaction, detailed below. This framework is provided for others to consider in the conduct their own peer review. Each element of the framework plays a vital and succinct role within the process but they are also linked, overlapping and cyclical. Each element is defined and described and an example of a peer reflection is italicised under each to provide further insight.

Reasons

A definition based on the term “motivation” by Robbins et al, (2010, p.119): “The processes that account for an individual’s intensity, direction and persistence of effort towards attaining a goal” best describes how we would define reasons. The reasons for undertaking a peer review are myriad and should be identified and discussed between the individual peers. There can be different reasons on the part of each peer but they need to be explicitly stated early in the process. This gives substance and understanding to the review and sets goals and boundaries early on. Some of the reasons might not always be apparent at first, or even be clearly understood, but discussion as a first step provides a foundation for adaptation and the ability to embrace new reasons as time progresses.

“This peer review has four identified goals. Two are instrumental and related to publishing, research and promotion purposes. The other two are process oriented goals which are to improve learning and communication with students and therefore our individual teaching practice.”

Respect

The need for trust in the peer to peer relationship is a paramount component of any peer review process. Without both peers having respect for each others’ capability and competence, the peer review process will falter. Respect also captures the need for trust and confidentiality being valued by both parties. There is the need to trust that the peer can be a critical friend while at the same time being free to be frank. Dictionary definitions of respect engender the idea of honour and esteem, holding in high regard and/or to consider and treat with deference.

“We had established a close friendship which was tested while sharing accommodation at a conference. After the success of our initial low key one-way peer review attempt we felt safe enough to go on to the next level.”

Reciprocity

Guirdham (2002, p.423) states “the common place notion that if you take you should give” offering a defined notion of reciprocity that embodies the exchange relationship that needs to be present between the peers. Issues such as time, workload and work ethic need to be addressed in this relationship. For peer review there is an intersection between respect and reciprocity but you can conceivably have one without the other. To have a successful dialogue both must share the same work ethic and cooperative style in order to collaborate and assist each other without the peer relationship degenerating.

“Our first peer review experience was one way however we knew from previous writing experience we would pull equal weight in terms of the process.”

Review

The review is done by one peer of the other in the agreed manner and on the agreed topic/s. A review calls for the peer to put on the critical friend hat and perform an analysis of strengths and weaknesses from their viewpoint in order provide a critique of their peer’s performance. There is the need whilst reviewing to take notes in order to provide written peer feedback and frame the feedback in terms of constructive improvements or areas for reflection. After initial attempts to provide feedback in a face to face meeting, each peer reviewed the work of the other and then emailed their feedback.

“It was a struggle to juggle the time to not only get my own work done, but find time to listen to a lecture by my peer, make notes and carefully craft feedback. The benefits on my own practice were certainly enhanced by the process as I learned as much as I critiqued.”

Reflection

“Reflection is a particular operation of thought by means of which the process of thinking folds upon itself creating a two-tier system in which one thinks about thinking and can account for the lower level of the activity through the higher level. In addition to thinking, the subject is capable of thinking about thinking.” (Maranhão,1992,p.236). Reflection is an ongoing process for individuals. In a peer review, reflection is not only undertaken on your own teaching but also on that of the peer. The reflective circle includes reflection on what you are doing, then on what the other person is doing and how they might improve their teaching and then on how all of those things improve your own practice (Catterall et al, 2002; Peltier et al, 2005, Rigano and Edwards, 1998).

“I had some years previously completed a six month reflective practice coursework personal exercise on my teaching practice, so adding a critical friend to the mix gave me a fresh set of eyes with which to view my teaching practice.”

Reaction

Reactions to the critical friend’s feedback can be emotional and defensive, and reservations can emerge. It needs the friends to be in a secure space and prepared to stand outside of themselves to fully comprehend and accept the challenges presented by peer feedback. The severity of reactions was seen to be linked to reasons, respect and reciprocity. The affective response is very much dependent upon the climate of trust and respect that the critical friends had developed.

When using a face to face method of feedback both peers realised they focussed on any negative feedback, whereas the critical friend delivering the feedback had been careful to craft constructive feedback and include many positives. The email feedback method helped to alleviate this reaction to the feedback. Discussions did occur both before and after, so both friends also engaged verbally.

“I found I was more anxious about giving feedback than I was receiving it. Most of the feedback I received I identified with and accepted, but early on in the face to face feedback I forgot most of what I had been told except the bad bits”

Limitations

Limitations associated with the process in general include that some of the sources of information were not available. The teaching evaluations undertaken in class did not cover external or offshore students. In addition only one lecture from each unit was listened to, so limited observations about improvements in delivery based on feedback could be offered, but this was somewhat overcome by our ongoing peer dialogue.

This was an action learning research study conducted over one semester and only over two units. A semester long peer review is better than none though a further longitudinal study, over one teaching year and several units, could provide a more dynamic and integrated approach to the learnings, to fully understand and document further reflections and teaching enhancements.

This review involved only two peers, and no outside guidance was sought or given other than that which could be derived from the literature. The process was therefore limited to our research, experience and understandings.

The original agreement was that each peer would undertake a standard university anonymous teaching feedback student survey in the middle weeks of the semester. The aim was that if the in-class students did not understand the lectures, then the external/international students would have little chance either. Due to time constraints, while the surveys were done, the reflection from each was confined to the adjustments needed for the current semester with more substantial reflection to come.

Implications for other “critical friends”

Time constraints, due to teaching and service workloads, were seen as the biggest challenge in being able to complete a peer review process. Time needs to be set aside for academics outside of their normal workload in order to gain the benefits of a peer review if these benefits are to be harnessed.

The deadline of writing a conference paper as an output from the process was an excellent strategy in terms of maintaining the peer review focus. It enabled both academics to further reflect upon the peer review process and gain more insights.

The emergent methodology of a peer to peer dialogue via email became a way by which the each academic could reflect upon their own thoughts before giving them to the peer and it in turn gave the peer ample opportunity to digest and reflect on the feedback provided. It also reduced the already limited face to face time available each peer had due to a busy teaching semester.

The benefits from peer review will be reaped in future semesters when the delivery of our units is enhanced, and the practice of reflective review of teaching continues, along with the collaborative constructive feedback and dialogue.

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