



**BRITISH ACADEMY
OF MANAGEMENT**

BAM
CONFERENCE

3RD-5TH SEPTEMBER

ASTON UNIVERSITY BIRMINGHAM UNITED KINGDOM

This paper is from the BAM2019 Conference Proceedings

About BAM

The British Academy of Management (BAM) is the leading authority on the academic field of management in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars and engaging with international peers.

<http://www.bam.ac.uk/>

From Research Practice to Teaching Practice: The Application of Peer Review in Higher Education

Abstract

This paper reviews the peer review programs implemented across Australia as well as with some leading institutions across the US and the UK. There is consensus among these countries that peer review of teaching has its benefits and challenges. Perceived benefits point to the positive changes for the observed individual, including being reflective about their teaching practice, receiving feedback from peers that is substantive, constructive and developmental, and using such feedback as the best complement to student evaluation results. The challenges associated with peer review are also reviewed. Aside from evaluating international peer review practices, this paper introduces a teaching evaluation framework that is being introduced at a large research-intensive university. Details of the peer review and follow up study to track attitudes and learning outcomes will be presented at the conference.

Knowledge and Learning Track

Word Count (excluding references): 1995

Developmental Paper: The paper will be developed further by presenting a case study of a systematic peer review process that was introduced for all teaching staff, including tutors, across a faculty (school). It will provide an overview of the experiences of academics, the obstacles encountered, the benefits (planned and unexpected) of introducing peer review for teaching and a follow up study tracking attitudes.

Introduction

Student evaluation surveys have long been used as an almost exclusive mechanism through which to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching. Indeed, universities in Australia and elsewhere have traditionally used these results to assess teaching quality and reward teaching excellence. These surveys have long been debated in universities and indeed worldwide.

Universities across the world have long used peer observation as an alternate mechanism to evaluate teacher effectiveness. Peer evaluation of teaching, such as in-class observations, is increasingly seen as an important tool for improving learning and teaching quality (Fraser & Ling, 2014) and a response to increased accountability in higher education (Ackerman, Gross & Vigneron, 2009). There have been many reported advantages of their effectiveness.

Most importantly, peer evaluation improves teaching practice and develops confidence to teach and learn more about teaching (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008). Particularly for new teachers, it was important to gain insight on teaching skills more than content, thus improving academic engagement, enhancing teaching and developing a collegial approach (Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014). The reflection opportunities in peer observations also provide ideas to improve teaching practice (Schussler et al., 2008).

While high-quality classroom observations appear to be related to better student outcomes, the quality of classroom observations depends on how well trained the observers are. Teachers often learn best from other teachers (Coggshall et al., 2011). Overall, research shows that teacher appraisal has an indirect impact on student learning, by influencing teachers' attitudes and practices, which in turn, may shape student learning outcomes.

In this paper, we propose to:

1. Evaluate the use of peer review programs internationally
2. Introduce a teaching evaluation framework

Peer Review of Teaching in the USA

The US literature consistently demonstrates that participants view peer review as a positive and valuable experience for their professional development (e.g. Gusic, Hageman & Zenni, 2013).

In assessing peer review and attitudes toward it, the literature reveals a number of benefits associated with the implementation of peer review programs. Positive changes to teaching methods and a higher level of reflection are common themes (Thomas et al., 2014). An analysis of a campus-wide peer review program at The University of Nebraska at Lincoln reported positive outcomes for student learning as a result of peer feedback (Bernstein, Jonson & Smith, 2000). The study demonstrated that within a cluster of participants there was

a consistent increase in student achievement after peer review and attributed the finding to improved quality of feedback provided to students on assignments, along with higher expectations of student performance (Bernstein, Jonson & Smith, 2000).

Many argue that teacher effectiveness is best evaluated via multiple measures to provide a robust assessment, rather than being reliant on only student evaluations (e.g. Ackerman, Gross & Vigneron, 2009). Feedback from students can be influenced by grades, as well as the entertainment value and likeability of the instructor. In a survey of twelve strategies to assess teaching, Berk (2005) concluded that peer review was the most complementary source of evaluation to student surveys as each method is essentially capturing different data. While students may be best positioned to assess teaching delivery, faculty are the experts in evaluating substantive and pedagogical course content (Ackerman, et al., 2009). Additionally, peers have the advantage of being able to offer constructive feedback based on their own teaching experience.

As a result of classroom observation, teachers report higher levels of confidence through gaining affirmation of what they are doing well (Gusic, Hageman & Zenni, 2013). Similarly, participants reported a heightened perception of the importance of teaching and viewed peer review as an opportunity to spend time on teaching development (Sachs & Parsell, 2014). Moreover, peer review has been shown to result in higher levels of collegiality by providing an opportunity to discuss issues around teaching with colleagues (Bernstein, Jonson & Smith, 2000). When executed well in a collaborative manner, peer review of teaching has been shown to encourage mentorship and facilitate professional development (Samson & McCrea, 2008).

Peer evaluations are typically conducted by a trained colleague or senior faculty and usually involve classroom observation along with a review of pedagogical materials. In line with most models of peer review adopted in Australia, a three step process involving a pre-observation meeting, observation and post-observation feedback is generally the norm for classroom observations at the majority of US institutions (Canale, Herdklotz & Wild, 2012).

While the benefits of peer review are well documented, it is not without its challenges and, as previously mentioned, implementation of the peer review process is often met with apprehension amongst teaching staff. Common perceptions held by faculty members are that one or two observations of classroom teaching are not representative of an entire course (Berk, 2005) and the process of observation itself may result in atypical performances (Ackerman, Gross & Vigneron, 2009). Additionally, intentional and unintentional bias is a common concern for those being observed (Ackerman, Gross & Vigneron, 2009). While peer review of research is blind, classroom observation ratings are personal and subjective and therefore not immune to bias (Berk, 2005). This issue can lead to controversies over who qualifies as a peer reviewer and may raise concerns around the context in which peer review takes place (Berk, 2005; Brent & Felder, 2004).

Peer Review of Teaching in the UK

The benefits and challenges associated with peer review in the US mostly reflect the same perceptions in the UK. The effects are observable in both the teachers and the students. There is emphasis on the value and contribution of peer review to enhancing teaching practice, to

the observer and the observed, and the quality of learning for the students. It is viewed as an enjoyable and useful activity and an opportunity to share ideas and practice (Bingham & Ottewill, 2001). The benefits are also two-fold: improved academic performance and enhanced quality of learning for the students (Sullivan, Buckle, Nicky & Atkinson, 2012).

Perhaps what is unique in the UK experience is that peer review minimises a sense of isolation and increases feelings of belongingness (Thampy, Bourke & Naran, 2015). Specifically for tutors, they found that peer reviews made them feel as part of a team and increasingly aware of their own teaching styles and they may themselves implement new teaching techniques they observe (Thampy et al., 2015).

Perhaps also unique to the UK are the reported challenges. Peer review can be seen as a threat to personal autonomy, it challenges academic freedom, and raises concerns about objectivity, representativeness, accuracy, validity period and generalisability of what is reviewed (Keig & Waggoner, 1995). In a later study, Warman (2015) agrees that it can lead to tensions and may undermine teaching professionals' sense of autonomy.

Peer Review of Teaching in Australia

In Australia, there is a strong shared understanding of what a peer review of teaching is. There is less inconsistency and variety in the manner by which it is conceptualised in universities. Perhaps this seems a good outcome. Ultimately, it often includes similar characteristics, designed as a collegial endeavour to improve the quality of teaching. It is understood in the wider university community that peer review of teaching is only one of the tools used to provide feedback, and encourage reflection, on teaching. Other forms include self-evaluation and student evaluations. Peer review is also not exclusively about observing lectures or tutorials and can include observations on clinical or field work or the development of teaching resources or supervision of graduate students (University of Tasmania, 2015). What is important is to include peer observation of teaching as part of a teaching portfolio for a variety of uses such as for promotion or taking up a new academic position, and ultimately for student success (James Cook University, 2011).

Peer reviews not only provide feedback on teaching performance but they also provide useful information about the quality of planning and preparation that goes into teaching. It should also be a development and cyclical process that relies on distributed leadership and successful cultural change (Barnard et al., 2015). It was found out that heavy workloads, limited time, and organisational issues were the main challenges in peer review. For an effective peer review program to work, it must rest upon responsibility, collegiality and leadership. Peer review must provide support and guidance to participants as well as be incorporated into policies relating to performance appraisal and promotion.

Discussion

There is a plethora of research of the peer review of teaching. Whilst there is a shared understanding of the benefits and challenges of peer review, there is, however, a limited investigation into the impact of peer review on teaching effectiveness and student learning. We noted earlier that the benefits to junior teaching staff is the boost in confidence and gaining insights in teaching skills, we have yet to determine the improvement in specific

areas of learning or teaching practice. We know what it is, the manner it is carried out, it's underlying principles, for what purpose it is used, and the models that represent it. Although we have yet to fully understand the significant changes it offers to teaching and learning, ultimately its greatest benefit is perceived to be improved quality of learning and teaching. Arguably, this has to do with the perceived benefits of receiving and giving feedback.

While there are similarities in experiences across the three countries, it is difficult to pinpoint a single teaching evaluation framework that appreciates the benefits of this undertaking and addresses its challenges. The US tends to focus on peer review's positive changes to teaching methods, teaching philosophy and student learning as a result of improved quality of feedback. It also provides an opportunity to discuss issues and encourage mentorship. The UK experience has somewhat the same premise, improving teaching practice and improved student outcomes, but sees also addressing issues around isolation, academic freedom, and objectivity as important. The Australian case is not significantly different from the US and UK experiences. However, the Australian it reveals the current motivations behind pursuing such activity, such as for teaching development, promotion and confirmation processes.

Towards a peer review framework

The following features should be included when designing a teaching evaluation framework:

1. It emphasises the sharing of expertise of observers
2. It fosters a collegial approach that is non-threatening and supportive
3. It aims to improve teaching practice
4. It aims to enhance and ensure the quality of teaching and student learning
5. It is a tool used as part of a collection of a portfolio of evidence on teaching

Thus, a framework should best complement the existing Student Experience Surveys collected from students. Further, the Faculty can adopt a simple four-step approach in developing a peer observation, review and mentoring program in the Faculty similar to that suggested by Cornell University Center for Teaching Excellence (Federation University, 2016) which includes: 1. A pre-observation meeting; 2. Classroom observation; 3. Post-observation debriefing, and 4. A written summary documenting the process. The process adopted in the Australian case study will be reviewed at the conference.

Conclusion

This developmental paper presented peer review of teaching experiences in the UK, USA and Australia. A number of benefits and challenges were noted. Similarities across countries were found as well as unique experiences. There is consensus in the literature that peer review is a meaningful activity to be carried out if it is geared towards offering support, feedback, encouragement, development and sharing of expertise.

The presentation at the conference will detail the peer review program for tutors and academic staff systematically introduced in one faculty at a large research-intensive university. It will detail the benefits and obstacles encountered and present the follow up study to track changing academic attitudes and impact on teaching practice that are starting to take shape.

Select References

- Ackerman, D., Gross, B. L., & Vigneron, F. (2009). Peer observation reports and student evaluations of teaching: Who are the experts? *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 55(1), 18–39.
- Bell, A. & Mladenovic, R (2008). The benefits of peer observation of teaching for tutor development. *Higher Education*, 55, 735-752.
- Bernstein, D. J., Jonson, J., & Smith, K. (2000). An Examination of the Implementation of Peer Review of Teaching. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 2000(83), 73–86.
- Brent, R., & Felder, R. M. (2004). a Protocol for Peer Review of Teaching. *American Society for Engineering Education*, 10–12.
- Carroll, C. & O'Loughlin, D. (2014). Peer observation of teaching: enhancing academic engagement for new participants, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 51(4), 446-456.
- Fraser, K. & Ling, P. (2014) How academic is academic development? *International Journal for Academic Development*, 19(3), 226-241.
- Gusic, M., Hageman, H., & Zenni, E. (2013). Peer review: a tool to enhance clinical teaching. *The Clinical Teacher*, 10, 287–90.
- Sachs, J., & Parsell, Mi. (2014). Peer Review of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.
- Samson, S., & McCrea, D. E. (2008). Using peer review to foster good teaching. *Reference Services Review*, 36(1), 61–70.
- Schussler, E., Torres, L. E., Rybczynski, S., Gerald, G. W., Monroe, E., Sarkar, P., . . . Osman, M. A. (2008). Transforming the teaching of science graduate students through reflection. *Journal of College Science Teaching*, 38(1), 32–36.
- Thampy, H., Bourke, M., & Naran, P. (2015). Peer-supported review of teaching: an evaluation. *Education for Primary Care*, 26(5), 306-310.
- Warman, S. M. (2015). Challenges and Issues in the Evaluation of Teaching Quality: How Does it Affect Teachers' Professional Practice? A UK Perspective. *Journal of veterinary medical education*, 42(3), 245-251.
- Woodman, R. J. & Parappilly, M. B. (2015). The effectiveness of peer review of teaching when performed between early-career academics. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 12(1), 2015.