

# **Reflection on Peer Reflection – reflecting on practice to enhance student learning**

**Lawry Price  
Roehampton University**

**Paper presented at the 5<sup>th</sup> ESCalate ITE conference, Glyndŵr University, May 15<sup>th</sup> 2009**

## **Abstract**

Alongside a background of advances in classroom technology and a wealth of newly created teaching resources, there remains an ongoing need to further develop and nurture up-to-date teaching practices in order to maximise student learning potential. By tracking how a Staff Peer Reflection scheme was firstly introduced to an ITE learning context, and then by considering what specific activity was pursued during its first year of operation, this paper seeks to highlight both the value and worth of such action on professional work. The foci of the paper presented here are: starting principles for the introduction of such a scheme; an agreed process by which such a scheme could be introduced; and the ways in which such activity might be recorded. There was an expectation that these practices continue, can be used as part of annual staff appraisal, and potentially as evidence to support promotion. This suggests that the key principle - that the scheme was owned from the outset by the staff as a whole - was a determinant factor in putting into place a successful strategy. Its overall benefits are yet to be fully evaluated and assessed but stand as a model for wider dissemination amongst colleagues contemplating the introduction of similar practices at their own institutions.

## **Keywords**

Peer reflection; teaching pedagogy; professionalism; staff development; teaching scholarship; student learning.

## **Introduction**

The basis of this paper is to record and share with colleagues a review of how a peer reflection scheme for staff was introduced to an ITE context. The key drivers for this were a desire to share best practice amongst colleagues and at the same time utilise its outcomes to profit the overall student learning experience. The review of a first year of implementation revealed a variety of professional activity, some of it new, and some having been a part of ongoing practice for some considerable time.

## **Context, principles, process, recording**

Against a background of advances in classroom technology and a wealth of newly created teaching materials and resources, there remains a general acceptance of the ongoing need to further develop and nurture up-to-date teaching practices in order to maximise learner's potential. By tracking through how a Peer Reflection scheme was firstly introduced to an ITE learning context, and then what specific activity was pursued during its first year of operation, this paper seeks to share with colleagues both the value and worth of such action on professional work. The foci of the contents of this paper are: starting principles for the introduction of such a scheme; an agreed process by which such a scheme could be introduced; and the ways in which such activity might be recorded.

The link to an expectation that these practices continue and can be used as part of annual staff appraisal (and potentially as evidence to support promotion), suggest that the key principle - that the scheme was owned from the outset by the staff as a whole - was a determinant factor in putting into place a successful applied strategy. From a first year of formal implementation, the overall benefits have been initially evaluated and part-assessed, and stand as a model for wider dissemination at this point of development of the adopted scheme. The fact that staff exhibited an enthusiasm from the outset for formal recognition of a peer reflection scheme, and how it can potentially play a key role in their professional work, adds further testimony of the importance attached to such activity.

Furthermore, by acknowledging through a practical example, the intrinsic link between the quality of student learning and the continued pursuit of advances in teaching pedagogy, peer review (or peer reflection as staff at this particular institution preferred to call it) appears to have proven a successful strategy, at least in its initial stages of formal introduction to practice. The potential for this to succeed and add to the quality of learning experiences for students and staffs like was enhance by the fact that it was applied within an institution and working environment that promotes a collegiate approach to professional learning.

## **Context**

Together with a number of related cross institutional new initiatives, including a restructured teaching year and a revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy, the introduction of a Peer Reflection scheme within the School of Education at the author's institution was primarily aimed at ensuring a level of staff development that complemented and enhanced the quality of student learning. It also signalled a response to an identified need to ensure that an evidence base existed that testified and reflected the myriad staff development activities that consistently happened across any one individual academic year.

The purpose of this paper is to set out the process through which a new policy framework for introducing a Peer Reflection framework for staff in the School was established. A review and analysis of the range and variety of peer reflection activity undertaken within its first year of introduction is included, with markers set for a continuation into a second year as representative of a key learning and teaching strategy in the School.

A significant pointer in the deliberation and discussions that ensued was to take into account both the national and local context in framing the need for and the type of scheme that was finally introduced. This included acknowledgement of the policy shift highlighted by Clegg (2003) towards prioritising the enhancement of the student learning experience, and an increased emphasis on the provision of CPD (Continued Professional Development) opportunities for staff involved in student learning (Taylor, 2005). Extra impetus to press ahead with this specific development came from the requirement for academic staff to demonstrate a commitment to their own CPD (HEA, 2006) in addition to our own institutions Learning and Teaching Strategy Action Plan (2006-09) which prioritised the peer review and support of teaching schemes being further developed and evaluated.

## **Process**

Drawing initially from a number of reference points, including models in the public domain (Kent University, Cardiff University, East London University, the University of Gloucestershire), it was possible to draw a knowledge base and learn lessons from schemes already in operation within the sector. This included an acceptance that whatever process was adopted it would benefit from continual enrichment by new ideas and strategies (Beaty & McGill, 1995).

This backcloth gave a range of possible starting-points from which to begin the debate to create a School of Education specific strategy for peer reflection policy. Identifying how university teachers come to understand their teaching, how they are encouraged to develop their teaching, how new staff are supported, with particular reference to being able to cope with the widening needs of a more diverse student body: all contributed to this debate and gave additional impetus to the challenge to establish a system that suited the School's particular needs.

The work of Kolb (1984) and Schön (1987) in identifying the importance of the fact that whatever is eventually produced and put into practice is potentially going to be successful, was an influential steer in the process. Key guidelines to work within were: the importance of seeking out pedagogical knowledge which is relevant because of its usefulness to discipline specific action; the fact that such pedagogical knowledge is based on ongoing practice so that its impact can be immediate; and ensuring that support is available for experimentation and change and therefore further reflection. The fact that there already existed well established staff activity along these lines, allowing therefore opportunity to go beyond just peer review, was a fillip to the starting process. Identification that staff were therefore “*practice ready*” for the introduction to a formalised scheme lent optimism to successful outcomes for the challenge. The recognised shift from just staff development categorisation of such activity to a recognition that such practice represented scholarship of teaching, was an influential selling-point, something highlighted within the University of Gloucester model.

The aims therefore for the introduction of a peer reflection scheme in the School were clear from the outset. There was an acceptance to specifically –

- Extend and enhance an understanding of personal approaches to curriculum delivery across teams and programmes
- Develop and refine curriculum planning skills with colleagues
- Engage in and refine interpersonal skills through the exchange of insights relating to specific teaching issues
- Identify collaboratively areas for special merit or development
- Develop personal skills of evaluation

In addition a further set of aims were deemed to be important as part of the process. These were –

- A growing ability to respond to a more diverse student population
- A developing confidence to effectively employ a wider range of teaching strategies
- An increasing capacity to enhance the student experience and effectively exploit the increasing range of resources available
- A greater ability to collaborate actively in a shared approach to curriculum delivery

Gaining maximum participation and evaluating whatever scheme was introduced, and learning from the process as a whole, were additional features being aimed for. By highlighting the possibility of benefits that would potentially re-balance workloads and produce substantive evidence to support promotion, contributed markedly to promoting a positive attitude and enthusiasm for staff engagement in the process, and was both anticipated, and with hindsight, achieved from the outset.

## **Implementation – Principles, Process and Recording of Activity**

A staff development day, based around workshop discussion and feedback interaction, was the vehicle through which the process would be established and the springboard for the launch of the chosen scheme. It was very much staff led in as much that management had acknowledged that the impetus needed to come from the staff as a body without the encumbrance of an imposed model. The circulation beforehand of literature and examples adopted both internally and from elsewhere ensured that the rationale and aims behind the adoption of a scheme for the purpose were explained and understood, in place and, with the attendance of personnel from the university's Learning and Teaching Enhancement Unit, the event was able to launch itself on the back of adopted School strategy policy, with a fitness for purpose principle embedded from the outset.

Working then from a set of negotiated, accepted and then agreed principles, the day's outcomes ultimately produced a scheme that was fully implemented for the following teaching year. The essence of these were an acceptance that the key purposes of peer reflection were to enhance and support the student learning experience, support collegiate professional learning, and enhance the quality of teaching and learning. There was an expectation that all academic staff would engage in this process and a time allowance given and recorded on individual workloads. It was also an entitlement for administrative, technical and support staff (as part of their own staff development). All of this cemented an all-staff commitment to the scheme. Crucially it was agreed that the process should be non-judgemental, always constructive, and include feedback that required mutual reflection and scholarly dialogue

Again, a set of core principles applied to the implementation, the "doing" of peer reflection. The need for practicable arrangements was an important part of this. For example, an accepted and necessary part of this was that it should be owned and directed by the individual member of staff who requests Peer Reflection activity as part of professional development. If funding is required, application can be made for an allocation from the Schools Training and Development Budget. Also, the individual member of staff defines the focus of activity and decides who personally is involved in the reflection process. Within this the accepted acknowledgement that peer reflection is more than just peer observation of teaching was accepted. It could involve reflection on teaching plans, teaching and learning issues generally, assessment, or any aspect of an individual's working practices that relate to the teaching and learning process.

The process of recording peer reflection in the School is the responsibility of a senior School Administrative Officer. The actual evidence of recording is completed by keeping a written record of all peer reflection activity, personal to those involved, with information including the nature of the activity undertaken, those involved and its potential benefits. Additionally, individual members of staff may choose to use the recording of a Peer Reflection activity to support appraisal requirements, or as promotion evidence, or to

support an application for a teaching fellowship, or as part of applying for membership of the Higher Education Academy. The School itself (through its School Administrative Officer) records the noted focus of activity, and the individual staff members involved in the Peer Reflection activity.

### **Review of a first year of implementation**

With a record of peer reflection activity in place which was added to throughout the course of 2007-08 by all members of academic staff, as well as some support and administrative personnel, a review and evaluation was possible. This was undertaken by the Schools Learning, Teaching and Quality committee. The review uncovered an extensive and vast range of different, diverse and individual approaches and interpretations of peer reflection activity engaged in throughout the period. Of particular note was the fact that many staff were involved in a multiplicity of peer reflection type activity, sometimes confined to particular teams, but also to cross curricular pursuits and in some cases, cross-institutional.

Examples of activity included the more obvious types of peer review like observing colleagues teaching. More significantly the broad interpretation of peer reflection taken on by staff has clearly led to a depth of understanding regarding the range of teaching activities that promote and support learning. This was well evidenced by recording types of peer reflection that included team teaching and team planning, co-led module planning, team teaching meetings, marking moderation meetings and shared evaluations of the impact of teaching and learning practices. It extended beyond the act of teaching to joint observations of students' school experience, joint interviewing of prospective students, time management review, shared updating of personal ICT skills, as well as international collaboration and the more expected specific module evaluation conducted by teams.

At this reporting stage staff were reminded formally of the need to maintain and continue to engage in and record their peer reflection activities. In discussion that ensued following formal reporting at the Schools Learning, Teaching and Quality committee, a general view was held of the benefits that had accrued from the scheme. Particularly highlighted were the greater levels of staff collaboration and the resultant benefits to learning experiences by use of a greater range of teaching technologies and pedagogies. The real benefits of collaboration with colleagues and how that had enriched their own work, and that of others, including the impact upon student learning, were further hallmarks of a generally held view that the scheme had been an overall success.

Perhaps more importantly and significantly, the introduction of a revised Learning, Teaching and Assessment strategy for the university as a whole coincided with the scheme's introduction. This strategy focuses on enhancing student learning, ensuring that students have a range of excellent learning experiences, and are provided with a balanced and effective assessment portfolio. Additionally, it seeks to provide opportunities for students to engage in work-related learning and community initiatives; aims to create supportive

and inspiring learning environments; lays emphasis on the importance of the student voice in university policy and strategy; and supports the professional development of teaching and support staff. On the final point alone there is a close alignment with the contribution a peer reflection scheme can make to this, as well as key contributions to many of the facets noted here.

## **Conclusions**

On balance, and as a result of thorough evaluation and analysis, the establishment and successful implementation of a peer reflection scheme would appear to have met its main objectives. The importance of establishing and agreeing the scheme's principles and processes and the fact that it should be created, and therefore owned by staff themselves, were of fundamental significance within this. The value and worth of such activity, and what it contributes to staff and students' work alike in terms of quality and enhancement, are measurable both in terms of the quantity and variety of activity undertaken.

What remains is for the momentum achieved to date to be maintained, sustained and the impetus achieved to be built upon. As part of an institution-wide attempt to place the student experience at the centre of strategic development, peer reflection activity is a key component, and one that is central to such an objective being achieved. The School of Education approach adopted at this particular institution has empowered its staff to take the lead with this, strengthen already established collaborative working practices, and established such activity as a significant component of staff development. Its relevance and usefulness is acknowledged as part of personal review and reflection, and can be used as testimony to annual appraisal processes.

Developing a bespoke policy for peer reflection of teaching clearly needs to match to institutional context and identified need. Understanding its purpose and recognising its potential for improving practices needs stressing at the outset of the process, as does the fact that this would also represent practices that already exist and are ongoing anyway. Putting any such scheme into the category of "*must do's*" as part of normal workload requirements needs to be avoided – far better to address its status and importance as just a normal part of working practices, with the driver and initiative being the individual member of staff. If its acceptance as something of real worth and value is recognised as being significant in supporting student and enhancing student learning, then its place as a key feature and component of learning and teaching practices stands a good chance of being further developed and is crucial to the sustaining of these laudable goals.

## References

Beaty, L. & I. McGill, (1995) Action learning: a guide for professional, management and educational development, London: Kogan Page

Clegg, S. (2003) Learning and teaching policies in higher education: mediations and contradictions of practice, British Educational Research Journal, 29 (6): 803-819

Kolb, D.A. (1984) Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development, London: Prentice-Hall

Schön, D.A. (1987) Educating the reflective practitioner, London: Jossey-Bass

Taylor, R. (2005) Lifelong learning and the Labour governments 1997-2004, Oxford Review of Education, 31 (1): 101-118

Kent University, Cardiff University, East London University, University of Gloucestershire – Peer Review policies and resource documents