Peer Review in an Online Learning Environment

Abstract

Anglia Ruskin University has an established peer observation scheme for classroom teaching. However, with the expansion of online learning and teaching it was recognised that there was an urgent need to develop an equivalent scheme for online teachers. In 2010, the Anglia Learning and Teaching team at Anglia Ruskin University granted the authors of this paper a Learning and Teaching Project Award, the aim of which was to develop a peer review scheme for online learning and teaching.

The project involved engaging with the literature available on peer review in online teaching and learning and considering how the elements of good practice identified might be applied within the Faculty of Health and Social Care. The authors believe an emphasis within the peer review process on the development of online learning skills is required, as this is a learning medium which is changing with extraordinary speed and is less familiar to many staff. Thus, one of the aims is to identify and disseminate areas of good practice in order that staff can design evidence-based learning environments. If the student experience is to be maintained at a high level those involved in the process are, and will be, required to design, develop and utilise the tools and processes inherent in an electronic learning environment.

Keywords

peer review, online learning environments, identification of good practice

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Introduction

“A significant part of the project involved undertaking an extensive literature review. This presented specific challenges, as it became apparent that, as yet, there is little consensus regarding the terminology; and in some of the literature the terms peer review and peer observation are used interchangeably. Therefore, the terms peer observation and peer review were both utilised within the literature searches. These terms cover a wide range of activities, from colleagues informally reviewing each others' learning and teaching strategies and ideas (Bennett and Santy, 2009) to much more structured frameworks. Rowe, Solomonides and Handal (2010) summarise the discussion by stating:

“It is used as a professional development activity to inform and enhance practice, and it can be done informally as an arrangement between just two colleagues or as part of a professional development process.”

Available at: www.mq.edu.au./ltc/pdfs/FBE_peer_obs.pdf

Peer review is now emerging as the preferred term and has been adopted by Anglia Ruskin University in the Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LTA) Strategy 2011-14, and will therefore be the preferred term throughout this paper.

Current Peer Review Practice at Anglia Ruskin University

Anglia Ruskin University has an existing peer observation scheme for classroom teaching, which has been in place since 2008. The process involves a time-limited, peer observation of a single teaching session, within a classroom setting, undertaken by an academic peer, and is intended to be 'a developmental interaction between peers not an assessment or appraisal' (Anglia Ruskin University, 2008). The established scheme is currently under revision and undergoing significant changes, with a view to introducing a comprehensive peer review strategy, as stated within the recently published University LTA strategy.

There is evidence that the current process has already evolved in some Faculties to encapsulate the breadth of the learning and teaching strategies utilised within their specialist field.

Early in the project it became clear that any peer review process will need to be sufficiently flexible to embrace future learning, teaching and assessment opportunities and therefore encompass classroom, blended and distance learning in ways that suit the time, place and nature of the individual student group.

Rapid advances in technology and the future anticipated developments for educators require a proactive process for change – an approach based on sound pedagogical principles which can be easily extended. This progression of peer review may be more complex and potentially challenging to all participants. However, a developmental emphasis should help individuals to evidence effective teaching practice and, arguably, the experience for all parties will prove to be illuminating and rewarding. The nature of feedback
to be given by reviewers can be particularly important in the online learning and teaching process, as it can be an isolated experience.

“I think the big issue for me is that I wonder if I am getting it right as I don’t really have a ‘peer’ group to work with.”

(Bennett & Santy, 2009, p. 405)

The recipient of peer feedback requires clarity, positive feedback and an indication of appropriate steps towards change, if required.

**Peer Review in Online Learning and Teaching**

There is a plethora of information relating to the advantages of peer review in the traditional classroom setting (Hammersley-Fletcher, 2004; Marshall, 2004). Peer review in this environment is about accountability, enhancing personal learning through feedback and reflection and raising the standard of learning and teaching in an institution by encouraging and identifying best practice (Gosling, 2000).

McKenzie, et al. (2008) echo these aims when they talk about their aspirations for peer review in online learning and teaching:

“The first is the need to enhance our capacity to improve the quality of teaching and learning in blended learning environments. The second, to extend the range of evidence for good teaching in blended learning environments beyond student feedback to include scholarly peer review processes that can be embedded in institutional practices and used across institutions.”

(McKenzie, et al., ascilite conference, 2008)

The notion that good practice in online learning environments should be identified and shared is supported by Wood and Rigmore (2003) and Swinglehurst (2006). Online learning environments are developing at a rapid rate (Bennett & Barp, 2008) and are showcasing a multiplicity of alternative models of education. This is certainly the case at Anglia Ruskin University, where the development of online courses is rapidly expanding, with all modules required to have an online presence by the end of 2011, and an increasing number of blended and distance learning modules.

There is growing evidence that Anglia Ruskin colleagues are already using the virtual learning environment in innovative ways to improve the learning experiences of their students. For example, the development of an online induction programme for distance learning within the Faculty is now becoming mainstream in other developing modules.

A peer review process in online learning is intended to disseminate the good practice taking place here. The culmination of the project identifies key criteria which could be incorporated into a comprehensive framework (Appendix 1). The framework allows for a range of online activities to be reviewed, including online discussions and the role of the moderator, the effectiveness of an online activity, and innovative uses of technology to influence teaching, including the use of podcasts and online lectures.

The rapid pace of change within online teaching means that some aspects may not be familiar to staff, and guidance containing standards of good practice may need to be incorporated as part of the framework. This complements work being undertaken within Anglia Ruskin led by Anglia Learning and Teaching. There is also a substantive amount of work undertaken by other national and international organisations.
As previously identified, there is a large spectrum of peer review processes and frameworks, some of which are very informal, as described by Bennett and Santy (2009):

“there was a conscious decision not to use ‘checklists’, not to ‘evaluate’ each other’s practice but to engage in observation as exploration of the issues agreed at the outset…."

(p. 405)

Others such as McKenzie, et al. (2009) and Boud and Prosser (2002) adopt a more formalised approach with defined guidelines. This seems to be more appropriate for an institution-wide approach; therefore, the authors have begun work on criteria to include in an initial framework (Appendix 1). We consider this to incorporate many key points; however, it is very much a first step in the process. Anglia Ruskin University is currently developing a peer review strategy and by 2012-14 expects all aspects of teaching to be reviewed (Anglia Learning and Teaching, 2011). Therefore, this paper should provide an opportunity for more detailed discussion and evaluation.

Considerations When Implementing a Peer Review Process

In any pilot project several components require evaluation, for example, modification of the individual elements may be required for blended learning, distance learning, programmes with a practice element and those intended to facilitate international students. The method of communication between the individual being reviewed and the reviewer needs consideration: should the process be face to face or online? An online system could be managed relatively simply with email communication, or some centres have designed specific software for this purpose (Wood & Friedel, 2009).

Students need to be informed when peer review takes place as their thoughts and postings are an intrinsic part of the online learning process, although consideration should be given to how this may affect the overall learning experience. Arguably, an online presence may be less intrusive than observation within a classroom environment where the reviewer has a visible presence.

“The observer…….can influence what is being observed, especially when the class is small. This can distort the value of the observations.”

(Gosling, 2002, cited in Bennett & Barp, 2008)

The nature of time in the online environment can be a challenge because it is asynchronous. Discussions between students, or student and tutor in the online environment, may be available for an extended period of time and are a semi-permanent record of the group’s interactions. This may be a challenge for reviewers, as the online discussion being reviewed may link to previous content and therefore read out of context, or may be excluded from the process. Arguably, the potential complexity of the process has implications for time management (McKenzie, et al., 2008).

“We had decided to allow one hour for Online Peer Observation but in fact it took much longer. It was necessary to read through many postings to really follow up a threaded discussion and on this basis find out what was really happening.”

(Bennett & Barp, 2008, p. 568)
Having a university wide pro-forma agreed with Anglia Learning and Teaching may circumvent several of these issues.

It could also be advantageous if the peer review framework was linked in some way to the existing system of student feedback similar to that described by McKenzie, Pelliccione and Parker (2008): ‘a peer review system is being developed to complement information that can be provided by students’. However, detailed consideration of this point is beyond the remit of this paper.

Conclusion
The project aims were to consider the literature in relation to peer review in online teaching and to consider a suitable framework for implementation in the authors’ own institution. During the course of this project it has become clear to the authors that any peer review framework had to have a developmental emphasis. Blended and online learning are developing rapidly and good practice needs to be identified and shared.

In effect, what was anticipated was a small scale project, one that would lead to a pilot implementation within the Faculty of Health and Social Care. However, once we began engaging with the literature it became apparent that the initial literature searches would be more extensive than we had anticipated. The potential benefits which we identified to the institution and individual of having an online peer review system mean we would now hope to involve Learning and Teaching Advisors and pilot a scheme across the University in which:

- The reviewer fulfils the role of the ‘critical friend’, sharing experiences and gathering examples of good practice.
- The success of developments and innovations can be evidenced and challenges identified and discussed.

References


Appendix 1

Initial framework for undertaking peer review in online teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clear management and communication</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Is the activity easy to find and clear in its instruction?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is this activity meaningful and appropriate to the students at this point in their learning?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are there clear goals for the students to achieve in terms of their learning? How are these related to the learning outcomes for the module/course?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do the timeframes for activities seem reasonable and are response times appropriate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How do any activities take into account the current circumstances of the student (balance with any other concurrent modules/resources available/time commitments)?</td>
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<th>Research and preparation</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Does the teaching material appear current? Are there appropriate links to learning materials to allow students to pursue topics?</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Does there seem to be an awareness of current innovations which support teaching and learning in the online environment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Are students’ prior experiences considered (with regard to content, language and terminology, type of task, IT skills required)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Is the activity appropriate for all learners (consideration given to disability/gender/culture)?</td>
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### Appropriate methods for learning

- Is flexibility to respond to students’ ideas and understandings, feedback and changing situations demonstrated?
- Is there fostering of students’ active engagement in learning, for example, through effective moderation of discussions and development of ideas?
- Do activities and/or course materials offer an appropriate level of intellectual challenge?
- Are there opportunities for student independence and choice, e.g. flexibility of learning modes and or choices of content/focus?
- Can students relate what they are learning to broader contexts, e.g. work, life experience, the broader discipline?
- Is peer involvement and feedback encouraged?

### Measurable outcomes

**For students:**

- Do the online activities count towards an assessment?
- Are the students offered feedback on their performance?
- Can it be evidenced that the students engaged with and achieved the learning outcomes?

**For teachers:**

- Can the effectiveness of an activity or interaction be evidenced?
- Is this of broader significance? For example, is there potential to use an innovation? Conversely, has this identified students have too many activities in too many modules and does this need discussion?

### Reflection and development

- Can these students' experiences be learnt from and teaching adapted in response?
- Acting on the evidence – showing how previous feedback/observation has been used to inform practice.

(Adapted from McKenzie, Pelliccione and Parker, 2009)