

Evidencing and Promoting Excellence: Closing the feedback loop in Peer Review

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Abstract

It is clear that, in an educational setting, peer review of teaching practice when undertaken in a professional manner benefits both the peer reviewee and the key stakeholders. However, it can be argued that the role of the Peer Reviewer is currently undervalued and lacks appropriate acknowledgement. As educators and colleagues we have an obligation to address this oversight by taking a, positive, extra step within the feedback process. To put it simply, we should re-examine the peer review process and close the feedback loop.

Keywords: Feedback and peer review.

Article

As teachers and educators it is becoming increasingly important that we accumulate a balanced, well-rounded evaluation of our teaching performance and our educational role. (Marshall, 2004) Peer review is widely regarded as a critical component of this process in both a higher education and a health care setting. As a process it encompasses many definitions such as ‘*appraisal and performance related to pay*’, ‘*peer evaluation*’, ‘*peer support review*’, a ‘*process to review ideas and catch mistakes*’ and a ‘*tool for change*’. (Blackmore, 2005a) It can include classroom-based observations, scrutinising teaching and learning resources including online teaching materials and evaluating course delivery. (Blackmore, 2005a) (Bingham & Ottewill, 2001) However, it can include aspects of curriculum design and/or the assessment processes that we develop and undertake. The peer review process can also be effective for clinical teachings that take place on ward rounds, operating theatres and outpatient clinics. (Sullivan, Buckle, Nicky, & Atkinson, 2012) (Thampy & Kersey, 2015)

The recipient of peer review, can use the process to gather evidence to support management decisions that include applications for promotion, salary increases and teaching awards. But the role and remit of peer review has expanded. The Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, 1997) raised the need for greater consistency of teaching standards across the Higher Education Sector, as well as improved quality. As a result peer review is also a process used to gather performance indicators for stakeholders such as the Quality Assurance Agency, professional bodies such as the General Medical Council, and student employers such as Health Trusts. Reflecting the wide remit of peer review, peers come in different guises and play different roles that benefit both the individual and the institution. For example, a university department may encourage peer review between colleagues as part of departmental quality assurance processes, whereas a peer review undertaken to assess an applicant for promotion may require a more senior or experienced academic. (Dearing, n.d.) In medicine, clinical peers may be pertinent in clinical settings. However, if the intention is to adopt new teaching practices in a department or programme, choosing peers

from a different faculty, discipline or institution may be appropriate.

The value and benefits of an effective, supportive peer review process should be acknowledged. If done well it can improve teaching among colleagues and within departments and institutions. It can also foster a collegiate, supportive community that demonstrates a willingness to share best practice and, ultimately, it can raise the status of those who teach. A reviewer can benefit directly from the peer review process. Areas of good practice are observed and incorporated into our own teaching practice. However in order to reap institutional benefits, an effective peer review system requires data to be triangulated and supported with other appropriate evidence, such as student satisfaction, external examination and inspection. (Thampy & Kersey, 2015)

Looking to the literature can provide both parties in the process with ample guidelines and frameworks. (Siddiqui, Jonas-Dwyer, & Carr, 2007) Higher Education Institutions also have codes of practice that highlight the different stages of the peer review process embedded in their policy documentation. Peer review should include a series of steps that require a two-way discussion between both parties. (Thampy & Kersey, 2015) These include an initial discussion to establish ground rules, a decision about the teaching session and the specific areas that require feedback. This is followed by the reviewer collecting data during the observed teaching exercise. Next, the reviewer provides feedback supported by constructive criticism and positive suggestions in a timely manner. The last stage currently undertaken is that the reviewee reflects on the feedback they have received as part of the review process. The reviewee uses this feedback to develop their roles as teacher and educator and as evidence of the quality of their teaching for purposes including appraisal and promotion. An exchange of learning should occur that may result in the reviewer changing their teaching practice, as a result of the process of observing good practice in the reviewee. This can also be used by the reviewee as evidence of good teaching practice that has been adopted by others. (Thampy & Kersey, 2015) (Siddiqui et al., 2007)

It can be argued that it is this final stage in the process that is undervalued and where underperformed by colleagues and educators. How often are the contributions of the peer reviewer meaningfully acknowledged in this process? More importantly, how does acting as peer reviewer enhance the role of a teacher and educator? Can it provide evidence of teaching quality for the purposes of appraisal and promotion?

First of all, let us think about our current reliance on student feedback to inform both our personal and our institutional teaching practices. Student feedback is about receiving information and putting it to use, in order to trigger positive change to areas such as curriculum design, assessment processes, support networks or teaching quality. We analyse the data from student feedback and we often convert this data into 'a change'. Crucially we then inform students about the changes that have occurred as a result of their feedback; we close the feedback loop. This has the advantage of encouraging staff to consider student feedback data. In addition it makes the students feel valued and it promotes student engagement even if there are practical and educational reasons why a suggested change should not occur. (Cavenagh, Leinster, & Miles, 2011)

In many ways peer review has parallels with the student feedback process. As a peer reviewee we receive feedback through peer review and we can convert this feedback into a change. I am proposing that as recipients of peer review, we need to close the feedback loop much more frequently and much more formally than we do currently. We need to take time to reflect on both the personal impact and the institutional impact or change that the peer reviewer has engendered because of the feedback they have provided. This impact could be an improvement in student satisfaction, an adoption of a new teaching methodology, an establishment of new improved or better practice, perhaps a segment of our revalidation portfolio, perhaps a publication, a promotion or a confirmation of appointment. This should be documented and used to form the basis for subsequent peer review. In addition these outputs and outcomes should be fed back to the peer reviewer. The feedback loop is then closed.

Why is this final, additional step is important? Establishing effective measures to evidence and promote teaching excellence and scholarship can be challenging. Current indicators used include publications, prizes, peer review and student feedback. It is clear that simply listing our roles as educators, including peer reviewers, is not sufficient to demonstrate proficiency: demonstrating proficiency requires an evidence base. Peer review that has been undertaken effectively and demonstrates proficiency can be - and should be -

formally acknowledged and documented. The provision of this documented evidence can then be used by the reviewer when they undertake their own appraisals, seek promotion or teaching rewards. In effect it can be used to evidence and support teaching excellence and scholarship. Clearly there can be pitfalls of a peer review process that includes hidden agendas, or conflicts of interest. However I feel that peer review should be an altruistic activity that has, at its heart, a desire to support colleagues and to improve the value and status of teaching. However, altruism and acknowledgement and reward should not be regarded as mutually exclusive experiences. Finally, we need to consider the additional benefits that providing this acknowledgement and documentation will bring to the process of peer review. As a minimum, the peer reviewer will feel valued, which will ultimately promote engagement in this activity and raise the status and value of this aspect of teaching.

From a personal perspective we should make the decision to become more collegiate and generous colleagues. We should aim to close the feedback loop not only in peer review, but in all areas of our practice as a teachers and educators. We appreciate the time taken by my colleagues when they have documented and given me feedback, offered advice, shared best practice and even their teaching resources with me. In particular, we should ensure that we record any impact or change that is a direct outcome or output of our interaction or encounter.

My advice is to try it and if it has a positive impact on your practice, the practice of your colleagues or your institution, then why not close the feedback loop and let me know?

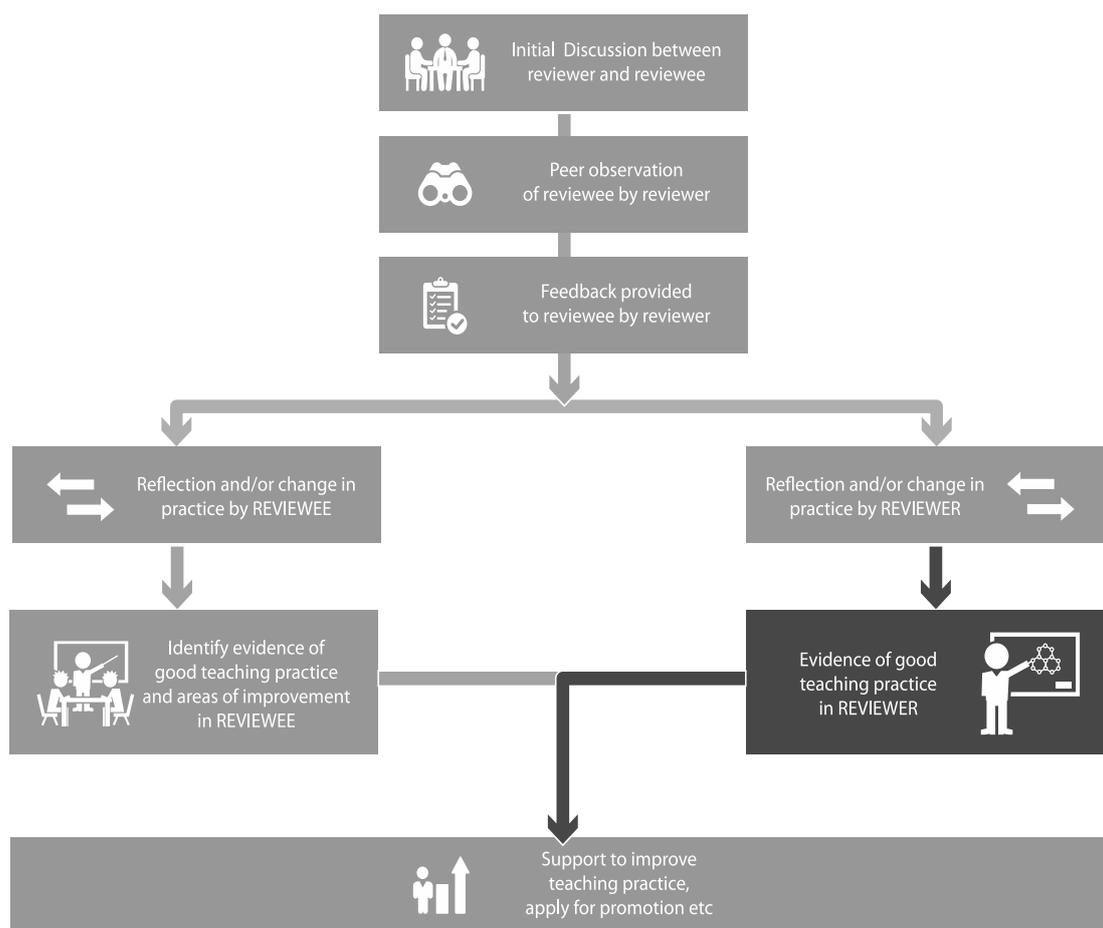


Figure 1: Suggested proposal for Peer Review to include a new step of evidencing good teaching practice in reviewer.

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Declaration of Interest

The author reports no declaration of interest.