

## **Chapter 4: Reflecting on your teaching practice through Peer-Supported Review**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter will examine the use of Peer-Supported Review (P-SR) as a collaborative, reflective framework to enable critical and transformative conversations in teaching practice in a specialist creative arts university. It will offer a practical discourse around the usages and limitations of P-SR for socially situated and culturally imbued, reflective dialogue. It will examine the evolution of P-SR as a response to more judgmental forms of evaluating teaching practice. It will describe how P-SR has been embedded in taught programmes and experiential professional development in teaching and what has been learnt along the way in terms of the use of P-SR for enabling the reflective disposition amongst disciplinary-diverse teaching staff.

### **Peer-supported review**

The use of collaborative, peer models in teacher development is not new, but various frameworks have been put forward, most notably through the exploration of peer observation schemes provided by Gosling and Mason O' Connor (2009). They examine three 'types' of peer observation: evaluative, developmental and collaborative. Evaluative models are defined as judging the quality of teaching; developmental models are where a more experienced or knowledgeable colleague reviews a less experienced colleague and, finally, collaborative models

are where peers engage in reflective dialogue to enhance teaching and the student experience. It is the latter model, which Gosling and Mason O'Connor (2009) frame as 'Peer Supported Review'. They suggest that rather than developing teachers' ability to self-improve through mutual advancement of pedagogic knowledge, teaching observations may, by default, encourage an over-reliance on the pedagogic expert. Whilst there are some clear benefits to having a hierarchical discourse concerning the assumptions, beliefs and values that underpin classroom practice, this dismisses the potential of collaborative reflection at the "coal face" of teaching. Peer-Supported Review, therefore has the potential to concentrate efforts on these socio-cultural, critical conversations which are individually constructed as well as socially influenced (Roxå and Mårtensson, 2009). Thus, rather than reliance on the "system", there can be co-operation between colleagues, allowing for mutual advancement and continuing reflection on practice.

The establishment of reflection, as a practice, within teaching and learning cultures can present a troubling tension for us in our role as educational developers. Whilst our orientation may be as a critical friend encouraging the use of reflection as a communicative and emancipatory approach to inquiry, the need to maximize individual performance may work against this, leading to an enactment of reflection that is far from productive. Even if we espouse a more emancipatory view of reflection as neither mindless verbalism or empty theorizing (Freire, 1998b) institutional pressures may work against this, resulting in more surface approaches to reflection. This rhetoric must be viewed against the contested nature of the professionalisation of teaching, which may be

regarded with deep suspicion by some, particularly when part of intensifying institutional accountability requirements. If, as educational developers, we want to foster the use of reflective practice for 'professional learning communities' (Hargreaves, 2003), collectively motivated by professional and pedagogic reasons, there seems a real benefit to promoting more practice-adaptable, collegial forms of reflection. It is also worth considering what Blackie et al., (2010, p. 643) state in that 'If we ask academics to hold students in a space of vulnerability and uncertainty in which they can embrace their own beings, it is necessary that we create the kind of environment where academics can explore their own vulnerability and uncertainty'.

### **Peer-Supported Review in practice – a case study**

The application of P-SR as a reflective tool to foster 'critical professionalism' (Appleby and Pilkington, 2014) in teaching is a pedagogic approach taken to fit the dispersed nature of the case study institution (eight academic schools, spread across four campuses). A reflective teaching framework that could be used by a distributed team for peer supported dialogue and collaboration was needed. The aim was to encourage teaching teams to reflect on their teaching within the contexts in which they are practicing.

In this case study, P-SR has been used as a framework for reflection and action, to enable teaching staff to reflect with a peer in a critical dialogue aimed at improving pedagogic practice. Given that most academics have little time to develop a reflective process for the mental processing of teaching, we describe how we have used P-SR to generate more collegial approaches to teaching and

learning (e.g. mentoring), to empower the problem-solving capacities of educators.

To address some of the challenges of reflective practice, outlined above, staff at the University for the Creative Arts, who attend teacher development programmes are encouraged to reflect on their practice, in dialogue with a peer through a framework of collaborative reflection called 'Peer-supported review' (P-SR) (Gosling and Mason O'Connor, 2009). P-SR was adopted by the university in 2012, replacing a peer observation scheme that had become a transactional tick box exercise with little impact on practice. P-SR is billed as a collaborative model of reflection in which peers work together as 'critical friends' (Steinhouse, 1975) to 'improve teaching and student learning through dialogue, self and mutual reflection designed to stimulate motivation' (Gosling & O'Connor, 2006, p. 4). In this sense, P-SR has the potential to become a mechanism for collegial self-improvement across the dispersed teaching teams of the university, removing the need for an expert in pedagogy.

P-SR is now a compulsory requirement for all professional development programmes in learning and teaching, both taught and non-taught and is an important aspect of probation for new teaching staff. Using a four-staged form (see Figure 4.1 below) staff are encouraged to work through a challenge in teaching with a 'critical friend', who also reflects on the experience.

**A1: Describe the activity to be reviewed:**

Explain to your reviewer:

- what you want them to review and which P-SR Guide you would like them to use for the review (you should use the same guide to plan your session/produce the material reviewed) - why you have selected this activity for review provide relevant contextual information

**A2: Reviewer records the activity, questions raised and reviewer/reviewee discussion**

**A3: Post Review Reflections – this is the most important part of the review and is to be completed by both Reviewer and Reviewee**

Write a reflective statement below that captures your engagement in the review.

Reflect on (examples below):

- the discussion you had either during or after the review
- the questions you asked/were asked
- what did you discover or learn?
- what thoughts/ideas did you have at the time of the review or later?
- how do you plan to move your practice forward considering the review?

**A4: Capture the actions you are planning post review**

1.

2.

3.

Figure 4.1: UCA P-SR guide key areas

To encourage a more expansive conversation on teaching, participants in P-SR are given access to a suite of P-SR Dialogue Guides based on different teaching contexts, for example, on small group teaching or reviewing assessment and feedback. These guides have been designed to consider aspects of inclusive

practice and contain a useful set of trigger questions to guide both reviewer and reviewee such as:

- Did students understand what was expected of them and how they are supposed to learn (e.g. independent study, teamwork/group work, etc.)?
- Did students appear to be clear about why they needed to learn this?
- What were students doing during the session?
- Were they engaging with the session?
- What was the tutor doing to try to engage the students?
- Were there opportunities for all students to contribute?
- Did students appear to be comfortable with the language used?

The guides themselves have been constructed in such a way as to encourage a teaching dialogue that is situated and adaptable to specific disciplinary teaching contexts. Participants are encouraged to focus on a collective challenge in their teaching practice, and to reflect on this individually and with colleagues through the lens of their own 'signature pedagogies' (Shulman, 2005), using elements of Ghaye's (2008) participatory and appreciative action and reflection.

By engaging experienced teaching staff in a peer-supported, appreciative dialogue around teaching, P-SR has potential as an enabling tool for individuals and groups to improve their working practices and lives, communities and contexts. This contrasts with more generic expressions of reflective teaching, which might be said to over-emphasise solving problems, and 'fixing' things in deficit-based discourses. If carefully managed, P-SR facilitates a non-judgmental dialogue between a reviewer and reviewee, where teaching staff feel safe to reflect on

practice and values. It can also be a collaborative learning process, as the example below shows:

*I found this a really useful session, both in being able to give xxxxx supportive feedback on her approach to maintaining a balance between the group discussion and focused individual feedback, and her facilitation of a session that was both productively supportive and challenging for the participating students, and in terms of recognising my own expertise in delivering such sessions. Consequently, I will draw some of the questions set out above into my own delivery of such sessions. UCA Peer Reviewer, December 2017*

For a P-SR dialogue to be productive and open new possibilities for all participants, the reviewer needs to be able to ask questions which challenge teaching practice as part of a critical and constructive conversation. In other words, we want to encourage more than just a 'cosy chat' about teaching between friends. P-SR can enable teachers and supporters of learning to work together as 'critical friends' reflecting on and inquiring into, an aspect of their learning and teaching practice. In the following extract from practice at the University for the Creative Arts, we can see the level of active reflection P-SR provokes:

*My initial thoughts were around developing effective live feedback strategies that can strike a balance between a group context and group discussion and the need for individually tailored feedback. To help with this process I had prepared written feedback notes on each draft text but made the decision not to share those with the students in advance or during the session, so we could keep the discussion in the room. I had them to refer to and forwarded*

*amended versions post discussion to include student comments shortly after the session. My discussion with xxxx immediately afterward the session enabled me to be more aware of why this approach had worked well. xxxx and I had an open and frank discussion about structure and pace and how discussion and feedback was facilitated during the session. I have been able to reflect, with xxxx's objective description, on the strategies I was using to engage students, to establish a supportive context for the session, and to keep the conversation relevant to each individual while also keeping the group connected and contributing. My specific question around the balance between individual feedback and facilitating group discussion was well answered by xxx's observation. I will reflect further on how I can further facilitate student to student questions and commentary. I feel more confident about developing strategies for this post review, and in response to xxxx feedback. I am also more confident considering the level of student engagement – all students had read some if not all the other submissions. They had clearly understood this aspect of the session and had used the blog to access other student's texts. Extract from UCA Peer supported dialogue, December 2017*

### **Role of reflection in P-SR dialogues**

Although it is possible for teachers to co-construct meaning and learn from each other through a peer-supported dialogue, the role of reflection in this process is less well understood and there appears to be a diversity of definitions and frameworks. If reflective practice is not well-defined within P-SR, there is a danger that value or meaning will be lost and any peer activities to enhance



teaching and learning may be perceived as little more than a 'checklist of behaviors' (Rodgers, 2013, p.844) rather than a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking for action and improvement. As Rodgers (2013, p. 846) states 'Teachers must be able to think systematically about their practice and learn from experience. They must be able to critically examine their practice, seek the advice of others and draw on educational research to deepen their knowledge, sharpen their judgement and adapt their teaching to new findings and ideas'.

With a diversity of definitions and frameworks, it is easy to see why reflection in teaching may not be well understood conceptually, theoretically and in practice and why in an age of measurable, observable learning, it may well be reduced to a behavioural checklist (Rodgers, 2002). This is further compounded by confusing reflection with other types of thought, like stream of consciousness, invention and belief (Rodgers quoting Dewey, 2002). There seems to be no single right way of going about reflective practice and it is embodied in practice through many contingently formed understandings, as Hickson (2011, p. 829) remarks: 'The origins of reflective practice vary depending on the perspective and the discipline.'

If reflection on teaching is not viewed through the lens of the discipline, one of the risks in undertaking P-SR is that participants may engage at an instrumental level, which has little authenticity in practice. Without any prior conversations about the values of reflective activity in a teaching team, some individuals may engage with the process at a surface level, perhaps choosing a reviewer they

know, rather than a colleague who will challenge their practice. The excerpt below provides insights into the limitations of this approach:

*xxxx noted that the preparedness for the session (printed copies of all documents available for all the students and printed copies of the written feedback) should be noted as an example of good practice and might be adopted by others across the course if this does not already happen.*

*My own feelings were that the session was very productive for those attending and while I am not able to write the essays for each student, I aimed to encourage each student to participate by name and the students all agreed that the session was very positive and beneficial for their learning.*

UCA Peer supported reviewee commentary, December 2017

The flipside of this scenario is one where the reviewer conceives of their role as knowledgeable expert, obliged to interact with the disciplinary content, rather than how the tutor communicates with students and engages them with the content. The excerpt below provides some of the contradictions with this approach:

*Your lecture began with a valuable contextualization of Martha Rosler's practice and this piece. You signposted the key text you had been using and why this was especially relevant and referred to surrounding practices, it may have been helpful to use images to help locate examples of these. You established some key topics and themes that would be valuable for further research but would at least anchor issues in the lecture and help give a context to this piece – these included documentary photography, women in*

*mass media, gender roles, domesticity of women 'home as the materialization of the flip side of war'.*

*The practice of collage was explored as a means of subverting and interfering with reading of mass circulated imagery – Hannah Hock was given as an earlier example of a politically aware artist. You explored how the language of media images constructed a collective consciousness and mythology of war and home 'collective experience of war [and home] is shaped by media images – here – there – ideas of seamless interconnected space'. You explored how Rosler's piece collapsed and confused readings of both. Excerpt from UCA reviewer commentary, December 2017*

The success or otherwise of a peer-supported conversation seems to come down to a combination of pedagogic awareness, teaching team ownership and situationally adaptive skills like coaching, appreciative action and reflection. This recent feedback from an experienced academic who participated illustrates this well:

*The opportunity to conduct Peer Supported reviews has been really enlightening. Whilst I always reflect on my teaching practice, it has been beneficial to be able to discuss this openly with my colleagues and reflect on that discussion. It has opened a more collaborative way of working within the FMM team to explore ideas and enhance them through discussion. It was interesting taking the two roles of reviewer and reviewee as this allowed me to learn from peers and pick up points for development for both of us. The P-*

*SR process has triggered some new ideas which help develop my practice*


UCA portfolio, FHEA, 2015

If we introduce more emancipatory frameworks like P-SR for reflective teaching, this also raises questions about whether teaching staff need training and ongoing refresher sessions. Running bespoke workshops on the value and benefit of P-SR for reviewer and reviewee can be particularly beneficial to teaching teams.

Gosling and Mason O Connor (2009, p. 11) give the example of training at the University of Gloucestershire, in which reviewers are advised to:

- Ask questions that stimulate reflection, but do not pass judgement or imply a judgement.
- Assume the teacher has a good reason for doing what he/she is doing but is curious what those reasons are.
- Take nothing for granted. Everything is up for debate by either participant in the Review.

Educational developers and those academics interested in moving beyond teaching observation, might also need to think about the 'practice turns' (Ghaye, 2008) involved to encourage a cultural shift to participatory and appreciative action. For example, in the case above we found that we had to engage staff in training on appreciative questioning and the value of moving away from self-learning to collaborative thought and action based around the teaching team culture.

It is also important to consider the impact of good leadership skills which encourage 'expansive workplace  cultures' (Engestrom, 1987). Good leaders

enable their teams to value openness and whole-heartedness for an honest, reflective dialogue; and reviewees and reviewers need to feel comfortable to explore new ideas in teaching and accept different viewpoints. There can be concerns about one's capacity to evaluate the teaching of others, especially the skills of commenting critically and giving constructive feedback. Schon (1987, p. 303) writes that in reflective practice 'the role and status of a coach takes precedence over those as a teacher as teaching is usually understood...the question is not how much you know, but rather how effectively you can help others to learn.'

The modelling of critical feedback practices (often used in coaching and mentoring) can impact on the quality and depth of the reflective thinking and learning in peer-supported review schemes. The importance of training in the provision and receiving of feedback is paramount here, as it is these critical feedback skills that can result in rich, constructive and meaningful dialogues around learning and teaching practice. If this training is provided, it becomes possible to enable reflective conversations where P-SR can come to be normal practice, rather than a bolt-on measure of performativity. Trust and collegiality are essential here: if these are not shared values in a teaching team, any learning from reflective practice will quickly become lost in the evanescence of daily teaching demands.

## Summary

Through this short exploration of Peer-Supported Review, we have come to some new understandings about how best to encourage the reflective dispositions of busy teaching staff. For teaching staff at the University for the Creative Arts, P-SR has largely been a positive experience. However, the adoption of the scheme beyond initial teacher qualification, has been problematic and it is still largely viewed by the academic community as a normative exercise to fulfil university probationary requirements (for new staff) or course criteria (for professional recognition units). Indeed, there is little evidence of a reflective culture beyond teacher development programmes. We have found that top down attempts at formalising reflective practice through teaching observation schemes might encourage compliance rather than authentic and deep engagement with improving the quality of teaching (Hammersley Fletcher and Orsmond, 2006). If we are seeking a framework for reflective thinking that encourages critical conversations on teaching and learning practice, and helps to promote scholarship, P-SR expresses this and more, even helping to build cultures of teaching excellence. But if we want to embed P-SR beyond teaching qualification routes, more as a practice-enriching reflective tool, it is important that we work with staff to help them better understand the value of reflecting on their teaching. Programme leadership seems pivotal here, particularly the extent to which leaders in teaching endorse the value of reflecting on teaching. Perhaps this highlights the need for educational developers to devise reflective activities and enabling spaces that encourage 'expansive' (as opposed to restrictive) learning and teaching cultures? Without these spaces for reflection and action, P-

SR can quickly become a mechanical exercise to fulfill the requirements of a teaching qualification and staff might struggle to shift conversations beyond a descriptive-reflective level (Moon, 1999, p. 26).

Whichever model of reflective practice we foster in academic development work, we also need to recognise the importance of reflection to help staff slow down and make sense of teaching practice. If we do not strive to enable this in our development work, we are in danger of sharing and accepting habitual practice; perhaps even undermining the democratic potential of the university 'to think, to engage knowledge critically, to make judgements, to assume responsibility for what it means to know something, and to understand the consequences of such knowledge for the world at large' (Giroux, quoted in Berg and Seeber, 2016, p. 32). If we can enable participatory and appreciative action and reflection (Ghaye, 2008) through tools such as P-SR, there is a real chance we could broaden the scope of creativity and innovation in education. As Berg and Seeber (2016, p. 40) comment, '[e]njoying our teaching will not only benefit our students but may actually combat the negative effects of the current academic climate'.