

## Peer Review: Structured, Informal, Confidential, Helpful!

Alice Cassidy  
In View Education and Professional Development

Jack Lee  
University of Toronto

*This paper<sup>1</sup> describes an introductory workshop, Preparing to be a Peer Reviewer, presented at the University of British Columbia (UBC) to give hands-on practice to faculty members and others in order to provide formative peer review upon request. This workshop, which was designed at the request of a faculty member, is complemented by an Advanced Workshop for peer reviewers. We show the ways in which we actively involved Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE) conference participants in a session to learn about the introductory workshop, and talk about peer review more generally. We briefly describe the Peer Teaching Network, created in the Faculty of Science, as an adaptation of the initial introductory workshop.*

### Introduction

Peer review of teaching is a form of evaluation designed to provide feedback to instructors about their teaching. This process is an important component of developing one's teaching practice and being self-reflective. Related terms include peer evaluation (used at Ryerson University, the University of Sas-

katchewan, and the University of Western Ontario), peer observation (Bell, 2002; Gosling, 2002), reciprocal observation (Pressick-Kilborn & te Riele, 2008), and observational feedback (MacKinnon, 2001).

In recent times, there has been much written about peer review and models developed both

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on work done by Alice Cassidy, when Associate Director, Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth (TAG) and Jack Lee, when Research Assistant, Science Centre for Learning and Teaching (Skylight), both at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia.

within disciplines, within a faculty, across disciplines, in campus-wide programs. Iqbal (2010) has explored aspects of departmental culture(s) that can hinder and/or support faculty members' engagement in the peer review of teaching.

The Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at Iowa State University (n.d.) conducted a literature review of peer evaluation of teaching, with links to best practices. Peer review has gained prominence internationally and for online teaching as well, such as through the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (n.d.). Johnson (n.d.) provides many more peer review resources and links on a blog at the University of British Columbia.

Here, we describe a campus-wide program, consisting of a four-hour introductory workshop entitled, *Preparing to be a Peer Reviewer*, and a four-hour *Advanced Workshop*. We also show an example of a model adapted for use within the Faculty of Science called the *Peer Teaching Network*.

## Background

Our campus-wide program grew from a request, in 2006, to help a colleague with a project funded for one year by the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF) within the Faculty of Dentistry. Janice Johnson and Alice Cassidy designed an introductory workshop to prepare faculty members within that Faculty to conduct peer review. Planning for the future, we also designed an advanced workshop as one form of ongoing professional development for peer reviewers.

Over the next two years, other colleagues joined us, with further TLEF funding. Hence we expanded to offering *Preparing to be a Peer Reviewer* workshops to colleagues in the Faculties of Medicine and Applied Sciences. This also allowed for greater discipline diversity within the *Advanced Workshop*. In 2009 and 2010, we also led workshops specially requested by the Faculties of Science and Pharmaceutical Science. In 2010, we moved peer review workshops to our campus-wide teaching-support centre, then called the Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth (TAG) and now the Centre for

Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT), where we also started a community of practice to encourage colleagues from across campus to become involved. To date, we have led approximately 12 introductory workshops and three advanced workshops.

Jack Lee, when working at Skylight (n.d.), a teaching support centre within the Faculty of Science, took the introductory workshop through TAG, adapting aspects of it for application to a new *Peer Teaching Network* within his Faculty.

## Campus-Wide Workshops

*Preparing to be a Peer Reviewer* is four hours and accepts up to 12 participants. It is experiential, based on practicing skills used in an actual peer review. These include three key components: pre-class meeting, in-class observation, and post-class meeting. Summaries of materials co-created during the workshop are shared with participants for their use when conducting peer reviews. The workshop includes the following sections:

- Who are you? Your experience?
- Your questions
- Goals and process overview
- Pre-class meeting: active listening
- Post-class meeting: use of phrases
- Helping trios: scenarios role play and observations
- In-class observation: 10-minute lesson, then pairs role-play being reviewer and reviewee
- Top ten list: summarize workshop
- Your feedback

Jan Johnson and Alice Cassidy first designed question sheets for each of the three key components for use during a peer review, then built the workshop around these. A fourth component of our model, the Report, is the written version of the three components. All forms, as well as other details about the workshop are available through the Peer Review Teaching Process webpage at UBC (n.d.).

As *Instructional Skills Workshop* (n.d.) facilitators and trainers, Janice and Alice know the

value of people having control over what they might otherwise see as the very high-risk activity of having a peer sit in on their teaching. Hence, we designed the question sheets such that it is the reviewee who decides what and how they wish feedback. We see this as a key principle of effective peer review.

Our peer review model is voluntary and expected to be used for formative assessment. As members of the teaching community hear about the program, through web advertising and other promotion, they contact the program to request a peer review. We ask that reviewees choose one reviewer, who has taken our workshop, from within their own faculty (if one exists) and a second reviewer from another faculty. They may wish to have both reviewers attend the same class of their choosing, or have each reviewer attend a different class.

The reviewee is the only person who receives the materials from a peer review. They are confidential to them, and they are free to do with them what they wish, including destroying them if that is their wish. More often, reviewees choose to include the materials in a teaching portfolio or application for a teaching position, promotion or tenure.

The *Advanced Workshop*, also four hours long, is designed as ongoing professional development for peer reviewers, focusing on challenges supplied by workshop participants and based on their actual experiences in conducting peer review. Role-play, and small and whole group discussions focus on successes. All material is summarized and distributed to participants for use in their peer review work. We ask that participants have conducted at least two peer reviews as a prerequisite for participation.

## The STLHE Conference Session: How We Involved Participants

During the conference session, Alice first facilitated discussion about the three key components of *Preparing to be a Peer Reviewer* by handing out cards on which each of the components were printed. She asked people to form small groups and talk briefly about what that component meant to them, from the perspective of either being reviewed or conducting a

review. She also asked them to talk briefly about the value of the component. Here is a summary of each key component and the shared contributions about each (and, in brackets, Alice's responses to particular contributions):

Pre-class meeting: What would you like feedback on? To establish collegiality; To determine expectations.

In-class observation: Observe the students as part of your feedback to presenter; Observe the class, both what the students and the instructor are doing; What happens between student and their environment and teacher and their environment?; Get feedback from students? (We talked about this, though it is not part of this peer review model, there is great value in doing this. At UBC, we offer Small Group Instructional Feedback (SGIF) that serves this purpose.)

Post-class meeting: Does it take place? (Yes, in our model, it is an integral part of the peer review); Ask instructor what they did in the class that they thought went well, or maybe did not.

Alice then modeled an exercise from the workshop that also serves to focus on the pre-class meeting. She presented a definition of active listening: "To hear accurately what is being said and to understand the intended meaning without judging" [Adapted from Centre for Curriculum and Professional Development (1993), used with permission]. During the exercise, participants formed pairs, with the person closest to a wall being first 'speaker' and the other person being 'listener.'

The speaker talks about the following topic for three minutes: "What would you like to have happen in the pre-class meeting (from the reviewer or reviewee perspective)?" The listener's job is to listen attentively (taking a few notes if they wish,

but not as a focus). They then have two minutes to paraphrase, check with the speaker for accuracy, and be ready to contribute to a list. Below is the list that was generated:

- Ask questions
- Establish rapport
- Get information on background of course, class, or teacher
- Talk about expectations
- Balance between what the reviewee wants the reviewer to focus on, and not narrowing it too much
- Provide context of course – what will happen in the class reviewer will visit

This list overlaps with the kinds of ideas that are generated in the actual workshop. In the workshop, we also keep the pair the same, but switch the roles, so that each participant has a chance to be both speaker and listener. After creating the list from every listener (hence, a much longer list), we ask the speakers to show, with a simple ‘thumbs up, neutral, or thumbs down’, how well they thought their listening partner listened actively. We report the findings to the group (commonly all or mostly thumbs up).

The exercise in the conference session mirrored that done in the actual workshop. And, as in the workshop, very practical ideas and examples are generated. Participants leave the workshop with practice in all three areas of the peer review process that they will soon be conducting. They also leave with many examples of things they can do and say to have the peer review experience be as helpful to the reviewee and as positive as possible for both reviewee and reviewer.

## An Adaptation Within One Faculty: The Peer Teaching Network (PTN)

There are concerns about some traditional models of peer review used at the departmental or faculty level, often where the person being reviewed has no say in which class, or who comes, and usually when there has not been a meeting before-hand for the reviewee

to talk about the context, learning objectives, philosophy, or other pertinent details of their class or course. Examples of concerns have been power imbalance (MacKinnon, 2001), that it is a one-way or mandated process that is often mysterious, that criticisms inhibit learning (Gosling, 2002), that it is tied to human resources decisions (Bell, 2002) usually as a summative assessment, and that the person being reviewed lacks control of the process (McMahon, Barrett, & O’Neill, 2007).

Jack Lee and colleagues at Skylight envisioned an alternative, after taking TAG’s workshop. The wish list included that the process be reciprocal, informal, collaborative, collegial, cross-disciplinary, confidential, formative, and not time consuming (no reports). In this model, two members of the teaching community pair up and visit each other’s class. Further details and a description of the process are provided through Skylight.

Preliminary feedback from 14 participants in the pilot program include the following positive attributes: working with a non-expert, opportunity to observe student dynamics, networking across disciplines, and more rewarding than previous peer review of teaching in my department. Curiously, two attributes were described by some participants as positive and other participants as negative or challenging: giving and receiving constructive feedback, and mentoring a peer. Continued work with a larger sample size could shed light on how to proceed with this adapted program.

## Concluding Remarks

We have provided an overview of a campus-wide introductory peer review workshop that started from a request for assistance from a colleague in one faculty. The increase in interest in this workshop, shown by the number of faculties involved and the number of workshops requested is a sign that the workshop design seems to be a success. We feel this is so because of our model of peer review emphasizing the importance of it being voluntary, aimed at formative assessment, and based on what the person who has requested the review wishes in terms of

feedback. The workshop is hands-on and practical, providing skills that peer reviewers will use right away. The advanced workshop, though offered fewer times, is worth continuing, as an important form of continuing professional development for peer reviewers. Our example of an adapted model within one faculty, involving reciprocal peer review shows potential, based on the feedback from the pilot year.

## Acknowledgements

All peer review workshop materials were co-created and co-designed by Alice Cassidy and Janice Johnson, Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology, formerly Centre for Teaching and Academic Growth (TAG), University of British Columbia. Thanks to Isabeau Iqbal, Luisa Canuto and Judy Chan, who co-facilitated some workshops with us. We also thank Karen Gardner, Clinical Assistant Professor, Oral Health Sciences, Faculty of Dentistry, who first invited Jan and Alice to be part of the initial project, and Darlene Redenbach, Senior Instructor, Physical Therapy and Susan Nesbit, Senior Instructor, Civil Engineering for their involvement in the subsequent years of the project. This work was funded by the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF) at UBC, we are grateful to all students at UBC, whose contributions make the fund possible. Thanks to Leah Macfadyen, Research Associate, SkyLight, for her contributions to the references. Gary Poole, when as Director, TAG, supported and valued our work; we are grateful to him for this and so much more. Many thanks to all colleagues who attended and took part in the conference session, *Peer Review: Structured, Informal, Confidential, Helpful!*, at Ryerson University on June 2010. The feedback provided by three anonymous reviewers greatly enhanced this paper; many thanks to these colleagues.

## References

Australian Learning and Teaching Council (n.d.)  
Retrieved from <http://www.unisanet.unisa.edu.au/peerreview/>

Bell, M. (2002). *Peer observation of teaching in Australia*. Learning and Teaching Support Network, Generic Centre, UK.

Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, Iowa State University. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.celt.iastate.edu/pet/homepage.html>

Centre for Curriculum and Professional Development. (1993). *Facilitator development workshop: Handbook for participants*. Ministry of Advanced Education, Training and Technology. Victoria, British Columbia.

Gosling, D. (2002). *Models of peer observation of teaching*. Learning and Teaching Support Network, Generic Centre, UK.

Iqbal, I. (2010). *Faculty engagement in educational development: The influence of departmental culture(s)*. Presentation at the annual conference of the Educational Developers Caucus (EDC), Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, BC.

Instructional Skills Workshop, ISW Network. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://iswnetwork.ca/>

Johnson, J. (n.d.). *Peer review resources*. University of British Columbia. Retrieved from <http://blogs.ubc.ca/peerreview/>

MacKinnon, M. (2001). Using observational feedback to promote academic development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 6(1), 21-39.

McMahon, T., Barrett, T., & O'Neill, G. (2007). Using observation of teaching to improve quality: Finding your way through the muddle of competing conceptions, confusing of practice and mutually exclusive intentions. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(4), 499-511.

Peer Review of Teaching Process, University of British



Columbia. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://clt.ubc.ca/programs/all-our-programs/peer-review-of-teaching/>

Pressick-Kilborn, K. & te Riele, K. (2008). Learning from reciprocal observation: A collaborative self-study. *Studying Teacher Education*, 4(1), 61-75.

Skylight, Faculty of Science, University of British Columbia. (n.d.) Retrieved from <http://www.skylight.science.ubc.ca/PTN>

## Biographies

Alice Cassidy is Principal of In View Education and Professional Development based in Vancouver, BC. For 15 years she held leadership roles at the campus-wide teaching support centre at the University of British Columbia (UBC). She co-created the campus-wide Peer Review Program at UBC.

Jack Lee is a doctoral student at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE; Higher Education) at the University of Toronto. He co-initiated the Peer Teaching Network in the Faculty of Science at UBC.