'Oh-oh … I'm under review!!!'

Sessional university teaching and peer review

Nina Sivertsen[1]

Abstract: Teachers are a community, and the best communities are those with the capacity to learn from its experiences and the ability to use that learning to improve practice (Wenger et al., 2002). Peer review is a critical element of this process of learning and reflection and is essential towards enabling teachers to help one another as well as themselves become better practitioners of the teaching profession. This is a personal account of how it felt to be under peer review by a colleague.

Keywords: peer review; university teaching; observation; strategies for peer reviews

1. PhD Candidate, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Flinders University, South Australia

Address for correspondence: Nina Sivertsen, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Faculty of Health Sciences, Flinders University, PO Box 2100, Adelaide SA 5001, Australia. nina.sivertsen@flinders.edu.au

Diana Laurillard (2002, p.3) argues that the most attractive vision of academic learning is a community of scholars pursuing their own course towards knowledge and enlightenment, inspired but not directed by their teachers. From the teaching point of view, she gives a vivid explanation of what the lecturer meeting a class for the first time, has to do:

> They must guide this collection of individuals through territory they are unfamiliar with towards a common meeting point, but without knowing where they are starting from, how much baggage they are carrying, and what kind of vehicle they are using. This is insanity. It is truly a miracle, and a tribute to human ingenuity, that any student ever learns anything worthwhile in such a system.

Not a small task. Yet, Laurillard (2002) says that teachers need to know more than just their subject. They need to know how it can come to be understood, how it can be misunderstood, what counts as understanding, and how individuals experience the subject.

Although there is superior teaching in the academy, unquestionably the best faculty could be improved and strengthened, as the seriousness of teaching is too often insufficiently emphasised and relegated to a position below that of other professional activities (Keigh and Waggoner, 1996). Evolving and improving our teaching is an ongoing task for which we should utilise whatever means we can. Student evaluation is most commonly used to assess teaching performance; although this method is considered reliable and valid, the potential for evaluation bias is also noted in the literature (Wellein et al., 2009). Peer reviewing is another method of assessing teaching performance. It allows teaching practices to be reviewed while additional skills are learnt from colleagues and teaching philosophies exchanged. Wellein, Ragucci and Lapointe (2009) argues that this exercise must be given as much importance as student evaluations, as shown by the positive results in their unique report on the importance of peer review process for classroom teaching. They also note that for it to be a productive and positive process, it must be supported and valued by the academic leaders and co-workers within individual teaching institutions. Hence, the need for workshops teaching a safe and proper method of implementing peer reviews amongst colleagues across or within faculties. Menges (1985) suggests that a successful collaborative peer review should encourage improvement and not be judgmental. A non-judgmental review consists of a safe common ground between the reviewer and the reviewed, and this equality provides a safe space for feedback from classroom performances.

Positive coaching from colleagues may empower new teaching techniques and confidence to trial new teaching approaches, contributing to more effective teaching (Menges 1985).

I was joining the Academic Internship Program to learn more about teaching strategies, which was a great honour and so much fun – and then…my stomach churned – we were going to have peer review sessions. Not only once, but twice. I started to dread the moment. But figured that I might as well get it over with as fast as possible. I was partnered with a great classmate, someone in whose company I already felt quite comfortable. That helped. Our schedules worked well together, and we put it in our diaries – within a couple of months we had pinned down all four sessions. To me, that was a great relief. I am a planner. I like to know what is in store for me. Mental preparation I guess. But having made a plan from the beginning was comforting.

As the first session day approached, I got jitters and imagined that my groupwork activities that always had run smoothly before, would unexpectedly go awry as soon as my review-partner would set foot in my tutorial. I imagined that the lesson I had planned would not go according to plan at all. That a student acted out and everything would just go wrong.

I needed a strategy, if only to calm my nerves and make me think of something else until I was about to be observed. I sat down and made a few mental notes for my self upon advice by Clovis (2011) … I decided to remember that the *purpose* of the session was to assess and provide feedback about my teaching, not to criticise. I decided to think about and write down and clarify my *objective* as I prepared for the session – what was my curricular topic going to be? and what did I want the learners in my tutorial to execute and present? I decided to be *true to my teaching style* and not to attempt a lesson different from who I am, simply to come across as more creative. Trying a teaching style, popular but unknown to me, might come across as awkward and hinder the synergy between the learners and me. I planned to dress comfortably and create a relaxing atmosphere by smiling and being open and enthusiastic, just as I normally act in the classroom if I enjoy my students and have a good tutorial. I decided to *plan group activities* down to every little nut and bolt; which theme; what materials needed; organise classroom according to activities; plan the instructions I would give to the students; and make a list of possible questions and solutions so that I would not be surprised by anything unforeseen. I decided to come well prepared and to *have an early night* the night before. To eat a good breakfast, plan extra time for dropping off the children in childcare and

arrive early for the tutorial start. And lastly, I decided to remember my *strengths as a teacher*; I know that I am doing a good job facilitating learning so why should I not have confidence in myself?

It is just that the week in school I read George Orwell's *1984*, I remember thinking that being watched was a creepy concept. Something out of my control; invading my privacy. It felt like having someone watching me, would reveal something about me. Such as, the longer they stared at me, the more they would see the real me, my secrets and my soul. I have never liked being watched. In my entire life I have not even once had a birthday celebration, no one to gather around me, to watch me blow out my birthday cake candles. I realised that I was inexperienced in being observed. And however much I prepared myself, I still felt awkward and uncomfortable about it.

Now that the peer-review is over and I had useful and good feedback, I see how I can utilise the peer-review for something positive. In retrospect I feel that I benefited from experiencing peer review cross-faculty. I have come away with new teaching methods, and have had a chance to implement these in my teaching with great success. Apart from being terrified of being observed, I have appreciated all the gains and see that my teaching in fact has improved. Thus, my experience was developmental rather than judgmental, and I have realised a number of personal and institutional benefits, not only student learning, but that also collegiality has improved.

The fact that the peer review was across faculties in the university I found very positive. This forced the review to be about the execution of the tutorial, and not about content. It can be helpful, in regards to how you present, to focus on facial expressions, body language, varying tone of voice, eye contact and repetitive words. We want our performances as teachers to be good and interesting – we want our audience to come back for more. It was a pleasure to partake in peer reviews with my colleague from a different faculty than my own. In regards to delivering his class, although in a different format than my classes, I learned from him about speaking with authority without being imposing, and still making room for the student's views. The creation of dialogue is something that I now consciously try to achieve in my classes.

Personally, I would like to see peer reviews being optional. I would rather have gatherings of teachers and tutors where all share and exchange methods of teaching and ways of teaching, instead of being observed. Some people do not mind being observed, and perhaps even feel that they perform better if they are. It is the opposite for me. My best classes are not the ones

having an observer visiting. I welcome improvement though, and have an ongoing goal of becoming a better teacher and making my classes popular and sought after by students. A different method of improving teaching could be to have a hub containing a variation of teaching methods and accessories, like video snippets, groupwork suggestions and description of methods available for use in tutorial (for example, the Grafitti method, fishbowl technique, different ways of dividing into groups – some of these techniques are so simple and effective, but not everyone is a creative soul and some help along the way is needed). With the lack of time versus what you are actually paid for as a tutor, that would be an excellent way of saving some of the time that goes into planning your classes, and instead utilising that time for student consultations. Having a hub would enable looking for ways of getting your message across in an interesting way, and ensuring that time spent planning is not cutting down on the quality of the classes.

Teachers are a community, and the best communities are those with the capacity to learn from their experiences and the ability to use that learning to improve practice (Wenger et al., 2002). Peer review is a critical element of this process of learning and reflection and is essential towards enabling teachers to help one another as well as themselves become better practitioners of the teaching profession.

References

Clovis, D. (2011) *Uh-oh, I'm being observed!* Scholastic

Keigh, L. & Waggoner, M. (1996) Collaborative Peer Review: The Role of Faculty in Improving College Teaching. *ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Series.* Washington, DC: The George Washington University

Laurillard, D. (2002) *Rethinking University Teaching: A conversational framework for the effective use of learning technologies.* London: RoutledgeFalmer

Menges, R.J. (1985) Career-span faculty development. *College Teaching, 33,* 4, 181-184

Wellein, M., Ragucci, K. & Lapoint, M. (2009) Instructional design and assessment: A peer review process for classroom teaching. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education, 73*

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., and Snyder, W. (2002) *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge.* Cambridge MA: Harvard Business School