The University of Melbourne

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Encounters in the classroom: A case study of peer review of teaching in creative writing

Abstract:

This paper describes a preliminary case study into teacher peer review in creative-writing classrooms. It sets a precedent and offers a template for further research and ongoing practice. In 2011 the Creative Writing team at the University of Melbourne undertook a peer review of teaching trial. Staff members attended each other's seminars and provided detailed feedback on teaching practice according to a number of carefully designed categories. This panel delivers a report on the results of the trial in the context of asking wider questions such as: is teaching practice a form of scholarship? What particular kinds of teaching practices are employed in the creative-writing classroom? Upon what criteria are we to determine good teaching practice and why? How can academic teaching practice be more accurately articulated during processes like annual performance development reviews? This panel reflects on these issues and on the viability and potential of an established peer review of teaching model in the Creative Writing discipline across Australian universities.

Biographical note:

The authors teach Creative Writing in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. Dr MacFarlane's first book, *Reading Coetzee*, will be published by Rodopi in 2013. Professor Kevin Brophy's latest book is a collection of prose poems, *Radar* (Walleah Press). Dr Birch's novel, *Blood* (UQP), won the people's choice award for the Melbourne Prize in 2012. Dr Johnson's *The wind-up birdman of Mooroobool Street* (Puncher & Wattmann) won the Wesley Michel Wright Prize for poetry in 2012. Dr Paterson is the author of the chapbook *Game show game show* (Vagabond, 2012). Dr Caldwell's poetry collection, *glass clouds* (Five Islands) was published in 2010.

Keywords:

Peer review of teaching – Creative writing pedagogy – Teaching excellence

In the second semester of 2011 four members of the University of Melbourne Creative Writing staff undertook an exercise in peer review of teaching and learning practices in the creative-writing classroom. While peer review of teaching is an element in the professional development and even promotion processes in some Australian universities (e.g. at Wollongong University each academic must participate at least once over the course of a tenure), it is not yet an accepted practice at the University of Melbourne. We were motivated by the possibility of beginning the process of changing this culture. In addition, we wished to explore the particular challenges of assessing pedagogical styles in the discipline of Creative Writing.

Pairing up, each staff member joined one of their colleagues' classes in order to observe and review the quality of teaching being presented; then later their own teaching was observed and reviewed by the same colleague.

Peer review of teaching remains an unusual in Australian universities. As Harris et al. observe in their handbook developed through the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, although peer review of research is 'a firmly established and internationally recognised cornerstone of academic scholarship', the practice of colleagues providing feedback on one another's teaching 'has little or no prominence in university policies and does not feature strongly in academic cultures and practices' (2008, 3). The trial became possible for us when we received funding via a Teaching and Learning Initiatives grant scheme. Why are academics seemingly so reluctant to adopt this reviewing practice when it comes to their teaching? As various, often interview-based, case studies have found, one reason peer review of teaching is not more widespread is the belief that teaching quality cannot be measured or even defined (see Trigwell 2001, Bell 2001, McMahon et al. 2007). Another is the reticence academics feel about having their teaching practice, and by inference their competence, 'judged' in this way (Bell 2001, Harris et al. 2008, Lomas & Kinchin 2006). We hope that an exercise such as the one described here can become a demonstration of one way that teaching quality might become a focus of pedagogical research, and teaching itself might become a more open and transparent professional activity of academics.

Like many universities across Australia, at the University of Melbourne the single means by which staff receive formalised feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching is through the systematic collection of student responses via evaluative surveys and comments. This is also then the single means by which their teaching is evaluated for the purposes of appraisal and promotion. As recent reporting on SES results at ANU has demonstrated, a major problem with this system is that if student feedback is negative, educators feel pressure to 'make their students happy at the expense of confronting their fledgling thinkers with rigorous lessons' (Thomson 2012). As the ACT secretary of the National Tertiary Education Union, Stephen Darwin points out in the article, only 20 to 30 per cent of students filled out the surveys, and these students tended to be 'the angriest' due to receiving poor results or being confronted by teaching that challenged them (Thomson 2012). Teachers at ANU now need to explain themselves if too many students are not pleased with their teaching. Lomas & Kinchin point out that academics are thus 'objects' of that evaluation rather than participants in the process. Their argument, which this paper

shares, is that academics need to be active in the process of enhancing teaching and learning (2006, 205).

This paper offers a case study for the development of a working model of peer review of teaching, with attention paid to the particular needs of the creative-writing classroom. Our contention throughout will be that, as University of Wollongong's Maureen Bell observes, truly collegial activities involving observation and review encourage shared critical reflection on real-life teaching experiences, and can lead to transformation of both perspective and practice (2001, 29). If we want to treat teaching as a scholarly pursuit of the same level of importance as research – and many Australia-wide policy changes reflect this goal – then its spirit of collaboration, shared knowledge and peer appraisal needs to be as healthy and vibrant as it is in the research community.

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As a program Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne has received consistently positive results from students in the Quality of Teaching surveys (now Student Experience Survey). Our ambition, then, was not to resolve something that was wrong with our teaching practice, but to reflect upon ways we could further improve the delivery of our subjects. The first task we set ourselves was to discuss what the ultimate aims and purposes of our peer review process would be. We came up with four distinct categories:

1. **Professional development** To improve and diversify our pedagogical practice.

2. **Student experience** To enhance the learning environment and experience of all creative writing students.

3. **Team-building** To foster collegiality through structured reflection and conversation about teaching with colleagues.

4. **A change of culture** To encourage a more open teaching culture whereby the classroom moves from a 'closed door' space to a shared professional space where discussion and sharing ideas is commonplace.

A key point we wanted to clarify to each other at this early stage was that it was imperative we respect the diversity of teaching practice. The goal of the exercise was not to develop a generic set of standards or practices that signified successful teaching, but to add to and refine our collective 'toolbox' of ways to communicate with and stimulate our students. Although there was a level of apprehension about having our teaching observed, once we shifted our thinking to the benefits of both an enhanced awareness of our own teaching practice, and of the opportunity to learn from our peers, the general attitude toward the exercise was positive and enthusiastic.

According to other case studies undertaken in Australia, it is clear that a similar attitude is often, but not always, the case. One key area of concern for many participants in the peer-review process is the level of trust and respect they afford their observer (McMahon et al. 2007, 507). In the course materials for the Melbourne Teaching Certificate, the Centre for Studies in Higher Education (CSHE) suggests various ways this concern might manifest itself: an uneven power/status relationship,

the competency and potential bias of the reviewer, the reviewer's unfamiliarity with the peer review process, peer pressure, and how the results of the review might be used at a management level (*Melbourne Teaching Certificate* 2011). Other concerns involved heavy workloads and limited time (Harris et al. 2008, 16). For the purposes of our small trial none of these potential concerns presented a major hindrance to us, and in fact our trial was not set up to take into account the potential impact of these factors. When considering the model's implementation at a departmental or faculty level, these issues clearly need to be addressed. We will return to this point later in the paper, but for now our contention is that participating in the peer review process is itself a major step towards addressing some of the possible unease related to collegiality and confidence in one's teaching environment.

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Our task then became pragmatic: how would we conduct the process? Making use of the CSHE's excellent design guides in their handbook, we devised the following framework:

- **Reciprocal partnerships**

Four participants would be split into two pairs. Each would act as both the reviewer and the reviewee in what Harris et al. call a 'reciprocal partnership' (2008, 35). This method, as they point out, is particularly conducive to the discussion and sharing of ideas, one of our major motivations. Its alternative, a non-reciprocal review process, most often involves engaging an outside party who has extensive experience and specific expertise; an industry professional, for example, or a member of the academic development staff. Although there is clear merit associated with receiving the advice of a professional observer (see, e,g., MacKinnon 2001), this option didn't fit with our third and fourth primary aims of team-building and effecting a change of the 'closed-door' culture of classroom teaching.

- **Observation**

Each participant would observe one of their partner's two- or two-and-a-half-hour classes. Although a minority of creative-writing classes at the University of Melbourne do involve lectures, we chose to limit our exercise to classroom teaching, classified administratively as either tutorials or seminars. In our discipline, these sessions predominantly comprise three activities: a discussion of set readings (of both critical and creative published works), writing exercises, and workshopping students' creative pieces. The other pedagogical activities we undertake – lectures, developing teaching resources, curriculum design, preparing online content, assessment, supervision – would all also benefit from a greater input from our colleagues, but we agreed that classroom teaching was most suited to the implementation of a formal process.

As to the procedure our peer review trial would take, we decided on a four-step process.

The first step was for the pair to meet and plan their review session. During this meeting, the reviewee would have the opportunity to give the reviewer some background information about the class, identify the intended learning outcomes of

the teaching session, note any areas they wanted particular feedback on, and any potential difficulties. We decided to use a slightly modified version of the CSHE's 'Peer review of teaching resources' document (Farrell 2011) for our 'Review plan' form (see Appendix A).

The second step was the class observation itself, which ideally would take place around the middle of semester, between Weeks 4 and 8 in a 12-week program. During the session the reviewer would make notes according to a set framework and criteria, while paying attention to the particular areas of concern noted during the planning meeting.

The third step involved the reviewer filling in a more formal written report on their observations during the class. Steps two and three entailed a careful process of designing the forms and articulating the criteria by which we would review each other's teaching. To do this, we examined a number of pro formas from Australian and international universities, as well as adding our own categories specific to the creative-writing discipline. Our first decision was to exclude those models that used an 'Agreement ratings' or 'Performance ratings' system whereby a brief statement or criterion such as 'Objectives of the session were clearly stated' was assessed by simply ticking a box. The limitations of this format did not suit our primary objectives: it did not encourage explanations or suggestions, instead encouraged evaluative rather than descriptive feedback. The three most useful models we discovered were those from Flinders University (*Teaching for learning* n.d.), the University of Western Australia (*Peer feedback on teaching* n.d.), and the University of Exeter (*Class observation record* n.d.). In different ways these three models used 'Open comments' or 'Structured comments' systems, whereby observers were guided through the review process by encouraging both affirmation and constructive suggestions. These three models also incorporated their review criteria within the review forms themselves, rather than listing criteria on a separate document.

Following the University of Exeter's model, we decided to structure the form in relation to the structure of the class itself (see Appendix B for the entire form). We included six main sections: Introducing and establishing the session; Main part of the session; Workshopping; Closing the session; Feedback on priority criteria; and Overview. Within the 'Main part of the session' section were three subheadings: Engagement and enthusiasm, Encouraging critical thinking, and Effective management. Directly following each section title were listed a number of suggestions as to which aspects of the teaching should be commented upon. These latter constituted our review criteria, which we formulated from a number of sources (see e.g. Harris et al. 2008, 64–65, *Peer observation guidelines* n.d., *Peer observation: criteria* n.d.).

The fourth and final step in the process was the Reviewee Response; an opportunity for the teacher under observation to respond to the process of being reviewed, and to the feedback itself (see Appendix C for this form).

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At the end of semester, once both pairs of staff members had completed the peer review process, we met as a group to discuss the results of the trial. The filled-in

forms themselves were only shared between pairs and with Elizabeth MacFarlane who collated the results, so each pair did not have access to the other pair's written results. Without going into exhaustive detail about the breadth of responses to the criteria sets, we will address a few of the most pertinent aspects and tendencies of the comments alongside our thoughts as to how we might adjust the process for future years.

In general, the feedback staff members received was positive, encouraging and enthusiastic. In the Response section of the forms, all four staff members affirmed the fairness and generosity of their reviews, the usefulness of the exercise for their pedagogical approaches, and the benefits that the extra level of self-awareness brought to their teaching. During discussions we noted that observing each other's classes was energising: it helped to enhance our passion for teaching, and offered us new ideas to use in our own classrooms. We also noted the usefulness and importance of having another person validate our modes of teaching. On the forms, the highest number of positive responses was received for the following: setting up a class's themes within the context of the course as a whole; the teacher's enthusiasm, energy and passion for class content; and effectively managing the pacing of a class.

Something we agreed to alter for forthcoming years was the structure of our Form B: Class observation record. While the chronological model may be the most useful one for many disciplines, we found that most of our feedback centred around the *activities* students were undertaking and the specific sets of teaching skills required for each. Thus, in the 'Main part of the session' section, comments clustered around the clarity, relevance and usefulness of, for instance, a particular writing exercise, or a particular discussion point. We thus proposed to restructure our Form B under the headings: Introducing the session; Class discussion; Writing exercises; Workshopping; Closing the session; Priority feedback; Overview (see Appendix D). Although some criteria would be applicable across all these activities – effective time management, for example – other criteria would apply specifically to each activity. Contextualising information and offering expert knowledge, for instance, are skills particularly relevant to facilitating a class discussion, whereas the ability to clearly explain an instruction is more relevant to introducing a writing exercise. Encouraging critical analysis at both the 'micro' level of the sentence and the 'macro' level of voice, narration and structure is particularly relevant to workshopping, but perhaps not to designing a class exercise.

As a discipline, Creative Writing is sometimes received with a level of mystification: if you don't give lectures, what do you do? Structuring our peer-review process in this way, then, serves the dual purpose of facilitating our natural responses to a classroom session, and providing a systematic outline of our pedagogical framework to those unfamiliar with it. This would prove particularly useful if peer review of teaching became a meaningful factor in professional development review processes.

Another issue for the future connects to the fact that certain staff do not always teach into their areas of specialisation. For example how is a Level A or B academic teaching into a generalist first-year program assessed alongside a senior staff member teaching a subject in which they have long-term specialisation? Given that the

intended learning outcomes and participatory processes are markedly different for undergraduate and graduate cohorts, and that distinctions are also made here in regard to research-oriented and practice-based subjects, our forthcoming reviews will aim to introduce a level of refinement that takes these factors into account.

On this point, the question of finding a balance between the specific and the general was a key part of our post-process discussion. One of the problems revealed by the trial was that our lack of training or background in the field of education meant we sometimes didn't have the necessary vocabulary to articulate appropriate responses to formulaic questions. To the 'Intended learning outcomes' on Form A, for instance, a number of responses stated what the teacher intended to *do* – show film footage, workshop essay proposals, discuss a reading – without reflecting on how this activity would help students to gain skills and knowledge. Likewise in the section 'Closing the session', some reviewers provided a summary of what had been accomplished in the class, rather than reflecting on how the teacher summarised the class to students. Reviewers also gave detailed outlines of writing exercises, but wrote less about the teaching skills and learning outcomes the exercises advanced. What these sorts of responses revealed to us was the need for further training and education in order to develop our awareness of ourselves as educators and the terminology to describe our pedagogical philosophies and practices. On a more positive note, it also showed us how enthused we are about sharing our resources, exercises and practices, and about learning more about each other's – often discrete, genre-focused – teaching content. It is possible that with further trials of peer review the benefits to our teaching will become more specific and long-lasting. More importantly, the introduction of peer review as a regular practice is likely to bring sustained professional attitudes and research-oriented knowledge to bear on our teaching.

Facilitating this pedagogical shift – from simply doing what we know works to giving serious reflection to why and how it works – is something the integration of a peer-review process will help to instil. When teaching is seen as an important scholarly pursuit, it should be allowed workload time not just for preparing and delivering classes, but for training in education and participating in peer observation.

McMahon, Barrett and O'Neill's 2007 case study analysed the responses of 22 lecturers to the peer-review process as adopted by Dublin's Graduate Diploma in University Teaching and Learning. Their analysis is informed by David Gosling's 2002 identification of three general models of third-party observation: the 'evaluation model' in which the observer is a superior within the management structure and includes a formal assessment of teaching; the 'development model' which also involves summative assessment, but in which the observer is an expert in higher education, and the purpose of the process is primarily to improve teaching competency rather than manage employees; and the 'peer-review model', which our trial adopted and has been described here (Gosling, cited in McMahon et al. 2007, 501–02). One of the key conclusions McMahon et al. reached through their analysis was that the issue of control over the peer-observation process was the dominant theme in the written reflections on peer observations by lecturers (2007, 506). Participants who affirmed that they had control over key areas of the process – the choice of observer, the focus of the observation, the form and method of feedback, the

resultant data-flow, and the next steps taken – felt 'encouraged…to focus on improvement of practice rather than a demonstration of existing good practice' (McMahon et al. 2007, 510).

This is a crucial distinction to make if we wish to effect a change of culture whereby teaching practice is afforded the same level of collaboration, shared knowledge and indeed esteem, as research practice. One reason our trial was received with such openness, and resulted in such a productive discussion of pedagogical ideas and practices, was because we had control over the key elements of the process. We were thus free to incorporate elements specific to our discipline in order to design a model that helped us meet our primary goals of professional development, improved student experience and team-building. On this point, we noted that one way of asserting the constructive, shared nature of the process would be to refer to it as, for instance, 'peer-to-peer engagement' rather than 'peer review', which might diffuse certain anxieties relating to more competitive kinds of performance assessments instituted by university appraisals.[1]

There is a further meta-goal, which is to introduce a research-oriented approach to pedagogical practice. There is a deep body of literature and research into whether teaching quality can be assessed (see Biggs & Tang 2009). An ongoing commitment to exploring these possibilities should be one measure of teaching excellence.

As Lomas and Kinchin acknowledge, 'The aim should be to embed peer observation as part of the departmental culture. In order to achieve this, the perception that teaching is a private activity, which is not shared with colleagues, needs to be tackled' (2006, 206). It was our intention to begin this process of embedding through the trial, and it is our desire that the process will become a welcome and established part of our disciplines, departments and faculties.

Appendices

Appendix A. Form used for review plan

<u>**PART A: Review plan**</u> To be completed together **before** the session.

Reviewee:		Reviewer:	
Name of subject/unit: Any other details to note about the subject (e.g. is it new? Recently redesigned?)			
Teaching session for review (e.g. lecture, tutorial, seminar etc.) and description of topic:			
Date:	Time:		Location:
Intended learning outcomes of the teaching session: (e.g. students will analyse, practise, respond to, identify, justify, criticise, evaluate, demonstrate etc.)			

Class background

Year level(s):	Degrees:	Number of students in class (approx):
Further comments about the group (if any):		

Review

Will the reviewer be introduced to the group?	If yes, how will this be done?	Where will the reviewer sit?
Please note any areas you would like particular feedback on (if any):		
Please note potential difficulties or areas of concern (if any):		

Feedback meeting

Date:	Time:	Location:

Appendix B. Form used for Class observation record

PART B: Class observation record To be completed **immediately after** the class by the observer and given, with verbal feedback, to the person being observed.

For each section please provide comments on <u>what worked well</u>, <u>what might need improvement</u>, and any further <u>observations or suggestions</u> you have.

Introducing and establishing the session *Recalling and linking to last week's session; clarity of purpose for the session; contextualising the session within the subject/course; activities expected of students in this session; reference to assessment.*

Main part of the session
A. Engagement and enthusiasm *Encouraging student participation; ensuring a spread of contributions; demonstrating enthusiasm for the subject matter; providing practical examples; drawing out student responses; variety of learning activities; sensitivity to individuals.*

B. Encouraging critical thinking and student learning *Facilitating discussion so it remains relevant to the intended learning outcomes; clarity of explanation and delivery; checking students' understanding; encouraging independent learning; effective questions.*

C. Effective management *Appropriate pace and time management; appropriate methods of communication; effective use of resources/materials/technology.*

Workshopping *Clarity of the aims and structure of the workshopping process; strategies for constructive and useful feedback; acknowledgement of the features of the particular form/genre being workshopped; sensitivity to individuals; engagement of teacher and students.*

Closing the session *Summarising what has been accomplished; reiterating why activities were relevant; linking to what will happen next week; expectation of activities between classes; timely finish.*

Feedback on priority criteria *If applicable, give feedback here on any particular areas identified by the reviewee in PART A.*

Overview *Briefly note the best aspects of the session, any techniques/activities that might be useful for dissemination to other teachers, general suggestions for improvement/development.*

Appendix C. Form used for Reviewee response

PART C: Response To be completed by the person who taught the class, following receipt of the observer's comments.

Reflection on achievement *To what extent do you feel you achieved your aims for this session? What were you particularly pleased with?*

Reflection on planning *If anything did not go as planned, was it a problem or a benefit? What is there to learn from it with regard to future planning?*

Reflection on observer's feedback *Are the comments fair? Did anything surprise you? How will you respond to notes on good practice and suggestions for development?*

Appendix D. Proposed alteration to Form B for future Peer review processes

Introducing and establishing the session *Recalling and linking to last week's session; clarity of purpose for the session; contextualising the session within the subject/course; activities expected of students in this session; reference to assessment.*
Class discussion *Encouraging student participation; ensuring a spread of contributions; demonstrating enthusiasm and expertise for the subject matter; providing practical examples; ensuring discussion remains relevant to intended learning outcomes; checking students' understanding; encouraging independent learning; effective questions; appropriate pace and time-management.*
Writing Exercises *Clarity of explanation and delivery; appropriateness to learning outcomes; effective use of resources/materials/technology; variety of learning activities; appropriate pace and time-management.*
Workshopping *Clarity of the aims and structure of the workshopping process; strategies for constructive and useful feedback; acknowledgement of the features of the particular form/genre being workshopped; sensitivity to individuals; engagement of teacher and students.*
Closing the session *Summarising what has been accomplished; reiterating why activities were relevant; linking to what will happen next week; expectation of activities between classes; timely finish.*
Feedback on priority criteria *If applicable, give feedback here on any particular areas identified by the reviewee in PART A.*
Overview *Briefly note the best aspects of the session, any techniques/activities that might be useful for dissemination to other teachers, general suggestions for improvement/development.*

Endnote

1. Recent informal discussions with creative writing staff at the University of Wollongong, where PRT is an established process, highlighted the distinction for them between the formal requirements of the review and the much broader, undocumented benefits to them as individual teachers and as a team.

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