

Facilitating Summative Peer Review of Teaching: a software based on academic values

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This paper reports on a summative peer review of teaching process implemented in a university. Software was developed to facilitate the peer review process, demonstrate principles of transparency, fairness and equity and support the academic values of collegiality, confidentiality and communication.

Keywords: summative peer review of teaching, software

Introduction

Peer review of teaching is a valuable feature of academic culture that facilitates and encourages improvement in teaching practice. The importance of peer review in higher education teaching is internationally recognised (Blackmore, 2005) and several national peer review projects have been funded in Australia (McKenzie et al., 2011; Sachs et al., 2014; Crisp et al., 2009) including a web-based peer review project (Wood, 2008). However, the focus remains largely on formative feedback for improving teaching practice (Bell, 2012) while academics are reluctant to accept summative peer review of teaching (SPRT) as an indicator of teaching effectiveness (Iqbal, 2013). Many academics are concerned about transparency, fairness and equity in the SPRT process, particularly if applied to performance management or promotion. In December 2014 the senior management group at UniSA approved the development of software to facilitate and enhance the SPRT process and address these concerns.

SPRT at UniSA

The process of SPRT at UniSA is initiated by the Head of School (HoS), who nominates staff for formal peer review at the commencement of each calendar year. Two trained reviewers observe a teaching activity/artefact, review curriculum materials including assessment items and course assessment profiles and develop a final report that merges their reviews. Where the observations and recommendations from the reviewers markedly differ and consensus cannot be reached a third reviewer may be requested by the HoS. The reviewers submit the final report and notification of completion of the peer review process is sent to HoS. The staff member under review has the option of writing a reflective response (rejoinder) regarding the feedback. A final report is included as part of a staff member's full suite of evidence of quality teaching for performance management or promotion purposes.

A new software system was developed to facilitate SPRT and enhance the following values within the process:

- *Equity/fairness* - The software supports equity/fairness by enabling the peer reviewee to see all stages of the peer review process: initiation, organisation, observation and report. They can also participate in the selection of their reviewers; make a rejoinder to the reviewers' report; request another review on the basis of extenuating circumstances with the support of the Head of School (HoS) or request a third reviewer when reviewers disagreed about their respective observations. A reviewer is also given the opportunity to reject an invitation to review a colleague.
- *Collegiality* - The software facilitates opportunities for reviewee and reviewers to meet and discuss selected review criteria and organise the observation activity. It also enables the reviewee to respond to reviewers' comments via the rejoinder and allows reviewers to reflect on and collaborate on their judgements about a colleague's teaching and then to collaboratively write the final report.
- *Confidentiality* - Confidentiality in the system is enhanced when the HoS can initiate a peer review and view (but not modify) the peer review report. The software also allows reviewers to complete parts of the peer review form, enter observations and write a report however they are not able to see the reviewee's rejoinder. All review data is stored in a secure database.
- *Communication* - Pre-review meetings are held between reviewers and reviewees to discuss and agree on dimensions and their indicators. These are then entered into the SPRT software.

- *Consistency* - The software provides a consistent framework for SPRT processes across the University and includes an up-to-date list of trained reviewers from across the University who can participate in reviews. Templates encourage reviewees to reflect on their teaching objectives, methods and feedback and choose the criteria on which their teaching or teaching materials will be judged.

The software includes the following roles.

Table 1: Software Roles

System Administrator	Review Manager	Reviewer	Reviewee
This role has access to all components within the system except for the populated review form and covers.	This role is granted to the Head of School (HoS) or Associate Head of School and is restricted to a specific School.	This role can move across Schools.	This role is restricted to a specific School.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View status (only) of all reviews across system • Configure the system and manage passwords • Manually assign people to specific roles • Edit School information • Modify dimensions and template. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initiate a peer review process • Assign a third Reviewer in the case of a disagreement between reviewers • Deactivate a review (in the case of extenuating circumstances). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organise and observe a peer review process • Consolidate findings and create a final report. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participate in pre-review meeting • Submit a rejoinder based on the final report completed by Reviewers

Outcomes

The SPRT software was trialled at the start of the 2016 promotion process (March 2016) with very limited functionality (the ability for Review Managers to enter a reviewee's details and the selection of two reviewers). A total of 67 reviews were completed and a great deal of positive feedback was received:

- Reviewers valued the discussion of teaching environments and review criteria and the development of a shared understanding of the review process. Many were excited to learn new or different teaching techniques that they could then experiment with in their own teaching, reflecting Bell's (2012) claim that peer review of teaching results in academic development. The training of a pool of peer reviewers has established the beginnings of a 'teaching community' referred to by Shulman (1993)
- Reviewees valued the opportunity to engage equally in the meetings prior to the observation of their teaching. They also indicated that they benefited from the constructive feedback received along with the evidence-based judgements of their teaching
- Heads of School valued the ability to become more aware of the quality of their colleagues' teaching.

As a result of the trial a range of enhancements to the software have been identified for future development:

- Allowing reviewers to nominate the periods they are available for peer review which will cut down on unnecessary email communication being triggered by requests for peer review
- Relaxing the need for one reviewer from the School and one from without the School once a School's reviewers have met their quota
- Linking to profiles of the pool of trained reviewers
- Developing agreements with other universities to access external peer reviewers.

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Note: All published papers are refereed, having undergone a double-blind peer-review process.



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