



What makes blended learning effective? An interactive session of peer review

Jo McKenzie, *Institute for Interactive Media and Learning, University of Technology Sydney*

Lina Pelliccione, *School of Education, Curtin University of Technology*

Nicola Parker, *Institute for Interactive Media and Learning, University of Technology Sydney*

This session will engage participants in a supported process of Peer Review (PR) in blended learning environments. An introduction to PR and short overview of a current PR project (McKenzie et al 2008) will contextualise the activities. Participants will form pairs and use a 'briefing template' to ask each other questions in relation to a subject/unit or staff activity run in blended learning mode. Each pair will log on to their subject/unit/activity site to work through part of a peer review framework. A debrief and look at project resources and website will conclude the session. This session is intended for all academics who have been teaching, or running staff development workshops, in blended learning environments. Delegates who have recently taught a subject, unit or workshop should bring along their laptops to engage in this 'hands on' review of learning and teaching in blended learning environments.

Keywords: Peer review of teaching, blended learning environments, scholarship of teaching and learning.

Introduction

Peer Review (PR) of teaching is becoming more widespread and presents particular opportunities and challenges in online and blended learning environments (McKenzie et al 2008; Bennett & Santy 2009; Wood & Friedel 2009). Many teachers are seeking more formative feedback to improve their practices and PR is a useful complement to information that can be provided by students. This interactive session will engage participants in a supported process of PR of an online component of their own blended learning environments.

Peer observation (Bell, 2005) has been widely used for face-to-face teaching and there have been many resources developed for this, and for teaching (or course) portfolios (see Bernstein et al., 2006). Less, however, has been developed for teachers in online and BLEs, where PR presents particular opportunities and challenges (Bennett & Santy, 2009). In contrast to peer observation in a face-to-face environment, in online learning and teaching the **record** and **nature** of the interactions taking place repositions teachers and students in terms of both time and place (Swinglehurst, Russell & Greenhalgh 2007; Bennett & Barp 2008).

The PR process that will be undertaken in this session has been developed as part of an Australian Learning and Teaching Council project involving teams across five Australian universities (McKenzie et al 2008). The project set out to create, trial & evaluate processes and resources to support scholarly PR of teaching and learning in blended learning environments in order to enable the use of PR for both formative feedback and improvement, as well as for recognition and reward. A co-productive action research approach has been taken, involving teams of academics at each partner university across a range of disciplines and blended learning contexts (entirely online to mostly face-to-face with some online support). The participating academics have engaged in reciprocal PR of aspects of teaching in BLEs to develop, and refine a common framework and protocols.

The project's PR framework (see Appendix) was developed by starting with the promotions criteria from the five partner universities; the qualities of scholarly work (Glassick, Huber & Maeroff, 1997); the literatures on good teaching and of learning in electronic or BLE (see for example, Biggs & Tang, 2007;

Laurillard, 2002). The PR and peer observation literature (for example, Van Note Chism & Chism, 2007) and the more recent literature concerning BLE were incorporated and iterative feedback from the PR teams was used to modify the framework and protocols.

In the session a brief introduction to PR and overview of the project will contextualise the planned activities, which include:

1. Participants using the project briefing template, including the scholarly PR framework, to conduct briefing interviews in pairs or threes, focusing on a subject/unit or staff development activity that they teach in a blended learning mode.
2. One member of each pair/three logging on to their subject/unit/activity site with the others acting as 'reviewers' to try out a component of the PR framework in practice.
3. A debrief focusing on what has been learned from the process and issues arising, as well as an overview of the project resources and website that are available to support PR.

A participant case study from Communications will also be discussed to illustrate the importance of each step in the process and value of engaging in PR. The case study highlights some important considerations for PR regarding the centrality of a thoughtfully developed and scholarly framework for the review process in order to support a broader perspective that goes beyond observation of teaching 'performance'. The need for sufficient 'space' for both the reviewers and reviewees to be able to clarify the process and focus of each review will be highlighted by this example. It also suggests that using a PR process that can serve both formative and summative ends provides benefits for curriculum and teaching development more generally.

The session is intended for academics who have been teaching students or running staff development activities in environments that include a blend of face-to-face and online learning opportunities, whatever their background or experience. Delegates who have recently taught a subject, unit or activity will be asked to bring along their laptops and engage in a 'hands on' review. The session will be run on the basis that enough people will bring along a laptop to share so that participants can work in pairs or threes around a 'connected' laptop computer. Participants who do not have a suitable subject/unit/ workshop to offer could work with others who do and examples will be provided for those without suitable personal settings. The session builds on a workshop that utilised a face-to-face version of the reciprocal activity with the framework at the ATN 2009 Early Career Academics Conference, and at internal UTS events. Aspects of this project have also been discussed in McKenzie et al (2008).

The expected outcomes of this session include:

- Awareness, and some experience of using, a scholarly framework for implementing PR in blended learning environments
- Direct experience of the challenges, issues and rewards of implementing the PR process;
- Awareness of project resources and examples that are available to support PR in blended learning environments.

In the process of focusing on PR of an aspect of their own teaching, participants will engage with questions about features that can make blended learning more effective.

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Appendix: The criteria used for scholarly peer review in this project

The criteria for the peer review and what they might include
1. Clear Goals For students' learning and for design of the learning environment. ○ Clear goals for students' learning and an understanding of how those goals are meaningful and appropriate for the students, the course and the context ○ Clear rationale for the design of the learning environment, including the chosen blend of options
2. Current & relevant preparation ○ Currency and relevance of the content ○ Teaching and learning practices that are informed by current scholarship and awareness of relevant innovations ○ Taking into account students' expected previous knowledge and experience, including experience of similar learning environments ○ Timely updating of teaching materials and resources for students, including currency of online learning sites
3. Appropriate methods for learning ○ Learning and teaching and assessment methods that are appropriate for the learning objectives, students, context and available resources ○ Opportunities for student independence and choice, for example flexibility of learning modes and/or choices of content or focus ○ Opportunities for students to develop graduate attributes relevant to the subject/learning activity ○ Fostering of students' active engagement in learning, for example through opportunities for inquiry and exploration of ideas ○ Fostering of student interaction and collaboration ○ An appropriate level of intellectual challenge ○ Opportunities for students to relate what they are learning to broader contexts eg work, life experience, the broader discipline ○ Flexibility to respond to students' ideas and understandings, feedback and changing situations
4. Effective communication and interaction ○ Clear communication with students about expectations, including guidance on requirements and options in blended learning environments ○ Clear pathways and navigation in online and blended environments ○ Clear explanations ○ Motivating student interest and perceived relevance ○ Responsiveness to students' understandings, ideas and progress in learning ○ Responsiveness to students' communications and questions ○ Effectiveness of co-ordination/communication with any other staff teaching in the subject.
5. Important outcomes Outcomes for students: ○ Evidence of student engagement ○ Evidence of student learning: desired outcomes and unexpected learning outcomes Other outcomes if applicable: ○ Evidence of outcomes related to any other intentions of the learning activity (for example evidence of the effectiveness of a learning innovation in achieving particular goals, evidence of effective collaboration with colleagues/tutors) ○ Evidence of broader significance – eg potential for the adaptation and scaling-up of an innovation ○ Presentation of scholarly reports of practice to colleagues and others.
6. Reflection, review and improvement ○ Learning from students and adapting teaching in response, during teaching and afterwards ○ Seeking a variety of forms of evidence about teaching ○ Acting on the evidence – showing evidence of how previous feedback has been built in to improve ○ Scholarly reflective practice informed by self, literature, students, peers and other sources (see Brookfield, 1995).

Authors: Jo McKenzie & Nicola Parker, Institute for Interactive Media and Learning, University of Technology Sydney, Lina Pelliccione, School of Education, Curtin University.
Email: Jo.McKenzie@uts.edu.au

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