# Peer review: A process of EnRoLE(ing) as a reuser

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Within higher education settings the peer review of research as well as face-to-face teaching has been an established practice for a number of years. Yet there has been little attention placed on the peer review of online learning designs, in spite of the widespread adoption of ICTs in universities over the last few decades. To date, the most notable strategies aimed at redressing this gap are review mechanisms embedded within learning repositories (such as MERLOT, CLOE, LAMS), and nationally funded projects directed at establishing methods for validating scholarship in university teaching (Taylor & Richardson, 2001; see also Carrick Institute: Priority Projects 2006).

This paper reports on the initial stages of the development of a peer review framework for Project EnRoLE: a Carrick funded initiative aimed at encouraging a community of like-minded teachers interested in developing and sharing role-based learning environments. It commences with a brief snapshot of the debate surrounding peer review and teaching scholarship, as well as the scope and aims of the project. Then, it outlines proposed elements of the review framework, highlighting its potential for encouraging other academics to EnRoLE in the (re)use of role play learning designs.

Keywords: peer review, role play, role-based learning environment, reuse, Project EnRoLE

## Peer review and teaching scholarship

Over the last few decades there has been a growing body of literature discussing the importance of recognising and rewarding the scholarship of teaching, particularly since Boyer's (1990) seminal text identifying the need to broaden the conception about what constitutes scholarly activity. Notwithstanding the interest in this area there is still considerable work that needs to be done if teaching scholarship is to be afforded the same value as the more established, traditional, form of scholarship – the scholarship of discovery, i.e. empirical research (Van Fleet & Peterson, 2005). Responding to the call for more recognition in terms of teaching scholarship is not an easy task to address though: for not only is the teaching/research nexus a highly complex phenomenon (see, Brew 2003; Hattie & Marsh, 1996), but also there is little consensus about what is the best approach in order to validate this type of scholarship.

To date most of the work about the scholarship of teaching seems to have embraced a publication-focus, one that Taylor and Richardson refer to as 'scholarship-about-teaching' (2001, p. x). Clearly this communicative element plays an important role, especially when compared with the publication outcomes associated with research. However, communicating *about* teaching is not the only aspect that must be considered. Another essential element is 'scholarship-in-teaching' (Taylor & Richardson, 2001). That is, 'those aspects of the scholarship of teaching that inform the design of pedagogical practices and are evident in the teaching itself' (p. 32). Yet, while these aspects of teaching scholarship are important inclusions they are not always easy to capture in a measurable form. A compounding issue is that even when these aspects are documented, using strategies such as a teaching portfolio, the process of judging this type of evidence is not well understood (Quinlan, 2002).

In spite of these issues, peer review is widely accepted as a necessary practice in the evaluation of any scholarly work. What it generally involves is an independent assessment of and judgment about the merit of specific work, often in the form of a publication documenting empirical research and/or theoretical perspectives. As such the peer review of publications documenting scholarship-about-teaching, and face-to-face teaching practices, have a longstanding history. However, there has been little attention placed on the peer review of online learning designs, in spite of the widespread adoption of ICTs in universities over the last few decades. The most noteworthy strategies aimed at redressing this issue are the review mechanisms embedded within learning repositories (such as MERLOT, CLOE, LAMS), and nationally funded projects directed at establishing methods for validating scholarship in university teaching (Taylor & Richardson, 2001). The importance of these initiatives is reinforced by the attention currently focused around these issues. In Australia two nationally funded projects are specifically aimed at peer review: one

focused on the peer review of teaching, the other focused on the external peer review of teaching portfolios as a means for validating teaching scholarship within the promotion process (see http://www.carrickinstitute.edu.au). Similarly other funded projects, such as the Carrick Exchange and Project EnRoLE, have included peer review as an important component within the scope of the project. With this context in mind it is now useful to review the scope and aims of Project EnRoLE, as both of these dimensions have influenced the initial peer review framework currently under consideration.

## About Project EnRoLE

Project EnRoLE is a Carrick funded initiative between five universities within New South Wales, Australia: the University of Wollongong, the University of Sydney, the University of New South Wales, the University of Technology, Sydney and Macquarie University. One of the project aims is to build a community of interested teachers who will share experiences and expertise about the design and implementation of role-based online learning environments in a higher education context. Another is to establish a repository of reusable role-based learning designs, with an associated peer review process: one that facilitates teachers' experimentation with imagining and designing role-based learning activities.

One of the first initiatives at each of the participating universities has been the establishment of 'local clusters' comprised of teachers interested in exploring and/or using role-based learning designs, in either blended or online contexts. The activities of these local clusters form an important strategy in terms of building a community of practice of role play designers. Firstly, the activities aim to support existing role play designers and encourage new recruits, while providing a vehicle for more collegial interactions between teachers about effective pedagogy. They also help to highlight the affordances offered by the use of ICTs in role-based learning environments and identify opportunities for sharing and rewarding proven role play designs. Furthermore, building this community should help to alleviate the isolation that some teachers report when they are implementing teaching innovations. Taken together the cluster groups form the foundation of the first State Network (New South Wales). Already this cluster model has begun to cascade into other universities across other states, and a formal network of role players at a national level and beyond is beginning to emerge.

Alongside these cluster activities another important aspect of the project is the establishment of a searchable repository of role play designs, with an associated system of peer support and review. The aims of this initiative are to provide opportunities for 1) disseminating and rewarding proven learning designs, 2) establishing inter- and cross-institutional role play partnerships, and 3) supporting new role play designers. As such, the implementation of the peer review framework discussed in this paper is an important component in addressing each of these objectives. Firstly, it will enable a formal process for recognising sound pedagogical design. It will also open up avenues for the implementation of collegial discussions with critical friends, and the establishment of teaching partnerships and/or reuse of learning designs within and outside disciplinary and institutional boundaries.
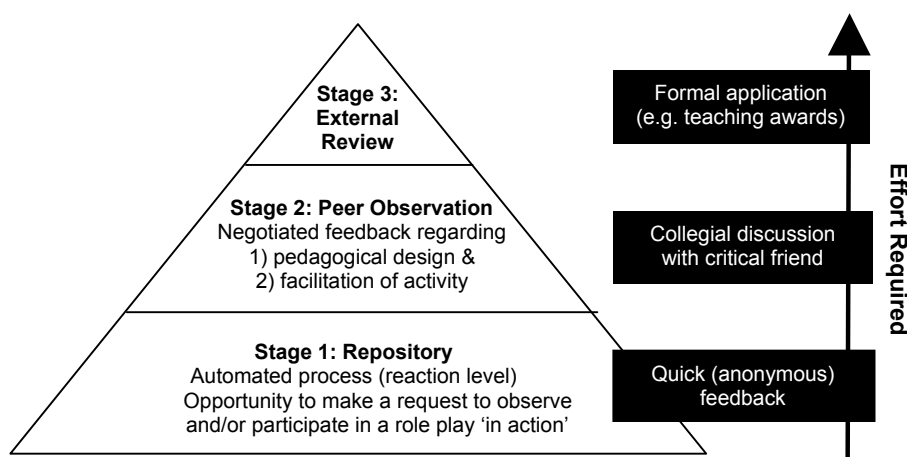
## Peer review and learning design

With the advent of more flexible forms of teaching and learning using ICT-based resources it is becoming easier to implement mechanisms for sharing and evaluating discrete (stand alone) teaching artefacts – the learning object movement is a case in point. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in the debate about what constitutes a learning object and its relationship with the concept of a learning design it is useful to note that role play activities generally fall into the category of learning design. Yet, Wills and McDougall (2006) have argued role play designs can become learning objects if and when they are reused (without modification). Notwithstanding these observations, it is widely accepted that e-learning activities and designs are very complex entities to assess and evaluate (see for example, Ruiz et al 2007). For, as Taylor and Richardson (2001) highlight in their report documenting a process for evaluating the scholarship associated with ICT-based teaching and learning resources, the expertise of reviewers should span 'at least three communities of judgement…the community of disciplinary peers; the community of scholars in teaching (in higher education); and, the community of educational designers/developers of ICT based resources' (p. 55). They also recommend that three forms of evidence should be presented for review: documentation outlining the design considerations; an overview of the resource; and reflection on the resource. In spite of the validity of these recommendations the establishment of a peer review framework for Project EnRoLE needs to address more than a formal reward and recognition agenda. It needs to encompass review processes that support and enable the dissemination and community building objectives of the project, and provide opportunities for evaluating and refining existing designs.

## Establishing the framework for peer review

With this broader agenda in mind, there were a number of questions we needed to address in order to conceptualise our peer review framework, specifically in relation to its purpose, audience, dimensions and procedures (see Table 1). In developing the initial framework we were guided by 1) existing processes embedded in online repositories and 2) commissioned reports and projects (past and present) and published literature exploring the issue of peer review. Drawing on this information, and taking the project parameters into consideration, a briefing paper outlining key issues for consideration and a staged model for review (see Figure 1) was developed and tabled at a project team meeting. Feedback from project team members was then used to adapt the initial review framework and refine the table outlining the keys issues.

### Table 1: Unpacking the issues

| | |
|---|---|
| What was the *purpose* of the peer review? | 1. Is the review evaluative (e.g. provision of peer feedback, refining activity design/process)?<br>2. Is the review aimed at the dissemination of 'good practice'?<br>3. Is the review about external recognition of and reward for teaching scholarship and pedagogical design? |
| Who is the *audience*? | 1. Is the review targeted at an individual level (e.g. the originator of the learning design and/or the reuser)?<br>2. Is the review targeted at a wider audience (e.g. the promotion process, internal and external teaching awards, validation of design within repository)? |
| What *dimensions* need consideration? | 1. What needs to be assessed (learning design/learning process)?<br>2. What evidence needs to be submitted?<br>3. What expertise is required (e.g. educational design, ICT/multimedia, discipline knowledge, teaching scholarship)?<br>4. What workload does the review process involve (teacher and/or reviewer/s)?<br>5. What are the evaluation standards/measures and how are these determined? |
| What *process/es* should be adopted? | 1. What is the timing of the review (before, during or after the activity)?<br>2. What is the role of the reviewer (e.g. peer observer, critical friend and/or formal assessor)?<br>3. What procedures should be in place (e.g. automated feedback via repository, review board)?<br>4. What communicative mechanisms are required to initiate the process (e.g. website)? |



**Figure 1: Peer review framework**

At this stage in the process the project team is proposing a three-tiered framework for facilitating peer review of role play learning designs. This staged framework aims to balance the workload involved, while maximising the potential outcomes (see Figure 1). The intention behind this preliminary framework is to provide the possibility of different levels of engagement and emphasis with the process of peer review. The plans for stage one are to embed an automated (anonymous) peer review process within the repository, in order to 1) enable feedback about teacher reactions to specific learning designs and 2) act as a mechanism for identifying those interested in more detailed observation of role play design and its associated facilitation techniques. The process within the second stage of the framework aims to provide an opportunity for peer review of both learning design and teaching process. It is anticipated that this activity will involve the negotiation of a review agenda, observation of the role play 'in action' followed by a collegial discussion between the teacher and observer. The final stage in this framework involves a

much more formal peer review process, one that taps into the award mechanisms already established at professional organisational levels and beyond (eg Carrick Institute, Commonwealth of Learning).

Having conceptualised this framework the project team will now consult cluster groups and the broader community to seek feedback about the validity and viability of a staged approach. The information gathered from these groups will be used to further refine the peer review framework to be implemented. Whether or not the process will help to EnRoLE new recruits, facilitate role play partnerships or opportunities for (re)use remains to be seen. For there are still a number of barriers, such as intellectual property and institutional policy, that need to be addressed.

## Acknowledgements

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