Beyond the Periphery:
Towards the Peer Review of Online Teaching

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Abstract

In this paper I examine both philosophical and operational aspects of cultivating a peer review of teaching process that embraces online learning as an integral, unique part of university teaching and learning endeavors. Reflecting on my own experiences as both a candidate and reviewer, my analysis seeks to disrupts presumptions about observation, interaction, teaching and assessment, which are experienced substantively differently in online than in face-to-face classes. A protocol for reviewing peers' online teaching is also proposed.

Keywords: online learning, peer review, evaluation of teaching, quality

The University Evolves

The university has evolved—sometimes quickly, more often slowly—in the seven centuries since the first European university was established. So too have ideas about quality in university teaching (Biggs, 2003).

However, the notion of a public university, public both in terms of resourcing and administration and in terms of its overall purpose, is a relatively recent development. As Western European states moved towards to a pluralistic, liberal democratic ideal, the rapid expansion of their colonial holdings transformed many aspects of traditional European society. In addition to property rights, economic diversification and democracy, access to education expanded, mostly out of necessity. This began with the advent of primary and secondary education (or their equivalents). In fact, this was necessary before any expansion of universities could occur: a dearth of literate young persons greatly constrained the pool of potential university students.

Over the last half century, the mandate of universities has further evolved. Most universities have broadened their offerings beyond those specific to degree (or credential) granting programs. University extension services offer community-based learners an opportunity to access some of the intellectual capital of university without enrolling in a degree program. These extension courses have sometimes been delivered at a distance from university campuses, using modalities such as print-based, television-based, and web-based materials.

But it is only in the last twenty years that university extension offerings have converged back again towards degree programs, with students able to complete some or all program requirements from a distance. This often has been in

the form of blended learning, where both face-to-face (F2F) and online delivery are combined within one course or program. More recently a plethora of massive, open, online courses (MOOCs) have been on offer, which are more akin to a digitized version of traditional university extension offerings than credit bearing undergraduate or postgraduate courses.

We are in a period of rapid innovation with respect to the university. Scientific and technological innovations are accelerating the practice, dissemination and development of the university-based research enterprise. These developments, along with an explosive range of learning technologies, tools and platforms is revolutionizing the university teaching and learning enterprise. This presents both challenges and opportunities for today's university staff.

In this paper I examine both philosophical and operational aspects of developing a peer review of teaching practice that embraces online learning as an integral part of university teaching and learning (SoTL) endeavours. My analysis disrupts presumptions about observation, interaction, teaching and assessment, since these aspects of higher education teaching practice are substantively different when contrasted with teaching online.

As peer review of teaching continues to gain currency in higher education, particularly in research-intensive universities, the normative, institutional practices that presume teaching is a face-to-face (F2F) activity are being increasingly interrogated. While the era of the brick and mortar university is not behind us—nor need it be—in the 21st century the nature of the university will continue to evolve. The presumption that university study is situated at a physical campus in a traditional classroom is increasingly less likely to be true. In particular, the footprint of online learning continues to grow rapidly, a development that rather rapidly has surfaced the limitations of common peer review of teaching best practices.

About Peer Review of Teaching

Peer review of teaching, as a form of professional development and quality assurance for teaching practice universities, is a decades old practice (Hubball and Clarke, 2011). Whilst most universities aggregate and synthesize student evaluation of teaching (SEoT) data, these data have rather obvious limitations. Students are sometimes inclined to evaluate teaching staff based on likability, popularity, or ease of assessment rather than the rigour of their teaching. Staff teaching complex, controversial or compulsory courses may see a negative skew to teaching performance questions, where student responses communicate displeasure with the course that is unrelated to the teaching. Finally, there is evidence that women and visible minorities often score lower than their male, (ostensibly) Caucasian colleagues in SEoT Data (Pratt, 2015).

To mitigate skew in SEoT data—negative or positive—peer review is an obvious choice for additional data on teaching performance. Most academic staff would agree that purposeful, substantive, collegial feedback from a colleague offers the perspective of one who (ostensibly) understands both the requirements of the role and the specific context of practice.

Peer review of teaching includes observing teaching practice, but such observations are but one of several elements. Peer review takes a holistic view of teaching (Arreola, 2007): preparation, documentation, teaching materials and other collateral and assessment objects are also routinely integrated into a review. It is important for candidates to understand the purpose of the review (improve practice, measure performance, or a combination of both), as well as the process of the review. University-based peer review of teaching should iterative and interactive. Prior to engaging in the operational aspects of a review, a reviewer and candidate (the person whose teaching will be reviewed) should discuss the process, agree to timeframes for the review process to be completed, determine any institutional requirements, confirm how various data sources will be gathered and analysed, and what sort of report will be prepared. For formative reviews, where the focus is on providing collegial feedback towards improving one's practice, a debrief after each ob-

servation, as well as after a review process is complete, is the norm. For summative reviews—which seek to measure teaching performance as part of an application for reappointment, continuation, tenure or promotion—often there is no debrief, since the peer review is part of an overall official staff performance review

Usually peer review of teaching processes are aligned with the norms of the disciplines being taught. Peer reviews have, out of necessity, moved beyond a narrow view of teaching practice as lecturing, tutoring or giving seminars: in many disciplines, the supervision of postgraduate research students can be as important an element of teaching practice as classroom-based teaching. Social and professional disciplines with a strong fieldwork component also have their own, particular requirements for a peer review.

University teaching is a complex enterprise within diffuse fields of practice. There are substantive differences to be found across and within disciplines; normative practices and notions of what is good teaching practice can vary widely between foundational and final years within specific degree programs, as well as between undergraduate and postgraduate studies. This complexity requires sophistication and nuance in terms of teaching practice. The peer review of such work equally merits an equally sophisticated and nuanced practice.

My Experience

I was introduced to peer observation during my doctoral studies in the late 1990s. As I held a concurrent lecturer appointment, my department instituted a policy of peer observation (rather than reviewer) for all newly appointed (or current early career) teaching staff. Under this policy a mid-career academic, was assigned to observe me. After the observation we had a brief meeting where we discussed the observation; a copy of the report was included as part of my personnel file in the department. Whilst I appreciated the impetus behind these observations—it is difficult to argue against opportunities to refine or enhance one's professional skills—the observation did not feel entirely collegial. That the report became official rather than making it a formative review was, in hindsight, problematic.

Towards the end of my PhD I approached another academic to observe my teaching: she counter-proposed that she instead *review* it. She described her preferred process, delineated at different stages what options were available, and we reached a consensus rather quickly about how best to proceed. As part of her review she scrutinized my course materials, in particular my course outline and description of assessments. After observing my class, we met again to discuss what she saw, what seemed to work well, and a few key areas upon which I could improve. The end result of her peer review of my teaching was a detailed, yet concise written report. Although this was a formative review, this report became part of my teaching portfolio. At the conclusion of the process I had greater confidence in my abilities as a teacher, and a clearer sense of where to focus, in terms of professional development.

A decade later, whilst completing a certificate program in the scholarship of teaching and learning, I was again required to engage in a peer review of teaching process, both of my own teaching and that of my peers in the program. I was also working in an educational services unit on a project developing an institution-wide peer review of teaching policy. However, my teaching was then entirely online, whereas my colleagues' teaching was face-to-face. The materials we were encouraged to use for peer reviews were ill-suited to my teaching practice and context: they assumed I either delivered lectures, or facilitated Socratic seminars within time and space bounded class sessions. In fact, my online teaching is more bounded by time periods of days or weeks rather than hours, and the bounds of my "classroom" are the learning management system and the devices from which my students and I access it.

For my upcoming review (as candidate) I was encouraged to develop prototype peer review of online or blended teaching materials. In terms of documentation I was comfortable with what we developed, but that experience surfaced another important consideration: find a reviewer who understands teaching online. Unless a reviewer has substantive experience with online teaching and learning, they are probably ill equipped to review a peer's online or blended teaching practice.

Online Versus Face-to-Face

University teaching is an activity mediated by structure and time. In face-to-face (F2F) university teaching, we are constrained by the spaces in which we teach: the acoustics, the technology available, the extent to which the chairs and lighting can be purposefully reconfigured and the number of students who can fit into a classroom. Whether a class meets thrice a week for 60 minutes or once a week for three hours also impacts how we teach F2F. Teaching online is also mediated by structure and time, but in different ways. In an online class, the physical spaces are analogous to the online learning ecosystem (including platforms such as learning management systems and synchronous communication tools) and the equipment through which teachers and students access the ecosystem. Online classes, though they may incorporate a few synchronous ("live") sessions that are timetabled, more often measure time in days or weeks. This means there are few strict times at which both teacher and student will be in the ecosystem concurrently, whereas in F2F classrooms there is a dedicated time where teachers and students interact synchronously.

In broad terms, there are four elements of university teaching that often differ substantively when considering online (and often, blended) versus face-to-face teaching. Table one delineates these:

Table One: Elements of Face-to-Face versus Online university teaching

Element	Face-to-Face	Online
Space	Physical (classroom)	Digital (ecosystem)
Time	Synchronous (hours)	Asynchronous (days or weeks)
Interactivity	Transmissive	Facilitative
Assessment	Paper-based	Technology enabled; paper-based

Using these four elements of teaching practices as a starting point, I began to refine my peer review of online teaching protocol.

Whilst it might seem obvious, the implications of teaching in digital rather than physical spaces are significant. In most instances, there is an institutionally supported learning management system (LMS), which may or may not be extended with additional tools. Virtual classrooms, social software, collaborative content or other platforms can be used to extend the LMS environment, offering a broader tool set. One of the key questions becomes *how well suited are the tools being used to teach the class, of the tools available for use?* In particular, evaluating online teaching practice based on how a class could be taught in a face-to-face environment is neither appropriate nor helpful. In general, a linear migration of an existing, face-to-face learning design to a wholly online environment proves surprisingly difficult: it is better to look at what sorts of learning design are suited to the topic being taught, using the learning platform(s) available.

As well, teaching online is usually a facilitative process: helping students navigate through learning activities. There is still a place for some transmissive activities (such as a synchronous lecture or guest podcast), but student engagement is improved by requiring some sort of interaction with all aspects of the course. Surprisingly, a Socratic approach to facilitating discussions often works

very well, using tools such as an LMS discussion forum. Whilst many would assume interactions are solely interpersonal, Anderson (2008) describes how student-content (in addition to student-teacher and student-student) interactions can be purposefully leveraged.

Finally, like all other aspects of online learning, assessment is often wholly mediated by technology, though some universities still require students to sit a traditional face-to-face final examination. Quizzes and exams delivered online can be leveraged formatively and summatively as assessment of, and for, learning (Gibbs & Simpson, 2005). Assignments can be assessed using a combination of detailed rubrics, qualitative feedback, and digital mark-up of submissions. Whilst the work to set up assessments and assignments can be laborious, once set up they often bring efficiencies and rigor to the assessment process (Hattie and Timperley, 2007). A reviewer needs to be sufficiently familiar with the assessment tools deployed in order to evaluate how well this is done.

These four elements speak to several of Chickering and Gamson's principles of effective undergraduate education: encourages contact between students and faculty; encouraging active learning; gives prompt feedback; and, emphasizes time on task (1987).

Philosophical Considerations

Regardless of how one teaches, what informs our approach to teaching—why we do what we do, and perhaps why we do not do certain things—is a key element of reflective practice (Schön, 1987) for anyone teaching at university. Embedding an examination of the candidate's values (or ethos) around teaching and learning ensures both the mechanics of a review, as well as the suitability of the reviewer.

Pratt and Associates' teaching perspective inventory (TPI) is one such tool (**http://www.teachingperspectives.com/tpi/**). The TPI (Pratt, 1998) differentiates between a teacher's beliefs (values), intentions (aspirations), and actions (practices), which can help uncover reasons why a teacher might experience dissonance between what they do and whether it feels right. As well, if a candidate and reviewer have TPI scores that are largely divergent, it may be appropriate to find a different reviewer. For example, those who have the transmission perspective as their dominant one might find the ways in which someone whose dominant perspective is developmental or social reform teachers difficult to understand, and therefore too problematic to evaluate fairly.

An important aspect of a pre-observation meeting is a discussion about how both candidate and reviewer view learning technology and online learning. There need not be wholesale agreement between the two, but surfacing each's views upfront offers important context to the teaching practice of the candidate. Neither candidate nor reviewer, by the way, needs to have an evangelical fervor for learning technology or online learning: a critical, appreciative view of the potential and pitfalls of online learning is more appropriate. The focus should remain on the practice of the candidate, rather than the perceived value of online learning, per sé.

Whether a reviewer who is an online learning expert is better suited to review online teaching than a subject matter expert who is otherwise unfamiliar with online learning is an interesting question. Certainly any reviewer must be able to comprehend the course materials, though whether they need to be a subject expert is unclear: some university units (faculties, schools, or departments) have specific criteria about who can review whose teaching. As it is common for a unit to have a sole expert each in different topics or subjects—often staff are required to teach courses that in strictest terms are not within their expertise. Conversely, someone who is expert in online learning but who cannot sufficiently engage with the content is ill-suited to conduct such a review. Someone familiar with online learning and conversant in the relevant disciplinary language should suffice.

A Protocol

Having been both a candidate and reviewer of online teaching, I have seen when more traditional approaches to peer review of teaching have badly served the online teaching and learning enterprise. Therefore, I have developed the following protocol for reviewing a colleague's online teaching:

- Find an experienced online educator or learner as reviewer
- Negotiate a period of observation rather than a session, usually one or two weeks
- Review the practice rather than the platform
- Consider content pages and any synchronous sessions as the equivalent of lectures or tutorials
- Consider the extent to which any learning activities might be linear migrations from a previous face-to-face offering (and plausible alternative approaches better suited to online)
- Consider the extent to which the course is instructor designed, or pre-designed

Peer reviewers should neither be skeptics nor blind adherents with respect to online learning. Ideally they should be experienced online teachers who are familiar with the platforms being used. Each review needs to take into account who is responsible for the instructional design of the course being taught, since, in some instances, reviewers should consider the extent to which the instructor might have been required to teach via another person's course design, which is not wholly reflective of their own naturalistic teaching praxis.

When identifying aspects of online teaching praxis that merit refinement or redesign, consider the extent to which a face-to-face learning activity was ostensibly migrated to online, without comprehensive consideration of whether it would work well online. Reviewers need to ensure their review is based on teaching practice within platforms, rather than the platforms themselves. Finally, where systems provide such data, learning analytic/reporting function of platforms can be used to provide some context for the review — though such reporting more often captures the frequency of interactions rather than their calibre.

Additionally, whilst technologies such as a learning management system's internal messaging tool and email create an ostensive digital archive of communication related to teaching, these sorts of communications should be assumed to be confidential and therefore out of scope for a review of teaching.

Conclusion

Many online educators are somewhat evangelical in their commitment to the particular affordances of online learning: a passion is sometimes badly served in higher education culture. ∂A fundamental understanding of the differences between online and face-to-face teaching is integral to designing a relevant peer review of online teaching protocol. Universities are, by their nature, social structures steeped in (arguably, at times subsumed by) tradition. In endeavoring to honor a centuries old historical university teaching practice we often unnecessarily constrain ourselves. Society continues to evolve and, hopefully, advance: so too should the university-based teaching and learning enterprise.

Whether reviewed for formative or summative purposes, the peer review of teaching process for academics needs to be transparent, rigorous and equitable. Higher education institutions' interests are also better served by processes that reflect the practice of context. Lave and Wenger warn that when "the place of knowledge is within a community of practice, questions of learning must be

addressed within the development cycles of that community, a recommendation which creates a diagnostic tool for distinguishing among communities of practice" (p. 100). Peer review of teaching can be an effective mechanism for academics to develop, refine and improve their teaching practice—if used in a way that relevant for the context of teaching practice. A focus on how space, time, interactivity and assessment each operate distinctly in an online teaching environment offers a useful scaffold for structuring such reviews.

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Biography

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