Using teaching observations to reflect upon and improve teaching practice in higher education

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Abstract: In order to improve teaching and learning within a faculty, an action research intervention involving peer observation of teaching staff via an expert was designed and implemented. A total of ten staff (including the first author) were observed over the year. The process consisted of observation at class, a written report, discussion between teacher and observer, and a group debrief. A follow-up written questionnaire was emailed to the ten participants and the qualitative responses were analyzed. Key findings for practice were: that staff recommended the process be continued; that it remain voluntary; that an external expert be retained; that the group processes were important; and that there be ongoing follow-up.

Keywords: teaching observation, peer observation, teaching practice, university teaching

I. Introduction.

The scholarly activity of peer review of teaching is broader than the observation of teaching practices; for example, it includes course review, assessment practices, online learning environments, curriculum design and resource development (Harris, Farrell, Bell, Devlin, and James, 2008). However, the research presented in this paper focuses on the observation of face-to-face teaching. The current trend across Australian universities is to move toward online teaching practices. This trend has been brought about by pressures to cater to student demand for more flexibility, competition amongst universities, availability of online tools (learning management systems), standardization, and codification of teaching and learning. At Curtin University where the research was conducted, a "blended learning" approach has been advocated that involves a combination of face-to-face and online practices as appropriate. Curtin University is situated in sixteen different locations; the main campus is situated in Bentley in Western Australia but there are other regional, national and international sites. There are five separate teaching areas across the University, one of which is the business school (CBS). This research was conducted in CBS which itself is as large as some universities and is comprised of seven teaching areas which are known individually as Schools and numerous research institutes, areas of research focus and centers. There are over 15,000 students studying in business courses at the numerous CBS campuses (CBS, 2010). In particular, this research was conducted in one of the seven teaching areas. The research site is referred to as the 'School' throughout this paper. Within this context the authors have reflected on what is distinctive about the face-to-face experience. What is it that teachers and learners bring to this environment that is difficult to replicate or support in the online environment? Hence, the aims of this study were to encourage skilled staff to reflect on their own skills, improve them and share them with their colleagues as a

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means of lifting the quality of face-to-face teaching. Earlier research by Hodgkinson (1994) noted lecturers may perform differently when teaching in diverse face-to-face modes; so, in this research the observer reviewed a broad range of face-to-face teaching formats – lectures, seminars, tutorials and laboratory sessions.

Another trend in higher education is a strong emphasis on evaluation of teaching and learning, particularly the use of student evaluations (Centra, 2000). Since 2006, Curtin University has used an online tool called eVALUate to gauge the quality of units and teaching. Students' perceptions of units and teaching are measured using an online questionnaire with 11 questions with five point Likert scales and two open-ended qualitative style questions (Curtin University, 2009). The eVALUate metrics are used throughout the university and are referred to by senior management in key performance indicators. The eVALUate, however, is limited to student perceptions of the teaching and learning experience, and as such provides no direct feedback to teachers from classroom observers with formal qualifications and/or experience in teaching. Thus using eVALUate alone as a guide to improving teaching is akin to a tennis coach relying on feedback from his pupils alone to improve his coaching. The feedback from students tends to be whether or not they are satisfied rather than any deep insight into pedagogy. For this, one needs an expert teacher to observe and provide insight and feedback (Centra, 2000; Paulsen, 2002).

The idea for conducting teaching observations was triggered at an annual School strategy planning activity by a request for ideas for improving the quality of teaching and learning. School members agreed to several initiatives during the planning session including the decision to engage in teaching observations in 2009. The first author was a teacher who also held the role of Coordinator of Teaching and Learning within the School. As such the first author chaired the School Teaching and Learning Committee and shouldered leadership responsibilities for directing teaching and learning within the School, as well as a full-time teaching load. Consequently, the first author established a plan to conduct a series of teaching observations within the School. The researchers recognized the importance of participatory leadership and assumed that participants would be more likely to volunteer to have their teaching observed if the School Coordinator of Teaching and Learning was a fellow participant in the process.

Teaching observations were not new to the School. In the past some peer observation had been organized and unit coordinators had also arranged some observation of sessional staff. In these cases, a written template was used to record the observations and later debrief staff. School members expressed concerns that an outside expert party would be better placed to observe and comment on teaching practices, rather than an internal peer – for whom acting as an observer would increase their workload. The first author, thus, approached the CBS Teaching and Learning Coordinator (the second author) as an external expert to conduct the observations. The CBS Teaching and Learning Coordinator was a faculty member whose experience and qualifications were in education, and had provided leadership, consultancy and staff development in the area of teaching and learning across the seven business Schools. So, the second author was external to the School and discipline but internal to CBS. After some planning meetings it was agreed that the process would begin with five staff in first semester, with a view to continuing and improving the process and cycling through all the staff over several years. The first author emailed the five volunteers and the observer and included a list of the weeks that the observer was available and a suggested allocation of participants to designated weeks. It was then up to participants to contact the observer and negotiate a mutually acceptable time to schedule the observations. Once agreement had been reached about observation dates, times and

foci, the observer sent invitations to participants using Outlook. Participants then accepted the Outlook appointments.

The aim of conducting the teaching observations was to improve teaching and learning practice. At the end of two cycles of teaching observations, conducted over the two semesters of 2009, the authors gained ethics approval and conducted research to evaluate the usefulness of teaching observations as a method of improving teaching practices. The research question was: What are teacher perceptions of teaching observation as a method for improving teaching and learning? The authors collected data by conducting two focus group sessions and surveying staff. In addition, the authors conducted a review of the literature pertaining to peer review of teaching.

II. Background.

Although teachers have relied on peers to help them reflect on their teaching practices since the 1950's, peer review of teaching has been less evident in the higher education sector (Bell, 2001; Harris, et al., 2008; Quinlan 2002). Even so there is evidence to suggest that the peer review of teaching in the higher education sector is gaining momentum and it is being recognized as a strategy that has the potential to enhance the quality of teaching (Harris, et al., 2008). Inherent in the increased interest in peer review is the recognition that teaching is a scholarly activity that can be reviewed just as research is peer reviewed (Boyer, 1990; Quinlan, 2002). However, the evaluation of teaching effectiveness appears to be more difficult to accomplish than judging the quality of research (Green, Calderon, Gabbin, and Habegger, 1999; Hodgkinson, 1994; Kenny, 1998). Academics across the world have sought to resolve the dilemma of evaluating teaching effectiveness (Bell, 2001, 2002; Blackmore, 2005; Green et al., 1999; Harris, et al., 2008; Hodgkinson, 1994; Quinlan, 2002). Consequently, a range of models and suggestions have emerged.

Gosling (2002, in Blackmore, 2005) identified three main models of peer review: evaluation (observation by senior staff); developmental (observation by educational developers); and peer review (teachers observing teachers). However the concept of 'peer' review is not understood consistently. According to Bell (2002) a peer could be a supervisor or expert − not necessarily a co-worker. Interestingly, Bell (2001) describes a Teacher Development Program (TDP) used at the University of Wollongong as part of their Introduction to Tertiary Teaching course. The TDP model consists of a three-way partnership: between an observed participant who subsequently submits a written refection of the experience; a supportive colleague who observes the participant's teaching; and an educational developer who provides feedback to the participant on the written reflection and monitors the TDP. Although the TDP is a formal process within a specific course, peer review can also be informal and can be used both for teacher development and performance management (Bell, 2002).

Effective peer review is dependent on establishing collegial trust and respect, providing guidelines and resources and embedding the process into performance management, promotion and recognition policies (Harris, et al., 2008). Just as observation of teaching is only one element of peer review, multiple methods must be used to fully evaluate the wide range of activities associated with quality teaching; moreover, training must be provided for all participants in the peer review process (Blackmore, 2005; Brown and Ward-Griffin, 1994). To successfully embark on a peer review of teaching process, the exact nature of what is to be reviewed must be identified (Bell, 2002; Glassick, 1997; Green et al., 1999; Hodgkinson, 1994; Smith, 2000). Weeks and Scott (1992, in Smith, 2000) and Smyth (1984, in Smith, 2000) recommend a four

stage cyclical model for peer review. The cyclical process consists of a pre-observation meeting, observation, post-observation feedback, and reflection (Bell, 2002; Smith, 2000). Although the research referred to in this paper followed a similar peer review cycle, it was also based on three other cyclical theoretical frameworks: action research; experiential learning; and organizational learning.

A. Action Research.

Inherent in the idea of using peer review to enhance the quality of teaching and learning is the notion of sustainable change which, according to Lewin (1947), requires a three-pronged approach of research, training and action. Accordingly, action research is recognized as a research methodology that enhances transfer of learning because its iterative cycle includes; research on relevant issues, collaboration, action, and reflection (Cady and Caster, 2000; Caffarella, 2002; Creswell, 2008; Kolb, 1984; Waddell, Cummings, and Worley, 2004). Moreover, the collaborative nature of action research requires group decision-making and commitment to improvement. Group commitment can strengthen attitudinal change, enhance transformational learning and support cultural change (Coghlan and Jacobs, 2005; Dickens and Watkins, 1999). Thus action research aids both individual and group learning.

B. Experiential Learning.

Experiential learning as conceived by Kolb (1984) informed this research; individual staff engaged in a continuous cycle of experiencing, reflecting, abstracting, and testing as they participated in the teaching observations. Also, the concept of having experience and learning from experience is foundational to theories of adult learning. Hence, it is important to recognize adult learners' experience and integrate the combined wealth of experience into group learning situations – participants learn from each other (Knowles, Holton III, and Swanson, 2005). Nevertheless, it must also be recognized that such experience is not neutral, it is culturally bound (Burns, 2002). The issue of culturally bound experience is pertinent to the peer observation of teaching with regards to the debate of whether or not the observer should be a peer from the same discipline, a senior academic administrator or an educational developer. As people observe and interpret teaching performance from unique perspectives, it is most important to establish clear guidelines regarding the purpose of the teaching observation and operate in an environment of collegial trust and respect (Bell, 2001; Blackmore, 2005; Brown and Ward-Griffin, 1994; Harris, et al., 2008; Paulsen, 2002).

C. Organizational Learning.

The concept of cyclical learning shown in both action research and experiential learning is evident, also, in organizational learning. The 4I (intuiting, interpreting, integrating and institutionalizing) framework of organizational learning (Crossan, Lane, and White, 1999) informed this research and supported the transfer of learning from individuals to the School group and ultimately to faculty. Accordingly, Crossan, Lane, and White (1999) noted that an expert intuitively recognizes patterns which are unnoticed by novices; an entrepreneur intuitively makes novel connections, perceives new relationships and suggests new possibilities. Thus, the concept of intuition has implications for the selection of an observer of teaching performances;

both expertise and entrepreneurial skills are beneficial. Interpretation is enhanced through discussion, as participants share their unique perspectives; the aim is for groups to reach a common understanding. Integration is the embedding of the emerging common understanding within the group psyche; it is achieved through deeper discussion, conversation and the evolution of stories. Institutionalization is the embedding of new understanding and practices into the systems, structures and routines of organizations. In this research the observer was an expert with entrepreneurial skills and interpretation was enhanced through dialogue between the observer and participants. The use of focus groups at the end of each round of teaching observations enhanced integration. Institutionalization is a long-term goal but already the idea of improving the quality of teaching through teaching observations is being taken up by other Schools within the faculty.

The research further draws on the theory of knowledge conversions in which conversions between tacit and explicit knowledge hold the greatest promise of innovation (Nonaka and Konno, 1998). Within the environment of this study the staff accumulated tacit knowledge of teaching, and whilst some may be explicated in conversation, much of teaching practice in the face-to-face setting is better learnt through demonstration and observation. In this case the expert observer can act as the converter to explicit knowledge and provide feedback to the teacher. So there is a tacit-to-explicit conversion followed up by an explicit-to-tacit knowledge conversion. The researchers note that peer observation holds the advantage of tacit knowledge socialization without the filtering of the expert observer but there are the disadvantages of learning bad as well as good habits, so the allocation of peers needs to be thoughtful. A combination of expert and peer observer whilst expensive could combine the advantages of a skilled coach with the direct demonstration and transfer of skills.

Traditionally, in academic life both teaching and research have been individual pursuits. Lecturers at the university in which this research was conducted have the opportunity to apply for recognition of teaching excellence through reward systems at the faculty, university and national level. For example, the Curtin Teaching Performance Index (TPI) provides financial rewards and esteem for individuals and groups of teachers for good *e*VALUate results, gaining teaching grants and awards and scholarship in teaching and learning. All lecturers achieving these results can apply for recognition through TPI. Further to this the award categories of 'Teaching Excellence', 'Programs that Enhance Learning' and 'Citations for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning' are available, competitively, at the faculty, university and national level (Curtin University, 2009). Although, organizational reward systems and structures support individualism there is some scope for recognition of excellence in teaching for team performances. Whilst this gives competitive advantages to individual creativity and innovation, it may be at the expense of the advantages of stimulation, sharing and synergy that come with group staff development activities. If universities want continuous improvement then there needs to be space for sharing of practices, so that individual innovators can share and learn with others.

According to research, although very few people are innovators many more people could be persuaded to adopt innovations even though it is likely that there would always be some people who would always resist change; participation in professional development was shown to increase the rate of adoption (Houle, 1980). To bring about organizational change it is important to engage sufficient people in an initiative until a tipping point is reached and the change becomes embedded in organizational culture (Gray, 2005; Loup and Koller, 2005). To reach a critical mass the change must be officially recognized, for example through alignment with

organizational reward structures. Second, the desired behavior must be modeled and incentives provided for early adopters (Gray, 2005).

In the context in which this research was conducted peer review has been flagged as an important aspect of the scholarship of teaching and learning and, although, it may contribute to promotion and recognition it has not yet been embedded in the culture and is not widely practiced across the university. Thus, in some pockets of the faculty there has been an emerging organizational awareness of the importance of peer review of teaching, the desired behaviors were modeled in this research and early adopters were intrinsically motivated to participate. Hence, the rationale for this study was to encourage voluntary participation in observation of face-to-face teaching practices and utilize both individual feedback processes and group debriefing sessions to foster collaboration and share knowledge. It was noted that several newer staff members were very positive about the benefit of having a small group with which they could share and learn teaching practices.

III. Methodology.

This research sat within the interpretive paradigm. It was exploratory in nature because the systematic approach to conducting teaching observations with the use of an external party and the provision of feedback as described in this paper had not been undertaken in this setting previously. Accordingly, the authors knew little about teachers' perceptions of using this type of teaching observation as a method for improving teaching and learning. Qualitative approaches are best suited to investigating complex human behaviors and for investigating situations about which little is known (Cavana, Delahaye, and Sekaran, 2001). In this investigation, the researchers collected qualitative data because they particularly wanted to understand teachers' perceptions of their experiences with this approach to using observation to improve teaching and learning. The authors did not collect quantitative data at this stage of the research because Creswell (2008) recommended that, in exploratory research, qualitative data is collected first then analyzed to identify themes, from which an instrument can be designed and subsequently tested using a mixed methods approach. The authors envisage that, in the future, they could collect both qualitative and quantitative data in relation to voluntary peer review of teaching – assuming there were sufficient numbers of participants to support meaningful quantitative analysis of the data.

A. How the Teaching Observations Were Conducted.

A qualitative action research approach was adopted to facilitate change and improve the quality of teaching and learning in the School. As such, the first researcher had multiple roles as researcher, teacher participant, and the School Coordinator for Teaching and Learning. The second researcher was the observer; as the faculty Coordinator for Teaching and Learning she consulted across the seven teaching areas or Schools of the business school. It is important to note that the second researcher had considerable experience in action research. For a period of two years, in a previous role, she managed a nationally funded quality teacher program based on action research. In this role she trained groups of teachers to conduct action research in relation to their teaching practices, and monitored and evaluated the project across a metropolitan school district with 100 schools in it. Accordingly, the second researcher drew on these experiences in the development of her thesis in a postgraduate research degree in education. Hence, for this

research, there was no need to train the observer in the use of action research. The authors believed that the observers' reputation, qualifications and experience were appropriate for the task. However, for the practice of peer review to become sustainable and embedded in the culture of the university subsequent reviewers would require an induction into the program and ongoing coaching, depending on their level of expertise. The research captured in this paper describes the first year of the systematic implementation of peer review within a business school. It is expected that in the future many more participants would be involved.

Initially, participants were recruited by invitation of the School Coordinator for Teaching and Learning who invited five staff members to participate in first semester; they all accepted the offer and another five teachers agreed to participate in second semester. One teacher from first semester volunteered for another observation in the second semester to improve their teaching. A cyclic approach was taken whereby after observation participants received personalized oral and/or written feedback from the observer and after each semester there was a group debriefing session to facilitate general feedback and inform the next cycle of teaching observations. The observer scheduled teaching observations by making appointments with teachers as described earlier in this paper. The researchers recognize that the fact that teachers knew when they were to be observed may have influenced their teaching performances. However, it is the researchers' opinion that teachers performed within a 'normal range' of their typical teaching performances. In some cases teachers forgot the observer was coming or didn't notice the observer in the crowd. Some teachers commented that they were 'a little nervous', others commented that 'it didn't make a difference'. The observed classes were composed of adult learners from a range of backgrounds; for example, undergraduate, postgraduate, international and local students, school leavers and experienced professional full-time workers. Thus, the researchers noted that teachers typically taught diverse groups of students and unobtrusive observation would have minimal influence on changing teachers 'normal' teaching activities. Teachers did not appear to go out of their way to perform at a higher level than usual.

The observer gave each participant written feedback using a variation of de Bono's (1992) PMI which is a perceptual scanning tool that promotes broader perception of phenomena. The PMI is a framework for the categorization of plus, minus and interesting points and has the potential to generate ideas over a broad spectrum of perception. Hodgkinson (1994) noted that providing lecturers with feedback in response to the observation of their teaching can be time consuming and special consideration must be given to avoid being overly harsh or soft in the feedback provided. Previously, the observer had used the PMI successfully but considered the terms 'strengths', 'weaknesses' and 'ideas for consideration' to be more appropriate for providing feedback about teaching performances in higher education. The researchers believed the use of the revised terms could engender a greater sense of collegiality and recognition of professional expertise. At the end of each semester the observer summarized the feedback comments and reported the aggregated and anonymous strengths, weaknesses and ideas for consideration to the whole group. In this way, the researchers and participants were able to identify trends and practices that were common across the group. For example, they identified that whilst lecturers were experts in their fields many had difficulty in creating opportunities for interactive learning. At the group debriefing session participants shared what they did, as a result of the feedback, to make their lessons more interactive. Participants commented that the group sharing activity was particularly beneficial.

B. Data Collection.

In second semester, the authors gained ethics approval to conduct research in relation to the teaching observations. As a result of discussions in the focus group sessions, the authors developed a written questionnaire which consisted of the eleven open ended questions, listed in Table 1; previously, the authors had asked participants eight of these questions at the semester one debriefing session but they discovered further questions were necessary. Consistent with the problem-solving and collaborative nature of action research, the researchers designed the questions to collect data about the participants' experiences with the teaching observations, evaluate the program and provide insight into how the program could be improved.

At the second semester group debriefing session one researcher asked participants the scheduled open-ended questions whilst the other took written notes. As only half of the participants attended the group debriefing session the researchers decided to email individuals the questions, so they could respond individually and in their own time. All participants completed the written questionnaire. The questionnaire was also given to the manager of the School to get a management perspective on the role of the teaching observations.

In addition to the questionnaire and the group debriefing sessions, the researchers interacted with the participants in the course of the teaching observations; this interaction was consistent with collection of data in as natural a setting as possible. In the role of School Coordinator of Teaching and Learning, the first author held informal discussions with staff members who had participated in peer observations, and a visiting teacher who had experience in an American university. The observer spoke to participants only when it did not interrupt their usual teaching activities. Participants introduced the observer to their classes when there were small numbers of students in the lectures, laboratory, and tutorial and seminar sessions. The observer sat at the back of the room as unobtrusively as possible and took notes. However in large lectures where there were often several hundred students present participants did not draw attention to the observer – who simply blended in to the crowd. When the observer did speak to participants she greeted them and chatted briefly to create a familiarity and calm any potential nervousness. The observer asked questions about what was happening in the class to get a sense of the context in which the teaching occurred. Typically, researchers use this approach to strengthen the interpretation of qualitative data; the oral and written feedback the observer gave to participants is a further example of 'member checking' used to validate the accuracy of qualitative research (Creswell, 2008). Participants noted the feedback was valid.

C. Research Limitations.

The teaching observations described in this paper were the first foray into the implementation of a systematic voluntary peer review process and there were few participants; although there were ten teaching observations conducted there were only nine individual participants as one teacher was observed on two occasions. Hence the total population of participants was too small to generate a sample size suitable for robust quantitative research.

As peer review of teaching was not already embedded in the culture of the university and there were no direct rewards to encourage teachers to participate, the researchers suspect that it could be difficult, in the short term, to access high numbers of participants for further research. However, the results of this initial research indicate there is an appetite amongst participants to extend the program and include others in the systematic voluntary peer review of teaching. The

researchers identified several themes that emerged from the data analysis which could be developed into hypotheses and used as the basis for future quantitative research if a larger group of participants could be identified. The research findings are discussed in the next section.

IV. Findings.

The survey questions and the major themes that emerged from participants' responses are shown in Table 1. The percentages shown in Table 1 are linked to the number of respondents who identified with a particular theme rather than as a percentage of the total number of responses; in some instances a participant identified with more than one theme. In question 3 there were eight respondents rather than nine. Following Table 1, the authors present a discussion of the research findings in relation to participants' experiences with the teaching observations, evaluation of the program and insight into how the program could be improved.

A. Data Analysis.

The researchers began to get a feel for the data when they first questioned participants during the focus group sessions. Table 1 shows the final list of questions to which participants responded in writing. Although the researchers could have interviewed participants, it was less time consuming and therefore less intrusive to email the questions to participants. The researchers collected the responses and read through them to identify the major themes that are shown in Table 1. Following this the researchers categorized participants' responses to various questions in relation to the three thematic purposes of the research and reported the results narratively in the following sections of the paper.

B. Participants' Experiences With The Teaching Observations.

Participants commented on their experiences with the teaching observations in their responses to questions 2, 9 and 11. Slightly more participants had not been involved in teaching observations prior to this experience. It was not surprising that many lecturers had not participated in teaching observations given the relatively recent interest in teaching observations within the faculty and the heavy reliance on student satisfaction instruments such as *e*VALUate for judging and improving teaching performance. The majority of those who, previously, had been involved in teaching observations had observed sessional teachers or poor performing teachers. Two staff had done some direct observation either formally using a structured written format and/or informally as follows:

> I have observed sessional staff informally by sitting in on the class and taking note of what seemed to work with the students and what not. Benefits: Self-improvement by incorporating positive pointers in own teaching style. Limitation: One observation is never sufficient to really get a view of what works well or not, but time limitations prohibit more extensive observations. (P3)

> Part of the quote notes the benefit of teachers learning through observation, although this has to be tempered with problems of novices leading novices. It would make sense that the observer should usually have more expertise than the observee so there is some added value to

the observee in the feedback process. The second author benefitted as an observer by getting to know teaching staff and their varying levels of expertise. As the faculty Coordinator of Teaching and Learning the observer found it beneficial to know which staff members had particular strengths so that she could refer others who were seeking examples of exemplary teaching, to them. Also, the observer has gained discipline knowledge and been able to encourage exemplary teachers to become peer observers themselves. Participants were initially reluctant to consider taking on the role of observer but if peer observation is to be sustainable the load needs to be shared between 'outsiders' and 'insiders.' Understandably, novice observers would require induction and coaching to take on this role effectively. In the future, research could be conducted to investigate alternative dimensions of peer review.

All participants noted positive aspects including the individual observation by an independent person with teaching qualifications. For the majority of participants the most helpful aspect of the program was the feedback and advice they received from the observer. One staff member who was relatively new to teaching at Curtin found the first semester experience so useful that on their own initiative they invited the observer to a second observation in second semester.

> [The observer] is an excellent facilitator of this program, and has observed my teaching two times now, including one time when I invited input from her. Her follow-up report promptly follows the observation session and is relevant, and provides professional guidance. She sat through the entire sessions, and the observations related to time usage, student interaction and student participation – all very relevant in a Master, case method environment. (P7)

A further positive aspect mentioned by several participants was the opportunity to share the experience and feedback in the group debrief. One participant particularly enjoyed the "frank and open discussions with other participants on what worked and what hasn't" (P1). After the positive feedback from participants in first semester, the authors revised and repeated the group debriefing session in the second semester.

The researchers noted that the organizational learning literature included deliberate strategies for escalating individual to group to organizational routines as a means of exploiting and exploring innovation (Crossan, et al., 1999). The researchers perceived the group debriefing session to be a very useful tactic in sharing of tacit knowledge that had been made explicit through the observation and recording process.

Organizational change is difficult to achieve, it takes time and participants are often unable to put the required changes into practice (Gray, 2005; Loup and Koller, 2005). However, participants in this research indicated they had put a variety of changes into practice - with a common one being changes to improve student interaction. For example, one participant commented that "[the observer] gave very practical advice which I incorporated into my lectures. The resultant awareness created by this process was very useful and was directed at adult learning principles inherent in graduate programs" (P7). Other changes were consistent with changes from traditional lecture formats to more participative formats with emphasis on case studies, problem solving and question/answer dialogues. Given the move toward wholly online or blended learning, the authors believed it was significant that interactivity in the face-to-face teaching situation emerged as an area requiring improvement. Although face-to-face interaction

Table 1. Survey Results.

Survey Question	Major Themes Emerging from Analysis of Responses	Percentage of Respondents (n=9) Associated with Themes
1. Do you agree with the purpose and method described? If not how would you would modify them?	Agreement	(100%)
2. What were the best things about the teaching observation process you experienced?	Feedback from observer Discussion with colleagues Challenge Affirmation Commitment of staff	(88%) (44%) (22%) (11%) (11%)
3. What things could be improved? (n =8 respondents for this question)	No changes suggested Observations should become more targeted Extend program to include all teaching staff Include a quantitative evaluation Improve general perception of peer evaluation	(50%) (12.5%) (12.5%) (12.5%) (12.5%)
4. What format should the feedback be recorded in, and how should follow-up be conducted?	As is, written and verbal Aligned with *e*VALUate categories Use of tick-a-box format Links to feedback from previous observations Develop helpful practices manual	(66%) (11%) (11%) (11%) (11%)
5. Do you believe the process should be expanded or disbanded? Why do you think so?	Expanded – being mindful of issues	(100%)
6. Would you recommend others to undertake it? Why is this your recommendation?	Recommend to others – being mindful of the issues	(100%)
7. Should it remain voluntary or become compulsory? Why or why not?	Voluntary Compulsory	(77%) (22%)
8. Should the observations be done by outside parties or would it be better done by peers? Please explain why you think this.	Outside parties Peers	(77%) (22%)
9. Have you ever undertaken observations of your peers and/or sessional staff? If so – How? and What were the benefits, limitations, or challenges?	No Yes	(55%) (44%)
10. How else should teaching observations and/or development be undertaken?	No suggestions Use of video Observe exemplary teachers Peer observation for feedback Teaching Tips	(33%) (33%) (33%) (22%) (11%)
11. Did you change any of your teaching practices as a result of the teaching observation? And if so, what did you change?	Yes No/not yet	(77%) (22%)

can be simulated online it is difficult to fully replicate and, when conducted skillfully, it can add value to the teaching and learning experiences of staff and students alike. Improvement of in-class interactivity is important given the availability of explicit knowledge in the form of document content (lecture slides, research papers, case studies, and web links) that is commonly distributed via the learning management system. There is now a greater need for teachers to make face-to-face classes distinctly focused on those aspects that cannot be done or cannot be done as well through online means.

Some staff mentioned that they were planning to incorporate changes in future semesters. This reinforces the issue of ongoing follow-up to support staff in development.

C. Evaluation Of The Program.

The researchers used participants' responses to questions 1, 4 5, 6, 7 and 8 to evaluate the peer review program. In a nutshell, participants wholeheartedly agreed with the purpose of and method used in the teaching observations and recommended that the program should be extended and offered to others. The majority of respondents preferred participation in teaching observations to be voluntary and with an outside party conducting the observations. The majority of participants were satisfied with the current method of providing feedback; others suggested alternative ways of giving feedback and following-up on implementation of any suggested changes to teaching practices.

The purpose of the teaching observations was to help staff improve their teaching skills for both their individual professional development and the benefit of the student-teacher learning environment. The proposed method was through observation, interaction, and feedback from an experienced teacher, and sharing of these experiences with fellow participants. The second researcher was the experienced teacher who conducted the observations: she was deemed to be an experienced teacher because of her position within the faculty, her qualifications, previous teaching experience and reputation.

Although respondents recommended expansion of the program, there were some concerns about it being used for teaching performance management. One participant stated that "teachers should be observed and evaluated to ensure a high standard of teaching and striving for excellence in the [teaching and learning] experience of students" (P3). On the other hand another participant expressed concern about teaching observations being used punitively rather than developmentally.

> If it is for benchmarking and comparing one versus the other or of a punitive kind or purely judging and comparing then it is a different issue altogether and many aspects of it need to be carefully planned and vetted out. (P9)

With respect to the underlying fears about how the process might be used by management it is noted that care is described as a foundation of knowledge creation (von Krough, 1998, in Jashapara 2004). If this is not cultivated and rather fear dominates then staff are more likely to abandon new ideas and stick to tried and tested routines, thus stifling the innovation that improves organizations. (Jashapara, 2004) This is the challenge for management to determine the balance of evaluation, benchmarking and control versus the need for creativity, exploration and innovation.

Methods of cultivating care include reward schemes, mentoring with senior staff and debriefings (Jashapara, 2004). Currently, although peer review has been identified as a goal in organizational planning documents, there is no immediate and direct reward for participating in the teaching observation process. The possibility exists for allowing time for participation in teaching observations as part of lecturers' workloads or providing rewards through the Teaching Performance Index. There is however the longer term incentive to use participation in teaching observation processes as evidence in promotion based on the scholarship of teaching and learning.

Given that participants understood the purpose of this peer review program was to help staff improve their teaching skills and not as a disciplinary measure they expressed their desire for others to have the opportunity to participate in teaching observations - although reinforcing having it be voluntary. One respondent thought that it would be helpful to have an observer who really understood specific barriers that student may have e.g. to compulsory units that were considered difficult and/or boring.

> I should imagine most experienced lecturers have a fairly good idea of how effective their teaching is (student responses, week 4 feedback and *e*VALUate results) but may wish to know 'how to make things better'. It can be difficult to elicit positive student participation if the student has a barrier to learning that particular unit. An observer experienced in teaching such students could impart useful advice. (P6)

Participation in the current peer review program was voluntary. The majority of participants preferred teaching observations to remain voluntary; the School manager also preferred voluntary participation in peer review of teaching. However two of the nine respondents called for it be compulsory. The differing views are captured in the following quotes:

> It should not be mandated. Lecturers need to be empowered – imposing this requirement could be de-motivational. The program needs to be promoted and evaluated on its merits. I for one, would highly recommend the program to all lecturers. (P7)

> Compulsory. There should be quality control implemented in the teaching areas, as is the case with research publishing in rated journals, number of publications, etc. (P3)

The researchers noted that the voluntary aspect was often mentioned as desirable in responses to other questions. Given that other feedback such as *e*VALUate (the student satisfaction questionnaire) is already compulsory it is the authors' view that the benefits and costs of maintaining a voluntary program at this stage outweigh those of a mandated program. Through instruments such as *e*VALUate it is possible for Faculty Heads to identify underperforming teachers (based on student dissatisfaction) and then put in place interventions (such as mentoring and/or observation) to support teacher development.

The majority of respondents preferred teaching observations to be conducted by an external, independent teaching professional who understood the teaching context. Typically, respondents wanted the expertise and the impartiality of a person who was not in a direct working relationship. There were however two staff who saw value in peers. One thought that

peer observation could be a secondary, supporting observation to the expert observation. The following quote captures some of the issue of using peers;

> [The teaching observations should be done] mainly independently, i.e. by someone who has no vested interest in the school. As if it's by peers then a whole lot of parameters need to be considered: it could turn out to be purely back thumping; or on the flip side, [they] could be overly critical – in case of some lack of trust, collegiality or due to some other vested and conflicting interest. (P9)

Following informal conversations with other staff members who had done peer observations in the past the authors noted that peer observation does have the advantage of increasing the skills of the observer/teacher as they observe other teachers directly. There is the possibility of tacit to tacit knowledge transfer. A thoughtful pairing of experienced and novice teachers additionally supported by the expert observer holds the promise of combining expertise, resources, and knowledge transfer. This three-way partnership between a supportive peer, a teacher and an education developer was used successfully at the University of Wollongong in their Teacher Development Program. In addition to the three-way partnership, training was recommended for all participants (Bell, 2001).

The majority of participants expressed satisfaction with the current approach to providing feedback on teaching observations. For example, one participant commented;

> The written recorded feedback is good because it's permanent and relatively fast and convenient via email, and can be considered over time. Verbal discussion with the observer is also good to clarify and interpret, because it is important for both the teacher and observer to understand the context and goals. (P2).

One suggestion was that a framework could be developed and aligned with the *e*VALUate tool. There is some merit in a framework for the teaching observation. A structure might be used to focus or target particular areas. Aligning with *e*VALUate however, which is focused on student satisfaction would require some careful thought. There are many teacher observation instruments available in the literature which could be adapted and used (Bell, 2001, 2002; Blackmore, 2005; Brown and Ward-Griffin, 2005; Centra, 2000; Glassik, 1997; Green, et al., 1999; Harris, et al., 2008; Hodgkinson, 1994; Paulsen, 2002; Quinlan, 2002; Smith, 2000). The general approach (strengths, weaknesses, and ideas for consideration) used in the first two cycles of the teaching observations was aimed at being open and exploratory, allowing issues to emerge rather than adopting a very structured instrument.

D. Insight Into How The Program Could Be Improved.

The researchers considered participants' responses to questions 2 and 10 to provide insight into how the program could be improved. Whilst many participants struggled to provide ideas and reported that they were happy with the current process, there were some stated improvements. One participant noted an opportunity to focus the observation over time.

> The observation could become targeted over time. For example if student/teacher interaction is chosen for improvement then specific interventions could be planned and

then observed in implementation by the observer. So the process and feedback becomes more focused and specific. (P2)

Another participant requested tracking over time in order to measure or observe self improvement. This was reinforced by a suggestion that there be follow-up observations to see how previous feedback had been incorporated. Other forms of follow-up or changes to the approach included the use of video to both observe one's own teaching and record the teaching of exemplary teachers so that others could observe them and the techniques they used more readily. Another suggestion from staff included having additional observations over time possibly using peers.

I once attended a seminar from a visiting lecturer in Biology who represented an 'exemplary teacher'. Of more importance than being observed I would like to observe such teachers in my teaching field. (P6)

A repository of teaching knowledge such as FAQs was also mentioned. Hence there appears to be several levels of scaffolding for teachers including use of explicit and tacit knowledge sharing and targeting at different levels of experience from novice to very experienced teachers.

V. Conclusion.

The first year of the teaching observation process appears to have been successful in starting a dialogue amongst the teaching staff. In this situation, an independent teaching expert observed face-to-face teaching and gave feedback on teaching practices which facilitated individual and group reflection. The camaraderie and collegiality developed through the shared experiences is not to be underestimated in what can at times be an individual and somewhat isolating teaching journey. The group debrief at the end of each semester definitely added value to the individual experiences.

The researchers note further evidence of the success of this initiative by the interest it generated in other teaching areas of the business school. In 2010 the number of participants doubled as the initiative spread from being conducted in one School to two Schools. As more people hear about what we have done, they also have become interested in the possibility of participating in teaching observations. In the light of this initial success, the researchers offer the following suggestions for others who might also like to embark on a process of conducting teaching observations.

Participants in this research recommended that the 2009 teaching observation initiative should continue and be extended. Three key elements of the success of this program were that it was voluntary, collaborative and provided feedback regarding teaching practices. Therefore, the authors recommend that others seeking to implement similar programs should promote opportunities to participate in teaching observations on a voluntary basis. This overcomes a lot of resistance – if teachers don't want to join in they don't have to. The results of this research show that participation in teaching observations was a positive experience for the teachers. Typically, teachers were more enthusiastic about participating after they had been through the process – for example, one teacher in this research asked to be observed a second time and comments in the survey recommended follow-up observations. Thus, it seems that participation in the program

generated enthusiasm for the peer review of teaching; participants promoted the program amongst their colleagues and more people became involved. The researchers note that intrinsic motivation is more powerful than extrinsic motivation. Whilst the establishment of organizational infrastructures, such as rewards for teaching excellence and performance management processes are essential for the institutionalization of continual improvement initiatives such as the peer review of teaching, personal choice and the desire to excel in one's job are strong intrinsic motivators for participation in professional development programs.

In this initiative there was collaboration between a School and a faculty member and amongst peers within a School. The researchers recommend a collaborative approach. In the authors' opinions, total reliance on external support from an 'expert' is unsustainable and does not continuously build the capacity of teaching staff to understand and implement quality teaching practices; however, the researchers believe this approach could be used effectively as a catalyst for change. In 2010, the researchers continued and extended the 2009 process to gradually include peer observations. It is unknown as yet how effective this was; further research will be conducted once the process has been completed. Participants in this research recommended the combined use of 'expert' and peer teaching observations. Given the heavy workload of academics, the researchers postulate that an ideal scenario could involve the use of an 'expert' along with peer observations in which teachers could voluntarily agree to observe or be observed by another teacher. The initial teaching observation process was useful in identifying 'exemplary' teachers who could be observed by others or undergo an induction process to become observers themselves.

Participants in this research particularly noted the importance of receiving individual feedback in the form of identification of their strengths and weaknesses and the inclusion of ideas for consideration. In addition to this, participants stated that the group debriefing sessions at the end of each round of teaching observations gave them the opportunity to share with colleagues, enjoy camaraderie and benefit from each others' knowledge and experience. The authors recommend the inclusion of both individual and group feedback processes. Whilst the current approach of providing written and oral individual feedback was well received by participants, this research shows that there is potential to extend the range of feedback opportunities available to participants in successive rounds of teaching observations. For example, after an initial general teaching observation subsequent observations could target specific teaching areas and include fine tuned feedback.

In conclusion, the authors recognize that the research described in this paper was exploratory and described the preliminary findings of what has now become an ongoing study. The current research results showed that this approach worked. Consequently the program has been extended and there is opportunity for further research in the future. As a result of the current research several themes were identified from which hypotheses and instruments could be developed for more extensive qualitative and quantitative research.

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