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## Reflective Practice

# More than I expected: Reflections on being observed and reviewed as a pharmacy teacher

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Reflection is an important skill development for teachers in order for their improvement in teaching style and practice. One of the ways in which teachers can reflect on their teaching is through peer observation and review.

**Description:** The article describes the process of peer observation and review by three academic teachers from three different disciplines at an Australian university. This process was utilized to assist and enhance the teaching practice of a pharmacy educator, whom has been teaching for > 15 years. Using Brookfield's reflective model through the "eyes" of the four "lenses," the pharmacy educator describes what she has learned and wisdom gained through this reflective practice process.

**Analysis:** The peer observation and review process involved elements including (i) a group verbal feedback and (ii) a written report outlining some strategies that could be utilized to improve teaching practice. Both were considered valuable and the method for providing "sandwiched" feedback utilized verbal and non-verbal cues.

**Conclusions:** Peer observation is a time consuming exercise that requires valuable time. However, the value that generates from such practices and the insights gained through this process far outweighs time spent. Providing feedback in a safe learning environment and "sandwiching" the positive and negative comments can be an effective process.

**Implications:** The value of reflecting on one's teaching practice can allow teachers to develop and improve their teaching style. Universities and colleges that support this type of reflective practice are likely to generate better teachers who will engage students to enhance their learning.

## Purpose

Writing a reflective diary or journal is not a new concept for many, educators or students alike. A diary or journal is used for personal reasons, to guide future learning. As a teacher of reflective practice and realizing the importance of critiquing one's practice to improve future practice, I am an advocate for the use of a reflective diary/journal to drive the learning process. From a young child I had always kept a diary and wrote in it fairly regularly (a few times a week) and as a daily process when I travelled on vacation with family. This practice allowed me to consolidate my thoughts, feelings, reactions about events, changes and experiences in my life. This process has continued through to adulthood, when I discovered an interest in the value of reflective practice.

There is the expectation for educators to facilitate students to engage in reflective processes and as such there is a need for us to model this process. Currently, my diary/journal writing relates more with professional purposes rather than for personal use, however, among other reasons for its use, a reflective diary/journal helps me to critique my own practice which also includes the

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practice of teaching. Another way in which educators can review and reflect on their teaching practice is through peer observation and feedback. I decided to “put myself out there” and volunteered to be peer observed and reviewed as a teacher. The purpose of me volunteering for such an exercise was two-fold: 1) I wanted to engage in something that would make me a better teacher; and 2) I wanted to know firsthand of its value, if any.

## Description

The peer observation took place during one of my intensive teaching periods and the feedback session followed. The peer observation and feedback was carried out by colleagues from three different disciplines or schools (Dentistry, Chemistry, Business) from the same institution as part of an assignment task for the postgraduate certificate. Each colleague varied in their years of academia/teaching at the institution, which ranged from 10 to 19 years. All three colleagues observed my teaching at the same time and during the same two-hour workshop/lab. As the peer observation process was initiated by an assignment task as part of the Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies, there was no prior instruction or training for the three evaluators, however, their process for peer observation and feedback was derived from the theoretical framework.<sup>1-4</sup>

The feedback session involved two components: group verbal feedback and a written report outlining some strategies that could be utilized to improve teaching practice. At the time, I had been an educator for more than 15 years. Although peer observation and peer feedback was a new concept for me, I felt completely fine with the prospect of three other colleagues from three different disciplines or schools “critiquing” my teaching practice. I guess that confidence came from the fact that the area I was teaching was my area of expertise and I was comfortable with my level of knowledge and experience. However, it was not the content or context that they were critiquing, rather the process and practice in which I could improve.

### *Different perspectives through different lenses*

Prior to undertaking a Graduate Certificate in Educational Studies (Higher Education), I thought I really knew the attributes of a good university teacher. Furthermore, I began to understand the importance of seeing things from different perspectives on how one practices. Brookfield’s reflective model posits four distinct “lenses,” namely, 1) theoretical or literature lens, 2) self-lens, 3) peer lens, and the 4) student lens.<sup>5</sup> The latter relating to engaging students through focus groups or questionnaires to ascertain their views on the learning environment. These may include a student’s perception of environmental barriers that may hinder effective teaching and learning practices, for example, time constraints and classroom layout or equipment. Adopting the *student lens* approach utilizing collation of data via external sources for example: online questionnaires) may be beneficial for accessing the relevant data given time constraints. The power of the *peer lens*, coupled with your *self-lens* provides a deeper level of reflection. This is particularly the case following peer observation and review (*peer lens*) which iterates an introspective process (*self-lens*), providing a reflective feedback cycle of learning for the individual.

#### *1) Theoretical lens*

Clearly, the published literature (*theoretical or literature lens*) asserts that attributes of a good university teacher includes someone who: shows interest in the context of their teaching to deliver the content required; has respect for students and their learning; provides clear goals for learning; applies appropriate and authentic assessment and feedback; and enhances student engagement to stimulate interest and critical thinking.<sup>5-8</sup> However, after 15 plus years of teaching and engaging in the peer observation process as part of an assignment task, I came to the profound realization that it is much more than that.

#### *2) Self-Lens*

Prior to this assignment, I had not given much emphasis or thought of my skills as a university teacher. It was through my confronting *self-lens* that challenged my previous beliefs and assumptions of what I thought a “good university teacher” involved.<sup>5,9</sup> Some of the more negative feedback (although sandwiched with the positive) made me sit back and reflect on how I could do things differently.<sup>1</sup> While I found the feedback from the peer observation useful, I found the process *confronting*. It challenged my views on how to be a good university teacher and whether all this time I may not have been.

#### *3) Peer Lens*

Peer lenses are those viewpoints that come from the perspective and through the “eyes” of your peer. Gaining new insights and understandings from multiple *peer lenses*, presented me with the unique opportunity to reflect and view the feedback from different perspectives.<sup>5,10</sup> For example, my colleague from the Business School suggested changes to my teaching practices in terms of utilization of more visual aids (*Technical Reflection*).<sup>2</sup> Another colleague from the Faculty of Dentistry suggested a slightly different approach by changing the learning environment to include student scribes (students who are selected to write the key points down on a board for the larger group to view while a teacher is explaining a process), thus enhancing student engagement in the learning tasks (*Practical Reflection*).<sup>2-4</sup> Some may argue that having being peer reviewed by colleagues from different disciplines who are not familiar with your content is a pointless task, however as peer observation and feedback is considered a type of reflective practice, the process is the “jewel” rather than the content or context.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, it really does not matter as to the years of experience of peer observers, as all peers have something to offer at different stages of their teaching careers and the diversity of peer observers adds another element and different perspective. For example, peers who have engaged in teaching for longer periods may have become more complacent in their teaching style, thus experience does not necessarily equal competence or effective delivery, whereas educators who are starting out may have alternative perspectives and engage in novel trends for teaching and learning. Different perspectives deliver different ideas, some through “fresh eyes,” others through the “eyes of know how.” All perspectives are valuable.

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