Available online at www.sciencedirect.com

ScienceDirect

Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 167 (2015) 28 – 37

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

IOSTE BORNEO 2014

Responsibility for Learning: An Inclusive Approach to Learning and Teaching Evaluation in Higher Education

Moyra Keane*

University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Abstract

Most university lecturers are required to evaluate their teaching (Cosser, 1998) and the most common evaluation tool is a quantitative survey. This type of evaluation provides only one evaluation lens (Brookfield, 1995) and this has a bias towards accountability and comparability. There is a need to find more developmental and meaningful models to assess and explore our teaching practice. This research aimed to explore responses to an inclusive peer review model as an additional, or alternative, lesson evaluation process. The study draws on lesson observations and feedback from staff following 20 peer reviews of science lectures conducted at a university in Johannesburg. Lecturers' comments on the peer review process are collated. This research also draws on two case studies that include students' engagement with the review process. I argue that rather than being an intimidating 'inspector', a peer can provide supportive and collegial feedback, while also giving students the opportunity to mediate their own, sometimes disparate, responses to the learning environment. This process contributes to the development of science students as critical and active participants in a democratic process; it highlights cultural and diversity issues, and promotes collective responsibility (See IOSTE 2012). Thus some of the goals of international science education communities are aligned with the lecture evaluation.

Peer-review under responsibility of Universiti Teknologi MARA.

Keywords: lecturer evaluation; science learning-environment review; reflective practice in Higher Education

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: moyra.keane@wits.ac.za

Peer-review under responsibility of Universiti Teknologi MARA.
doi:10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.12.638

1. Introduction

I present a brief overview of the of peer reviews, describe the model used in this study and then go on to report on the extended model which 'closes-the-loop' of the review by discussing evaluation responses with students and negotiating a way forward with students and the lecturer. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the peer review process itself from the lecturers' perspective; to reflect on the process from the peer reviewer's observations and to report on lecturers' perceptions of undertaking peer reviews.

It is often threatening, unsettling and seen as contentious to have an outsider evaluate one's teaching competence (Brent & Felder, 2004; Blackmore, 2005). When an outsider sits in on a class – even if that outsider is a friend or colleague – the lecturer may feel exposed and the students may assume that there is some sort of 'inspection' going on. The model used here is based on collegiality, learner-centred principles, and power sharing. These principles certainly contribute to the effectiveness of the review, (Castetter, 1996) by increasing lecturers' willingness to engage meaningfully in the review process in the long term. In this way peer reviews change from being a compliance exercise to one of growth and development. The final report takes a narrative form and thus moves away from the recommendations of Brent and Felder (2004) who support a scored rubric template for reviews.

2. Literature review

A great deal of research has been conducted into the lesson evaluation process internationally and in South Africa (Sosibo, 2010; Cosser, 1998) and while there are claims of the validity and reliability of student evaluations of teaching (Theall & Franklin, 2001), lecturers are often not convinced of this and some research contests the claim of the validity of such standardised evaluations (Cosser, 1998) due to the very varied contexts, subjects, and the way these quantitative ratings are interpreted. While students may be best able to comment on the classroom experience (Chism, 2007), peer reviews have certain advantages. Peer reviews, while resource intensive and potentially sensitive, are sometimes favoured - or at least used in conjunction with quantitative measures (Sosibo, 2010). Issues of the unique learning situation can be better taken into account in a qualitative review. Furthermore an academic advisor / peer has a better knowledge of sound teaching practice than do students and can suggest ways of improving the course design and learning opportunities for students (Johnson & Ryan, 2000). While there are sound arguments for the use of peer reviews it would be useful to know how they are experienced by science lecturers and what insights are gained through the experience of a peer reviewer. From this data the peer review process may be refined.

3. Methodology and description of the peer review model

This study reports on lecturer feedback on the peer review process and the subsequent design of an inclusive model that includes students in the evaluation analysis. The initial survey was conducted by the Teaching and Learning Centre at a University in Johannesburg. It elicited responses from 20 lecturers in eight different schools in the Faculty of Science who had had peer reviews, as well as a case study report of two lecturers (one in science and one in science education) where student feedback and discussion where included in the evaluation. The survey sought to asses:

- Reason for requesting a peer review
- Strengths and weaknesses of peer reviews
- Outcomes for the lecturer
- Outcomes for teaching practice
- Possible improvement in subsequent quantitative evaluations
- Possible improvement in subsequent student pass rates

The process described here has been developed to include a strong formative and dialogical ethos. The peer reviews are therefore time intensive and require the expertise of an academic advisor. Can such an investment of resources be justified when there are quantitative evaluations available? There is a need to know if academics find