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Redefining Peer Review of Teaching: Partnering with Students for Meaningful Feedback

Emma Hollenberg
Mario Pezzino

Motivation

- **Assessing teaching quality and effectiveness**
  - External: regulatory requirements; institutional reputation; recruitment, etc.
  - Internal: student experience, attainment and progression; academic professional development; career progression, etc.

- **Sources of evidence and information**
  - Outcomes
  - Student feedback
  - Reviews of teaching

- **Challenges**
  - Student outcomes provide a partial and distorted picture: outcomes depend also on student effort and engagement
  - Student feedback may be biased and based on low response rates.
  - Reviews of teaching by "peers" may be seen by some instructors as an invasive line management tool or could be treated by some observers as an empty bureaucratic exercise.

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Reviews of Teaching

- **Categorisations**
  - Evaluative, developmental, collaborative (Gosling 2002)
  - Shifting control to the reviewee makes peer reviews more developmental and less evaluative (McMahon et al. 2007)
- **Developmental reviews should be based on principles of experiential learning and reflective practice**
- **Every review will have an element of judgement. Who is a "peer"? What is an "expert"?**
  - epistemology Vs ontology
  - "third party observer" (McMahon et al. 2007)
  - What about students?

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Students as *Peers*

- **Potential benefits**
  - Student-centred insights
  - More authentic perspective
- **Potential challenges**
  - Requires training and guidance
  - Effectiveness depends on reviewees' acceptance
- **Already examples of students as consultants**
  - Student consultants typically offer alternative/additional feedback but are rarely involved as full partners
  - Potential benefits of true partnership have not yet been fully realised
- **Academics and student reviewers working in partnership can transform peer review into a meaningful process**

Peer reviews of teaching in the School of Social Sciences at UoM

- **University Policy**
  - Evaluative model with elements of development
  - Probationers Vs Non-probationers
  - Outcomes shared with line managers

- **Challenges**
  - Operational
  - Selection, training and engagement of reviewers (who are also concerned to hinder colleagues' career progression). WAM.
  - To pre-empt potential issues around *trust*, the process is by construction formal and rigid, which hampers most of the developmental benefits of a review.

Our 2024/25 Pilot

- **Idea: Three-way voluntary, informal system in partnership with students and the SU for developmental opportunities**
  - In addition to formal evaluative system to support probation decisions
- **Established a group of student reviewers (4)**
- **Made a call for expressions of interest to serve as reviewer and/or reviewee**
- **1 student partnered with 1 academic reviewers**
- **Reviewee in the centre: timelines, focus of the review, use of the form/feedback decided by them**
- **Semester 1: 4 reviews, Semester 2: 18 reviews**

Partnership with the SU

- **Benefits**
  - Experts in student voice and student experience
  - Bridge between students and the university
- **Student reviewers were student reps**
  - Rep training
  - Training and coordination
- **Long term: institutional connections**

Our extension of the model in McAnally et al. (2024), based on Fleming et al. (2018)
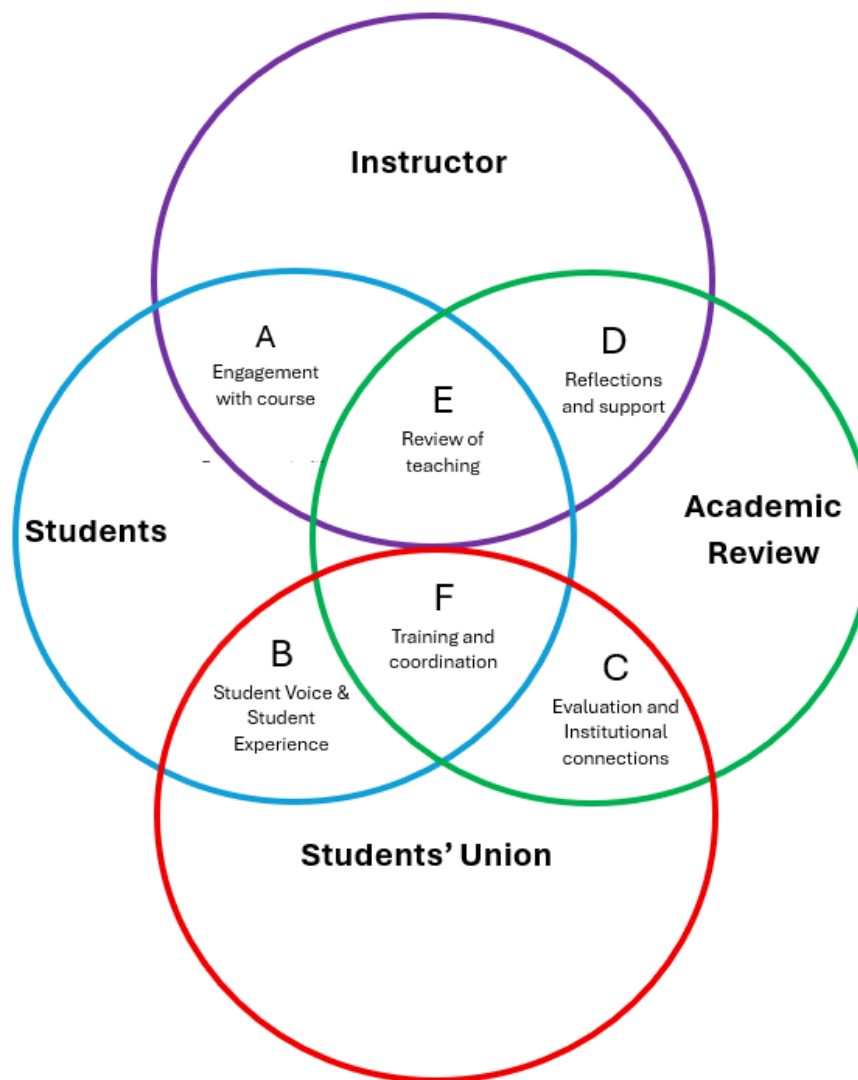
Evaluation: What worked well

- **Partnership between students and academic reviewers**
  - Both parties learnt from each other
  - Students felt comfortable discussing their thoughts
  - Sense of equality between student and reviewer
  - All academic reviewers would recommend colleagues to serve as a reviewer and request a review in the future
- **Students' feedback**
  - Different and unique perspectives that enhanced the review
  - Identified aspects that would otherwise have been overlooked
  - Constructive and thorough
  - Encouraged staff to be more innovative
  - All reviewees would recommend a colleague to request a review in the future

Evaluation: What worked well

- **Students' skill development**
  - Communication, interpersonal skills, problem-solving, professionalism, leadership
- **Collaboration with colleagues**
- **Informal and voluntary nature**
- **Administration and coordination**

Areas for Development & Learnings

- **Within vs. across disciplines**
- **Offering students the options to collaborate in pairs**
- **Training and guidance for students**
- **Support for students throughout the review process**
- **Student coordinator**
- **Coordinating staff & student availability**
- **Additional opportunities for reflection**
- **Suggest colleagues to consider reviewing each other**
- **Contribution of learning developers and digital experts**

Quotes

- *"I found the partnership with the academic reviewer valuable, as it provided insights into the review process and helped me feel more confident. Their guidance was helpful, and I appreciated the opportunity to engage in meaningful discussions."* (student)

- *"There were some aspects of the feedback that made me wonder if they hadn't read some thing properly. But then I realised - that is MY job to make sure that everything in course materials is as clear as can be"* (reviewee)

- *"I found it very enjoyable to work with a student. Getting her perspective on a course was eye-opening for me. And I think she benefitted from hearing an academic perspective as well."* (reviewer)

- *"This is a wonderful initiative and it is always great to hear and get feedback from a students' perspective. We can try to put on their shoes, but there are always some things which we think are obvious but are not to students. Understanding that can greatly benefit my own teaching as well as student experience in my modules."* (reviewee)

Conclusion and next steps

- Overall positive and encouraging feedback from participants
- Rewarding experience for the organisers, in spite of unavoidable set up costs
- Next steps:
  - Enhance the reflective elements and opportunities for academics and students
  - Create opportunities for the sharing of good practice and reflections
  - Expand the scheme across the Institution, if a few conditions are satisfied:
    - Administrative support
    - Creation of the role student coordinator