Talking about teaching: Empowering staff through peer partnerships

Andrea Chester, Angela Clarke, Dallas Wingrove and Bianca Denny
RMIT University, Australia

ABSTRACT: Peer observation of teaching practice is becoming increasingly common in higher education. The approach has been linked to enhanced teaching confidence and skill development, as well as improved collegial relationships. As such it represents an efficient and effective form of professional development, empowering teachers and building supportive networks. This paper describes a model of peer observation, titled peer partnerships, implemented in an Australian university. The peer partnerships model is based on seven core principles: building relationships, fostering learning, encouraging reciprocity, valuing voluntary participation, ensuring confidentiality, respecting ownership and enhancing quality. Quantitative results, presented in the paper, suggest the program has a range of benefits, including a positive impact on pedagogy, the development of skills and enhancement of collegial relationships. Interviews with participants have been used to collect further data to refine the model. The major themes emerging from these interviews are discussed in the paper and recommendations for future development outlined.

1 Background

Peer observation programs have long been identified as an effective method to support the developmental process of improving the quality of teaching in higher education settings (Centra, 1975; Hendry & Oliver, 2012). Tertiary institutions now face the continuing challenge of providing sustainable and effective peer review in times of rising accountability and increasing financial austerity. The Peer Partnerships model described in this paper has been designed as a response to these challenges, with embedded leadership and a focus on the principles of adult learning as two key features that enhance peer observation as a form of continued professional development.

Peer observation is a process by which academics are paired to undertake observations of teaching, allowing partners to talk about teaching, share their reflections and collaboratively discuss ideas for improvement. This leads to a collegial sharing of insights and techniques that provide both parties with a unique and rich opportunity to enhance the quality of their teaching (Bell, 2001). The strong focus on the reciprocal sharing of ideas distinguishes peer observation from other programs designed to improve higher education teaching, such as student evaluations, self-evaluations, and external review. Peer observations can be used for both summative (academic decisions, quality assurance and managerial decisions) and formative purposes (reflective practice) (Hatzipanagou, Lygo-Baker, 2006). The latter purpose is the focus of the current investigation. Given this emphasis on the formative, collegial nature of the observations, the term peer partnership is used.

Previous research overwhelmingly supports the value of peer partnerships (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Maeda, Sechtem, & Scudder, 2009; McMahon, Barrett, & O'Neill, 2007). Peer partnership programs have been described as an authentic, practical, useful, and meaningful way to modify and improve teaching (Maeda, et al, 2009). Additionally, higher education teaching staff typically evaluate peer partnerships positively (Bernstein, Jonson, & Smith, 2000; Chester, 2012; Maeda, et al, 2009; Pattison, Sherwood, Lumsden, Gale, & Markides, 2012). For these reasons, peer partnerships have been heralded as a way for Universities to meet the increasing need to demonstrate accountability and assure quality (Brew, 2001; Crisp et al, 2009). Perceived advantages include the development of new ideas and skills, improvement to teaching practices, its practical nature,
its support for continued self-improvement, and ability to stimulate discussion (Bell, 2002). The benefits of peer partnerships are strengthened by its reciprocal nature, in which peers not only learn through feedback, but also experience vicarious learning through the observation of peers’ teaching practices and strategies (Cosh, 1998; Hendry & Oliver, 2012). The perceived disadvantages of peer review, including time investment and vulnerability associated with giving and receiving feedback, are not generally strongly endorsed (Chester, 2012; Morehead & Shedd, 1997).

Recent investigations have shown the usefulness of peer partnership programs in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Bernstein, et al, 2000; Chester, 2012; MacAlpine, 2001; Pattison, et al, 2012). However, the varied nature and processes of existing peer partnerships within and between institutions presents challenges for the interpretation and comparison of results (Maeda, et al, 2009). Different methodologies include cross-disciplinary peer partners (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004), comparisons of peer feedback with student ratings and grades (Galbraith & Merrill, 2012; MacAlpine, 2001), triads of peers rather than the traditional format of pairs (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004), and observations across classrooms and video samples, syllabus reviews and teaching portfolios (Maeda, et al, 2009).

The literature briefly reviewed here points to the clear benefits of peer partnerships for professional teaching development in higher education settings. Regardless of its purpose or design, successful peer feedback programs feature a structured and supportive framework and are informed by principles of adult learning (Fleming, Shire, Jones, Pill, & McNamee, 2004; Kelly, 2005; Marshall, 2006).

1.1 Peer Partnerships and principles of adult learning

The Peer Partnerships program described in this paper is a sustainable, school-based professional development involving peer observation of teaching. The Peer Partnerships model encourages teaching staff to voluntarily take a critically reflective approach to their teaching practice for developmental purposes. Through a process of confidential peer exchange, staff can learn about teaching and/or work toward enhancing the quality of their teaching practice.

The Peer Partnerships program was developed around seven core characteristics for professional development and sustained education change proposed by Speck (1996) and further articulated by Chester (2012). The core principles of building relationships, fostering learning, encouraging reciprocity, valuing voluntary participation, ensuring confidentiality, respecting ownership and enhancing quality informed the Peer Partnership model.

**Building relationships** is core to the Peer Partnerships program and has been evidenced as an outcome of several peer feedback programs (Barnard et al, 2011; Chester, 2012; Donnelly, 2007). In particular, Peer Partnerships is designed to operate within schools, where the development of a community of practice can lead to a range of productive outcomes including enhancement of professional identity, sharing of teaching resources and even research collaborations. Maximum benefit arises from reflection on teaching practice when that practice takes place within a community where there is mutual valuing of personal and intellectual growth and when time is dedicated to the task (Rodgers, 2002).

Peer Partnerships **foster learning** with a focus on process rather than content. The program does this by encouraging participants to partner across teaching programs, pairing staff with others inside the school, but outside their discipline area. In this way partners are encouraged to focus on the processes they observe rather than responding to accuracy of content. Participation in Peer Partnerships can be used as evidence of reflective practice for
promotion applications and teaching awards.

In contrast to some other models of peer feedback that use expert reviewers, Peer Partnerships encourages reciprocity, with peers taking the role of both observer and observee in each partnership. This reciprocity is designed to build genuinely collegial relationships and works to diffuse the power imbalance often present in external reviews or mentorship programs (Barnard et al, 2011; Cohen & McKeachie, 1980). In addition, as Hendry and Oliver (2012) have observed, observation has the potential to increase self-efficacy, with participants gaining as much from observing as being observed.

The importance of the voluntary nature of the programs is underscored by research that suggests mandatory approaches are often associated with superficial engagement (McMahon, et al, 2007). A voluntary approach allows staff to choose their own timing for participation. In contrast to deficit peer feedback models that focus on under-performing staff, Peer Partnerships is designed as an opt-in approach that engages staff when they feel ready to participate, using the goals they set for their own professional development. This aspect of the program is designed to encourage commitment and reduce defensiveness.

The confidential nature of the observations and the use of reciprocal feedback maximises the opportunity for staff to engage in reflective practice (Chester, 2012). Important to the program is an acknowledgement of the inherent vulnerability of observation. The mandatory training deliberately focuses on the development of trust, explores how to manage the feedback process effectively with opportunities to practice giving feedback, and emphasises the confidential nature of all information generated by the partnership.

Peer Partnerships is founded on the notion of ownership of the process at several levels: peers are responsible for setting their own goals, Schools deliver training and ongoing support of peers, and the University provides senior management sponsorship and integration of the model into policy and procedures.

The focus on enhancing quality of teaching addresses the universal emphasis on teaching standards and complements existing professional development practices offered by the institution. This is consistent with Hamilton's (2003) ethical guidelines for peer feedback that maintain peer observation should contribute towards a culture of high professional ideals and high standards of professional conduct Peer Partnerships is designed to be embedded in the workplanning process.
1.2 The Peer Partnership model

The principles outlined above informed the development of the Peer Partnership model. The need for a clear and comprehensive structure of the program is consistent with mounting calls for standardised implementation processes, clarification of expectations and protocols prior to observation sessions, and clear strategy and consensus surrounding peer feedback issues (Cosh, 1998; Fleming, et al., 2004; Hamilton, 2003).

Similar to most peer feedback programs, the current model includes the stages of preparation, observation, feedback, and reflection (Bell, 2005). Additionally, the model includes mandatory training and debriefing sessions for all staff. This embedded training and evaluative support is designed to facilitate a shared understanding of the principles underpinning the program, and may assist peers in overcoming the challenges of peer observation, including concerns about delivering and receiving praise and criticism (Donnelly, 2007; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005).

1.3 Research aims

The current study was designed to evaluate the implementation of Peer Partnerships at one large Australian dual sector (higher education and vocational training) university. The study examined the impact of Peer Partnerships on both school leaders and peer participants. This paper focuses on the experience of peer partners.

2 Method

21 Participants

Participants in the current study were 36 participants. The 36 participants (14 females and 22 males) were academic staff and teachers from both the higher education (N=25) and vocational training (N=11) sectors of the university. Participants included both permanent and casual staff. Years of teaching experience among peer partners varied from 6 months to 30 years (M = 9.1, SD = 7.6). More than half the participants (58%) reported having a formal teaching qualification and one-third (31%) had previous experience in a peer partnership program. The six schools represented included Architecture, Business IT, Education, Aerospace Engineering, Fashion, and Science.

22 Measures

Peer partners were surveyed at the beginning and end of the implementation process. An evaluation survey measured partners’ perceptions of the program, with nine items covering the following aspects of the program: becoming more skillful as a teacher; acquiring practical experience; learning about the student perspective; building confidence in teaching; strengthening reflection on teaching; contributing to portfolio for promotion and/or awards; addressing student survey issues; and building confidence in providing feedback. In addition, individual interviews were conducted to further explore quantitative findings.

23 Procedure

The project team worked with school-based leaders throughout the Peer Partnerships cycle to recruit, train, and support peers. Peer participation was open to all teaching staff. The program consisted of several phases including: a 90-minute group training session, pre-observation meeting with partner, observation(s), post-observation meeting with partner, and group debrief session. Training was facilitated in each School by members of the project.
team, supported by School leaders. In addition to offering an opportunity for peers to meet with partners, the content of training included discussion of the program principles and ethical parameters, videos of past peers discussing their experiences of the program, activities on finding a focus for peer partner observation sessions using templates developed for the program, and activities and practice sessions on giving and receiving sensitive feedback.

The pre-observation meeting provided peers with a one-on-one opportunity to discuss goals of participation, clarify a focus of observation, and engage with the guidelines for observing a colleague. The observation stage featured engagement through direct observation peers’ teaching, followed by a face-to-face meeting to discuss observations and provide written and oral feedback.

A one-hour debrief session was held in each School at the conclusion of the Peer Partnership cycle. This provided an opportunity for peers and leaders to share aspects of the program that had been useful, consider suggestions for improvement, and discuss plans for continued reflection and improvement to teaching practice.

### 3 Results and discussion

Due to the relatively small sample size, results presented here are descriptive and are complemented by qualitative data. Qualitative themes were identified from interview transcripts.

Peers were invited to rate the personal importance of eight aims related to reflective teaching practice on a five-point scale at the beginning of the program (pre-program). At the completion of the program participants rated the extent to which these aims had been achieved (post-program). Results are summarised in Table 1.

Peers indicated agreement (choosing agree or strongly agree) with all aims at the beginning of the program. Holding a teaching qualification or having previously engaged in a peer partnership program made little difference to participants’ aims for this program, however, years of teaching experience was negatively correlated with most aims, in particular “addressing issues raised in the student evaluation surveys \((r=-.50)\), “contributing to a teaching portfolio” \((r=-.48)\), “learning about teaching by acquiring practical experience” \((r=-.43)\) and “building confidence in my teaching practice” \((r=-.39)\). Less experienced staff rated these aims higher than more experienced teachers.

At the completion of the program outcomes were positive, with all mean scores sitting above neutral; however, scores on nearly all items were lower than at pre-test. While this could reflect dissatisfaction with the program, qualitative data did not support this. Any mismatch between expectations and experience is more likely therefore to reflect the development of a realistic understanding of the strengths and limitations of the program over time. Notable was greater variation in scores at post-test compared to pre-test, perhaps indicating that the Peer Partnership experience produced different outcomes for individual peers. At the end of the program 864% of participants noted that they had gained new skills and/or knowledge and 100% of participants noted that they would recommend the program to other teaching staff.

Qualitative data was collected from participants at the end of semester debrief and from face-to-face interviews with five participants. Six themes emerged including: building relationships, structure and training, clear observation focus, recognition, and reflective practice.
### Table 1
**Participant Aims and Outcomes of Peer Partnerships Program Participation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aims and outcomes of participation</th>
<th>Pre-program</th>
<th>Post-program</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 29</td>
<td>n = 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Become more skilful as a teacher by acquiring new teaching strategies</td>
<td>4.55 (0.69)</td>
<td>4.04 (0.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn more about how to teach by acquiring practical experience</td>
<td>4.24 (0.95)</td>
<td>3.78 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build more confidence in my teaching practice</td>
<td>4.31 (0.81)</td>
<td>4.26 (0.92)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enhance my professional learning relationships with my peers</td>
<td>4.48 (0.57)</td>
<td>4.22 (1.20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengthen my reflection on teaching practice</td>
<td>4.55 (0.57)</td>
<td>4.17 (1.15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribute to my teaching portfolio to support applications for promotion and/or teaching awards</td>
<td>4.07 (0.92)</td>
<td>3.65 (1.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Address issues raised in my student evaluation surveys</td>
<td>3.97 (0.87)</td>
<td>3.78 (0.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Build confidence in providing my colleagues with feedback on their teaching practice</td>
<td>4.17 (0.66)</td>
<td>4.18 (1.26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note* All responses on 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)

Peers commented on the positive benefits of **building relationships** with colleagues through Peer Partnerships. Advantages included networking opportunities, recognising that similar issues are faced by others, and getting to know more people within their School. As one peer commented, “I built a relationship... that is a big benefit”. Another noted that “it's good to network and to know that the same things happen in other departments”. Notably, participants reflected the Peer Partnerships process provided a sense of belonging to their School and also to the wider University community: “...it increases your networking... and it gives you that sense of belonging too, as if you are part of the big thing rather than ‘we’re [discipline] here and that’s what we do’.

Peers were highly supportive of the **structure and training** of Peer Partnerships, and cited the clear stages as helpful in effectively navigating the process. One peer noted, “if I hadn’t gone to that first workshop [training session] it may have taken longer to sink in”. Another believed they would be “more vulnerable to things going wrong and people being uncomfortable” without the initial training session. Peers also noted the usefulness of resources, “…the resources that you have are fantastic. The resources give you something to... hang onto”.

Connected to the benefit of the structure and training was the advantage of having a clear **focus for observation**. Peers strongly endorsed the value of being “in control” of the focus of observation, with such control integral to reducing feedings of vulnerability that are common to peer review programs. Peers also reported that having a focus made it easier to
provide honest and constructive feedback: “you don’t feel like you’re picking on the person because they’ve asked you to observe that”.

Peers strongly endorsed the notion of recognition for participation in the form of acknowledgement in workplans and through endorsements by line managers and Heads of School. One peer noted the practical nature of the need for recognition: “it needs to be supported by your manager, because if it’s not supported they won’t give you that time release”.

Finally and importantly, peers also reported that the program provided useful opportunities for reflective practice. One peer noted self-reflection as “one of the most powerful outcomes”. It also provided an opportunity for reciprocal learning, with one participant realising that issues observed in his peers’ classroom could also be applied to his own teaching: “my reaction was ‘hang on, I think I do the same thing’ and, in fact, there’s a lesson there for me too”. Peers noted the importance of continuous improvement of their teaching, noting that the program helps to “keep you on your toes in the kind of way that having a student teacher [does]”.

In summary peers provided overwhelmingly positive support for the Peer Partnerships program. Congruent with previous investigations of peer observation programs (Bell, 2002; Hendry & Oliver, 2012; Maeda, et al, 2009), peers identified the positive benefits of building collegial relationships, encouraging reflective practice, and providing a safe environment for peer observation to occur, as well as the value of encouraging reciprocal learning.

Several key factors contributed to the success of the current program, including the structure surrounding its implementation. The training sessions were identified as integral to creating a shared understanding of the principles guiding the Peer Partnerships program. The training also provided a preemptive opportunity to explore issues related to vulnerability and discomfort surrounding giving and receiving critical feedback. Peers indicated that resources in the form of workbooks and online documents provided a tangible and easy-to-access support structure beyond the initial training session.

The Peer Partnerships program outlined in this paper contributes to a growing body of research on reflective teaching practice in higher education. Specifically, it shows the value of peer feedback programs that provide a strong and supportive structure for staff to talk about their teaching, that are informed by principles of adult learning.

References
Bell, M (2005) Peer observation in higher education Milperra, NSW: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA)


Marshall, S J (2006) Issues in the development of leadership for learning and teaching in higher education Macquarie University: Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education


Speck, M (1996) Best practice in professional development for sustained educational change *ERS Spectrum*, vol Spring, pp 33-41