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# Internationalising Peer Review in Teaching and Learning

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## **Abstract**

**Excerpt:** In 2004 I decided to apply for promotion from Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor. Mine is an Australian research intensive university. Having reviewed the promotion literature, I decided to seek promotion based on an 'outstanding' contribution to teaching and learning. At the time the university was expending far greater efforts to improve teaching and learning after rating very poorly on a national student survey. Having made a contribution to the furthering of teaching and learning, the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education) and the head of the recently established teaching and learning unit were quick to offer their support to my application. Indeed the Pro-Vice Chancellor volunteered to be one of my referees.

## **Keywords**

Peer review in teaching and learning, SoTL

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## Internationalising Peer Review in Teaching and Learning

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In 2004 I decided to apply for promotion from Senior Lecturer to Associate Professor. Mine is an Australian research intensive university. Having reviewed the promotion literature, I decided to seek promotion based on an 'outstanding' contribution to teaching and learning. At the time the university was expending far greater efforts to improve teaching and learning after rating very poorly on a national student survey. Having made a contribution to the furthering of teaching and learning, the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education) and the head of the recently established teaching and learning unit were quick to offer their support to my application. Indeed the Pro-Vice Chancellor volunteered to be one of my referees.

Having informed the Chancellery of my intentions I was duly sent the necessary forms. And then the fun began. To apply for promotion I needed to demonstrate that my teaching was outstanding and that my research was significant. Up until this time the overwhelming majority of applicants had applied using the reverse criteria of outstanding research and significant teaching. I only knew one person (in the sciences) who had ever been promoted to Associate Professor on teaching

Despite allowing me to nominate my teaching as my outstanding field, the form was constructed for a response on outstanding research. With the application broken between research and teaching and in that order I was compelled to address my research first before I got to the main category for which I was seeking promotion. This was undoubtedly a disadvantage but I was not too perturbed and in my introduction I was quick to cite Boyer (1990) and suggest that by breaking my application between teaching and research that I, a 'scholar teacher', was being forced to make divisible that which I saw as indivisible. Further, I had been promoted to Senior Lecturer on 'significant' research so I didn't see a major problem. It was not as if in the intervening years my research had suddenly become insignificant.

Despite the fact I was applying for outstanding teaching the application process compelled me to nominate international referees for my research. An applicant applying on outstanding research simply had to get a report from a departmental colleague for significant teaching. I was also asked to follow this system for the evaluation of my teaching. Rather than a departmental colleague I chose a senior lecturer in the teaching and learning unit with whom I had worked on a number of teaching and learning projects and whom I had invited to observe my teaching. The only departure from the stipulated system was that the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Education was allowed to act as one of my referees in place of one of the research referees.

That I am still a senior lecturer today gives clear indication of my application's success. The feedback on my application from the Deputy Vice Chancellor in charge of promotions was disappointing. If his response was anything to go on it appeared that my claim for outstanding teaching was simply not addressed. The only

comment pertaining to my teaching was that the teaching related referees were 'too close' to me. All the feedback was about my research not my teaching which, low and behold, had somehow changed from significant to insignificant.

I remain unaware of any candidate for promotion at my university whose research was found to be outstanding but the application was knocked back because the committee did not rate their teaching as significant. It seemed that as long as you had a heart beat you got significant teaching

In the final wash-up there probably was within the committee that made the final decision resistance to the idea of promoting a senior lecturer based on their teaching. But, more importantly, I came to realise that structural and process issues clouded the decision-making and helped determine the outcome.

Afterwards it was suggested to me that the committee had faced a problem with my application. It was clear I was an outstanding teacher, indeed, I had an award from the Vice Chancellor that said just that. The difficulty was comparing the evidence I presented for teaching with the evidence that those seeking promotion on the grounds of research offered.

After the disappointment subsided I could see the point. The committee would have been sceptical if someone applying for a research-based promotion had produced a senior academic of their own institution to argue their case. It was also suggested that if I had won the Prime Minister's national teaching award for the humanities that the committee would have had no choice. My response to this was there would be very few academics promoted on research if promotion was only secured by the winning of some national or international prize. My standard of evidence was not high enough but what was expected of me if I was to be successful was a standard higher than that expected for research.

It was in the wake of this unhappy event that I read Christine Asmar's very useful exploration of the power of research on university cultures and how supporters of teaching and learning in research-intensive universities had to take account of this power in seeking change (Asmar, 2002). The article did save me from becoming too bitter and twisted, and provoked thoughts on another area of interest; the related issue of how we as academics improve our teaching.

With this by way of introduction, this paper seeks to explore peer review in learning and teaching and, with the example of peer review in research before us, calls for the internationalisation of peer review in learning and teaching. It suggests that internationally organised discipline communities would be the best placed to realise such a goal and offers a model for the implementation of such an approach.

As SOTL's influence grows and more and more university teachers are drawn to present and publish in the field, it should not be forgotten that the overwhelming majority will remain engaged only to the extent they seek the evaluation of their approach and practice; codifying that they are 'scholarly teachers' (Richlin, 2001). Further, evidence from across the English-speaking world clearly shows that for reasons of quality control and career advancement more and more university teachers will be compelled to document their practice (Ramsden, 2003).

Building on Ernest Boyer's work, Lee Shulman reached the conclusion that the scholarship of teaching and learning must be 'public, susceptible to critical review and evaluation, and accessible for exchange and use by other members of one's own scholarly community' (Shulman, 1998, 24). To date the notion of one's 'own

scholarly community' has been interpreted fairly broadly in a discipline sense but fairly narrowly in a geographical sense. Most efforts to document and evaluate teaching practice have taken place within institutions and across disciplines as a function of campus-based teaching and learning or professional development units. Shulman notes the problem with this approach:

That's a perfectly reasonable idea. But notice the message it conveys—that teaching is generic, technical, and a matter of performance; that its not part of the community that means so much to most faculty, the disciplinary, interdisciplinary or professional community. It's something you lay on top of what you really do as a scholar in a discipline (Shulman, 2000, 25)

Rejecting this approach, British geographer Mick Healy has taken Shulam's idea a step further:

...[I]f the scholarship of teaching is to match that of research there needs to be comparability of rigour, standards and esteem, and secondly, that the key to developing a scholarly approach is to link the process explicitly to the disciplines (Healey, 2000, 170).

Given that the origins of SOTL were informed by the desire to encourage university teachers to take a more active interest in teaching and learning within their disciplines, Healey's observations make perfect sense. He has shown that traditional models of educational development which are institution-based would be far more profitable if they were embedded in disciplines. (Healy, 2000) By extension such work gives added weight to the notion that the evaluation of teaching practice should not be divorced from the 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman, 2005) of the discipline being taught.

In both Australia and the United Kingdom there has been an acknowledgement in recent years that in-house approaches cannot deliver the level of rigor that would compare SOTL favourably with research cultures. In 2005 representatives from 17 Australian universities gathered at the University of New South Wales to discuss the issue of external evaluation. In 2006 the Australian Carrick Institute for Teaching and Learning funded a major project which set out to explore these possibilities at a cross-institutional level. In Britain a cross-institutional approach has been by-passed in favour of exploring national approaches such as the Staff and Educational Development Association's fellowship system and the Higher Education Academy's 'Register of Practitioners'. The degree to which such approaches will be driven by the disciplines, however, is questionable and so leaves Healey's challenge unanswered. Again a comparison with research cultures is illustrative. The evaluation of our research is not something that is organised between our home institution and another. If it was, both those supplying the evidence and those then asked to accept it in other contexts would be justified in being somewhat suspicious of the process and the outcomes. Looking at a national approach, it should be remembered that the examination and evaluation of our research does not stop at borders. Indeed the international reception of our research is central to our standing in our discipline community. Why can't this be the same for our teaching?

The in-house, cross-institutional or national approaches hold a further complication. Several academic commentators have suggested that the recent interest in teaching and learning by institutions and governments straightjackets teaching and therefore challenges academic freedom (Sherry, 1994, Reeher, 2002 & Shulman, 2005b). If such a concern is warranted (and one hears much anecdotal evidence that many

university teachers believe it to be true whether it is or not), such approaches undermine a fundamental goal of SOTL; empowerment. If university teachers see the evaluation of their teaching as simply being about some bureaucratic notion of quality control rather than a tool for continual improvement of their practice then the game is lost before it has begun. While the bureaucratisation of research and its measurement in Australia and Britain in recent years has concerned many academics, most would still argue that their research remains somewhat protected because its raw evaluation continues to be conducted within the discipline community and outside the reach of any institution or government.

If academics drive the evaluation of teaching and learning through their discipline communities (with as much support from institutions and governments as can be afforded), it might remove much of the scepticism that many of our colleagues hold about the 'scholarship of teaching and learning'. If the disciplines stand up and take control, the ensuing empowerment may see the realisation of the American historian Peter Stearns' dream that all university teachers will one day approach their teaching with the same enthusiasm and creativity that characterises their research (Stearns, 1993). Finally, it might go a little way to address Alan Booth's concerns about the 'structural factors' that continue to undermine our colleagues and institutions from becoming 'equally serious about the theory and practice of disciplinary teaching and learning' (Booth, 2004).

If we accept the notion that rigour in the evaluation of teaching can only be fully realised within discipline communities and outside the bureaucratic influences of institutions or governments, and should, at the very least, be trans-national if not truly international, several structural problems are immediately encountered. First, peer review in research is supported internationally through publications and conferences as the main source for exposition and evaluation. While, as noted, this form of evaluation will be able to be applied to some aspects of SOTL it is obviously not the way forward for the evaluation of unpublished teaching practice. This is where SOTL must, because of its very nature, diverge from research. If the evaluation of teaching within discipline communities at an international level is to take place it will have to be organised by these communities themselves.

Even before members of a discipline community might consider how to approach this issue of documenting and evaluating teaching most disciplines would be confronted by an absence of international organization. While many disciplines maintain research-based international learned societies, in 2007 only geographers, and more recently historians, have made efforts to organise themselves internationally around SOTL themes. The foundation of the [International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning](http://www.issotl.org/) < <http://www.issotl.org/> > (ISSOTL) in 2004, however, has gone some way to providing the opportunity for further discipline-based organization. While the geographers preceeded ISSOTL, the origins of HistorySOTL can be directly linked to this organization and its role as a facilitator within and without disciplines, within and without countries. That HistorySOTL has become the first discipline affiliate of ISSOTL offers a way forward for other like-minded discipline communities to create an international organization. Another approach may be for the traditional research-led discipline-based international organizations to diversify their interests to embrace SOTL. This has certainly been achieved by a number of national learned organizations in recent years, most notably in the United States.

If discipline communities establish international organizations with a focus on teaching and learning and a willingness to foster peer review, the next major issue relates to definition and approach. Trav D. Johnson and Katherine E. Ryan note there is little consensus on what a 'comprehensive approach to the evaluation of college

teaching' might look like (Johnson and Ryan, 2000). The difficulty of a one-size fits all approach that has characterised generic approaches may go some way to explaining this dilemma but these same definitional issues exist within specific discipline communities. Peer reviewing research in our discipline communities, while sometimes problematic, does contain a number of implicit ideas central to the approaches and methodologies of the scholars in that community. SOTL is still in the process of drawing out these subtleties in individual disciplines. Further developments in identifying the 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman, 2005) of specific disciplines will be a huge step forward (Calder, 2006; Woeste and Barham, 2006 & Wood, 2006). Such an approach would also have to explore the degree to which disciplines are shaped by national and other cultural contexts. A one-size-fits-all approach within a discipline community might also be problematic. This said, the experience of research would suggest that such national variations (especially in the English-speaking world) are more subtle than fundamental and should not prove a major impediment.

Having formed a discipline specific international organization committed to SOTL and peer review, then developed a comprehensive and accepted approach to how teaching practice might be judged, the next issue relates to process. How can we demonstrate our teaching practice to an international audience? The problem is little different from that which would be experienced in cross-institutional or national contexts. If one accepts Petersen and Petersen's conclusion that 'Good peer review does not include classroom observation visits' (Petersen and Petersen, 2006, 41) then the simplest and most effective way to provide evidence for peer review in teaching and learning remains the portfolio (Trigwell, Martin, Benjamin & Prosser, 2000); and a portfolio can travel to the other side of the world as easily as it can travel to a neighbouring institution or the other side of the country. Electronic portfolios continue to be developed and the possibilities using blog technology open up the opportunities for making evaluation a public process.

Having resolved the issue of medium and form, a far more complex problem presents itself. In 'rethinking the scholarly' Alan Booth asked: 'What sort of expertise should peer assessors possess?' (Booth, 2004, 248). This is a very important question and naturally leads to the more general question: 'Who should be our peer assessors?'. In his defence of an institutional approach to peer review in teaching, Larry Keig suggested that most faculty are well qualified to perform the role of peer reviewers for their colleagues (Keig, 2000). Placing to one side this paper's touchstone of comparing such a practice with research, I would question what qualifications most of our colleagues could call on to perform that role. Speaking of student evaluations, Bernstein, Jensen and Smith noted that: 'Only when the feedback we get on teaching comes from intellectual peers (not simply interested novices) will the level of our work grow to its greatest potential' (Bernstein, Jensen and Smith, 2000, 84). Could not the same be said for many university teachers? Peer review of teaching and learning by many of our colleagues would produce the same sorts of issues that have been identified as problematic in summative and formative student feedback. Are not many university teachers still, to borrow David Pace's term, 'amateurs in the operating room' (Pace, 2004, 1171)? Does being a successful university teacher mean we should be a capable peer reviewer? Certainly our research cultures are built on this assumption. Should this fundamental issue be considered as a new peer review system for SOTL is being constructed? If peer review is to be taken seriously the people doing the reviewing need to be well versed in the scholarship of teaching and learning. We need to take the next step if we are to engage rigor. It must be more than simply a form of 'collegial collaboration' (Hutchings, 1996) if it is to be taken seriously. In establishing an international peer review system an international discipline community organization would require

some sort of qualification review system for deciding who and who should not exercise this very important responsibility within the discipline community.

So what might such a system look like? Having achieved and commenced acting as a clearing house and facilitator of best practice for its members, the new discipline-based international 'Society' (for want of a better name) sets about formalising a peer review system. The core of this system will be the evaluation of a member's teaching through a portfolio system whose parameters are agreed by the membership. Blog-based technology that would allow instantaneous feedback and easy internet posting might be the best platform for such a portfolio.

The peer review system is managed by a 'College' (for want of a better name) of the Society. The College is made up of 'Fellows' (again for want of a better name) who have been earlier selected by their peers because of their contribution to SOTL within their discipline. It is the responsibility of the Fellows of the Society to design and maintain the peer review system. A portfolio might be designed to address the following criteria (borrowed in this instance from a number of Australian teaching award systems):

1. Evidence of interest and enthusiasm in undertaking and promoting student learning in the discipline area
2. Evidence of a professional, systematic and reflective approach to teaching improvement informed from feedback from a variety of sources.
3. Evidence of responsiveness and innovation in course design and delivery, including appropriate use of information and communication technologies to achieve improved student learning outcomes.
4. Evidence of ability to organise teaching and curriculum materials so that they arouse curiosity, stimulate independent learning and develop the skills and attitudes of scholarly inquiry.
5. Evidence of keen and sympathetic participation in guiding and advising students and understanding their needs
6. Record of professional, systematic and reflective approach to teaching improvement informed from feedback from a variety of sources
7. Evidence of command of the subject matter and exploitation of recent developments in the field of study
8. Evidence of provision of appropriate assessment that is congruent with course outcomes and the provision of worthwhile feedback to students in their learning
9. Evidence of participation in and/or contribution to professional activities and scholarship related to teaching.

Before the portfolio is evaluated by the Fellows of the Society it is placed on the organisation's webpage for one month so that the membership of the Society can examine it. Using blog technology, ordinary members of the Society can both gain from being exposed to new approaches and ideas from around the world and can also offer their informal ideas and opinions on specific portfolios through an asynchronous posting system. Fellows might also call on this reportage when making



their later evaluations. After this month of member exposure (something that our research is always subjected to) the Fellows then evaluate the portfolio. They might either suggest ways for improvement of the portfolio and the practice that informs it or acknowledge the calibre of the portfolio and its creator by accepting them to membership of the College as a Fellow. With such elevation from ordinary membership to Fellow of the Society, the mutual obligation cycle re-commences as the new Fellow accepts the responsibility of elevated membership and starts to evaluate portfolios themselves.

As well as the formal evaluation by the College, the owner of the portfolio will, hopefully, have some valuable feedback from the ordinary membership's examination of the portfolio. This information might be used to improve practice or might provide evidence that can be used in support of promotion or other teaching recognition. If the Society maintained high standards of quality and accountability, elevation to Fellow status could also be an important formal recognition of leadership in the teaching and learning of their discipline community.

In discussing the importance of peer review in teaching and learning, Lee Shulman observed: 'The influence of the evaluation of someone's scholarship is directly related to the square of the distance from the campus where the evaluator works. So for Stanford faculty, a Berkeley review is pretty good, but an Oxford review is much better' (Shulman, 1993, 6). Implicit in this off-the-cuff truism is the suggestion that the recognition of scholarly practice must be internationalised if teaching and learning is to attain wider acceptance as a scholarly activity. The logical path for such internationalisation is for discipline communities themselves to take the lead and put in place processes that reflect the nature and priorities of their own 'signature pedagogy'.

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