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PIONEERING A PEER REVIEW INITIATIVE: STUDENTS AS COLLEAGUES IN THE REVIEW OF TEACHING PRACTICES

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Introduction

This essay is a collaborative account of an attempt to achieve authentic collegial staff-student partnerships through the innovation of a peer review process at a Scottish University. The voices of Ursula, a postgraduate student who participated in the project, and Jenny, a pedagogical researcher who designed and facilitated the initiative, interweave throughout this essay, as they describe and reflect on their experiences of being part of this pioneering project: *Students as Colleagues in the Review of Teaching Practices*.

Ursula

Six weeks into the 2014/2015 academic year at Edinburgh Napier University (ENU), the weekly rhythm of the trimester was well established. Between attending lectures, time allocated for reading and studying and with a busy family, domestic and social life, my week was undoubtedly full. Then, out of the blue, an intriguing email from a researcher, Jenny Scoles, based in the Department of Learning and Teaching Enhancement (DLTE) at ENU, appeared in my mailbox. She was seeking volunteers to participate in a new project. My interest was piqued by the project title: *Students as Colleagues in the Review of Teaching Practices*. The project's aim was to task students to professionally review the teaching practices of a paired staff member. My immediate reaction was to question the inherent premise of the project title: how could *students* be colleagues? Would we be taken seriously? However, instead of pressing 'delete,' I applied to the project, and thus begun my subsequent participation in a fascinating research experience.

Jenny

I had been employed by Professor Mark Huxham, director of ENU's DLTE, as a researcher tasked to explore current practices of peer review (PR) throughout the university. Through consultation with staff, three important considerations for improving PR practices had emerged:

1. Cross-discipline participation: Staff felt that asking observers from another school or discipline could eliminate the feeling of those participating being 'too close' to their peers and the course content.

2. Asking students: Whilst it is accepted practice that students participate in course evaluation it is still rare for HE institutions to partner with students for '*pedagogic advice*' (Healey *et al*, 2014). Students have a unique and particularly valuable perspective on the learning experience that can and should complement PR. As one staff member articulated:

I think that students are the best people to ask about how you perform as a lecturer... They don't have the same knowledge base as you or I... so they come

in with open eyes, and because they don't have any background knowledge of a subject necessarily, or on what the rights and wrongs of teaching are, they're able to give you a much clearer perspective... a much more honest, unbiased perspective.

3. Review of online materials: Teaching materials, as well as teaching spaces, are increasingly online. Therefore, reviewing Moodle (the university's virtual learning environment, VLE) would be very useful, as Moodle has "some of the most needy areas of improvement."

In light of all these considerations, our project was an attempt to rethink some of the key concepts of traditional PR. In reconsidering the notion of 'peer,' we engaged with the recent movement towards involving students in teaching and learning processes (Cook-Sather, Bovill & Felten, 2014; Dunne & Owen, 2013; Bryson, 2014). As D'Andrea and Gosling (2005) suggest, peer review activities should increase awareness of the main stakeholders' experiences — the students' learning experience — and they propose that students should be part of this review process.

Therefore, the project was designed as an opportunity to explore the transition of students from passive subjects in the traditional hierarchal student-teacher dynamic into active participants in collegial relationships, much like that of a 'peer.' We were also interested in rethinking the notion of 'review.' Traditional PR tends to use one method of reviewing practice — an observation of a lecture or tutorial. However, teaching practices are increasingly occurring in different spaces and through diverse methods due to technological advancements and innovative pedagogical practices, and do not necessarily lend themselves to an observation method (Gosling & Mason O'Connor, 2009). Therefore, the project sought to include teaching and learning practices that exist beyond the classroom, such as virtual learning environments (VLEs) or workshops, and through feedback and assessment techniques.

In this paper, Ursula and I draw on reflective diaries that we, and others, kept, as well as on data from focus groups held during the project. Our individual contributions reflect on the project design and training processes as well as the challenges faced and lessons learned. Finally, we conclude with a short summary of how the project is now positioned within the university and the wider higher education community. First, though, I explain how the project was developed.

The Inception of *Students as Colleagues*

Jenny

Students as Colleagues was designed as a small-scale, voluntary project. It was based on a culture of professional and lifelong learning and not on performance management or accountability. In establishing this approach, we were mindful of the foundational values for student-faculty partnerships articulated in Cook-Sather *et al.* (2014), that of "respect," "reciprocity," and "shared responsibility." We gained full approval from the university's Ethics Committee and were funded by an in-house Teaching Fellows grant. The initial project was designed by Mark Huxham and myself but with recognition that the participants would be actively encouraged to engage in the continuing design, dissemination and evaluation of the project.

To galvanise this engagement we developed a second initiative based on Healey and Jenkins' (2009) call for all undergraduate students to “experience learning through and about research and inquiry” (p. 6), which we called simply *Students as Researchers*. Here, the participating students could also volunteer as our colleagues in conducting pedagogical research in an attempt to break down any preconceived notion that engaging in academic research was an activity reserved for those firmly installed in the ivory tower. Suitable training in research methods was provided so they could contribute as co-authors in peer-reviewed journals. We also worked together to submit abstracts, academic posters, and papers to present at international conferences. First, though, we had to conduct the project to create the data and findings.

Volunteers were recruited and trained during the first trimester, and review exercises were conducted during the second trimester of a single academic year. The review exercises that the students conducted included:

- an observation of teaching practice
- an evaluation of our VLE (i.e. Moodle)
- a focus group with students taught by the staff member
- a review of the staff member's feedback provided on assessed coursework, and
- a one-on-one audio-recorded feedback session, between the student-staff pair.

Training was crucial for the project's success in supporting and equipping the students with the necessary knowledge and capacities to conduct these review exercises. Our aim was not to teach the students to be expert reviewers, but to better enable them to articulate their already valuable perspectives as constructive feedback in a professional manner. The next section discusses how this was accomplished during the training workshop, but first we describe the recruitment process.

Recruitment and Training

As this was designed to be a reciprocal initiative, we were keen that both the students and staff gained professionally from participating. To be as inclusive as possible, we recruited student volunteers from all year groups including postgraduates. As this was an unpaid opportunity, we encouraged recruitment by emphasising the graduate skills likely to be gained by participating. The university's Careers service would run pre- and post-project workshops to help students identify and articulate these skills, such as delivering constructive feedback and conducting focus groups.

The project proved attractive to staff members generally and included full and part-time lecturers as well as academic and skill developers, teaching assistants and online module leaders. Aside from the constructive feedback that would be provided by the students, a notable motivation for staff members' participation was the opportunity to evidence their engagement with the project for professional accreditation with *The UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF)* (2011). Our project has clear links to many of the formal dimensions of this framework such as “assess and give feedback to learners” (A3), “the use and value of appropriate learning technologies” (K4) and “use evidence-informed approaches and the outcomes from research, scholarship and continuing professional development” (V3). We suggest that our project advances these dimensions further through its philosophy of shared responsibility between staff and students to identify and inculcate improvements into pedagogical practice. Ursula now reveals why she felt motivated to apply for the project.

Ursula

I was intrigued by three distinct reasons to participate, namely: the project's innovative status, the opportunity for personal and professional skills development, and the prospect of participating in academic research and, potentially, co-authoring a journal publication. Interested students were asked to apply stating three *positive* personal outcomes anticipated as a result of participation, ensuring that applicants had considered seriously their own motivation for inclusion. A further question asked applicants to identify "what might be the *worst* thing to happen as a result of your participation?" included to perhaps underline that any potential student-staff relationship might be a sensitive and emotional undertaking.

My own submission, replicated below, makes clear my motivations and concern in participating:

- 1) I help contribute to an initiative that serves to enhance the student experience.
- 2) That as a result of this initiative the participating lecturers gain increased self-awareness and consequently derive greater satisfaction from their pedagogical responsibilities.
- 3) I develop my own feedback skills and gain an opportunity to deepen my knowledge of research methodologies.

The worst thing that could happen as a result of observing and feeding back to a lecturer is that although he/she accepts my feedback he/she does not implement changes.

During my 'student as researcher' role, I analysed all the students' answers to the recruitment questions, and it was clear that the opportunity for personal development was a significant motivating factor for over 80% of applicants. They also identified the future benefit for their CV and employability, as a fellow student wrote: "The project will teach me how to hold focus groups/meetings effectively which could be an example of how I showed leadership."

Another motivating factor cited by just over 60% of applicants was the clear desire to contribute to pedagogical practices that would in turn lead to an enhancement of the student experience: "In the end this will improve the university experience for all students and support the lectures (sic) to improve their skills."

Other positive outcomes for involvement in the project were issues such as revealing a dyslexic and international students' perspectives, and the opportunity to break down hierarchical barriers between staff and students. A few weeks later, eighteen volunteer students were informed of their successful applications and, at the inaugural training session, met with eighteen staff members. For research purposes, we decided to randomly assign the pairs, although they were matched from different disciplines to avoid any conflict of interest. Jenny now describes how she designed the training sessions.

Jenny

The foundational values of respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility were explicitly modelled and encouraged through the collective training events for staff members and students. Both worked closely together during the initial training workshop, and the structure of the session allowed for the emergence of ideas, suggestions, and learning for all. Following Gosling and Mason O'Connor's (2009) model of peer-supported review, the initial

training session comprised an in-depth discussion about the value of respectful feedback, professionalism, and trust, and explored the differences between evaluation and judgement. To support students' understanding that they were providing feedback on professional practices and teaching performances, videos of different teaching scenarios and examples of Moodle pages were useful tools to develop 'feedback checklists.' These checklists were then formalised for the students to use as review prompts in their review exercises. Next, Ursula reflects on her experiences of the workshop.

Ursula

At this first session, I felt that we were all establishing a collegial relationship with our paired staff members even before the project commenced through informal conversations, making diary arrangements and agreeing on the next steps. The professional but informal structure of the training clearly contributed to a fast paced, lively and engaging session, as I noted in my reflective diary:

It proved to be very informative, fun, even more interesting than hoped for, relaxed, innovative, nice and pacey... It will be great to work with all these able students and experienced staff... We covered a great number of topics and took on board the learning through innovative ways, e.g. using maps, books etc to consider the issues of feeding back on course materials. A really good mix of experiential and theoretical learning.

The next section explores the project in practice.

Students as Colleagues in action

Jenny

I didn't know who was more nervous before the project began — the students or the staff members! Both groups confided their anxiety about making themselves vulnerable and concerned they might be 'found out.' This sense of vulnerability emphasised the need for a spirit of collegiality, trust, and respect. We had purposefully prescribed minimum instructions on how to develop these student-staff relationships because we were interested in exploring how these developed organically from a research perspective. How often did the pairs meet? What were the potential barriers to creating an authentic and credible professional relationship? Did this type of relationship disrupt traditional student/staff hierarchies, a point reflected in a staff member's diary:

It's a good opportunity to look from a different angle and to look in more detail than just the formal university work and the occasional chat in the corridor with the student. I felt like I've had an amazing opportunity to learn something I would probably never find out without this project. (David, staff)

We touch on some of the answers to these aforementioned questions in the following sections, but a more detailed analysis of our findings can be found in a separate journal article (Scoles et al., in prep). As a comparative element, we also incorporated an explicit research design that allowed us to contrast student-staff review practices with traditional peer-peer review practices. These findings are also discussed in a separate publication (Huxham et al., in prep). Ursula now reflects on the relationship progression with her staff member.

Ursula

Each pair was encouraged to develop their own approach to their partnership. My paired staff member, a senior lecturer called Helen (a pseudonym), had over 16 years of experience. We agreed to initially meet face-to-face on a fortnightly basis and that I would provide regular feedback on her Moodle materials as they were systematically released to her students. We also agreed in advance all the dates for my observations of her lectures, workshops, and assignment feedback to her students. For each task, Helen confirmed the specific issues that she wanted me to focus my feedback on. The following extract from my diary provides some insight into how our meetings were subsequently conducted:

I made sure I prepared very thoroughly for the meeting and had given it all a lot of thought i.e. how to set the right tone, the sort of relationship appropriate to develop etc. ... It went well; we had a very productive 30 minutes. We do not need to be friends, but professional colleagues working in a supportive manner and I felt we got to that.

Our more formal approach to meetings fortuitously suited both our personalities. However, other pairings worked very differently, but equally successfully, forging close working relationships and meeting in more informal settings over coffee.

I was initially very sensitive to the fact that Helen had voluntarily opened herself up for professional review of her teaching practices, and the personal risks for both of us inherent in any feedback process. However, at the first meeting, it became very clear that she was genuinely concerned about the learning and development of her large number of students. In addition, she also had an innate preference, perhaps derived from her own scientific training, for objective and evidenced-based feedback.

From the outset, I was aware that my feedback had traction and value, as I noted in my diary: "I was really pleased that Helen had incorporated my previous recommendations into her Moodle. It affirmed that this is about small and incremental improvements."

Some weeks later we met following one of her lectures. By this time sufficient trust and mutual respect had evolved to allow for constructive feedback on elements of her personal style of lecturing in addition to her management of the content of Moodle. I felt ready and able to handle this challenge. The two-hour lecture clearly revealed her knowledge and experience. This was most evident in her ability to adapt her material in the moment and to vary her approach from delivering key facts from PowerPoint to setting up 'pop-up' discussion groups and posing questions to students. So, other than some minor housekeeping points, I was clear there were no significant points of criticism.

Therefore, the key value of my feedback was objective affirmation and recognition that her work remained vibrant, pedagogically timely, effective, coherent, and fun. Contrary to my expectations, but maybe symptomatic of our overtly professional relationship, I suspect we both felt slightly more exposed and awkward by my delivery of this positive feedback, which she quickly glossed over. My own positive observations were also replicated in the feedback derived from the focus group discussion and the online survey with the registered students who identified her teaching practices as both very "effective" and "engaging."

Following the conclusion of the project, I have continued to bump into Helen; on each occasion we have enjoyed checking how each other are getting on. It is as if we have developed through our shared experience our own 'code' that built on trust and honesty,

allows us to go straight into important subjects for discussion. The carefully maintained professional boundaries preferred during the project's duration have easily been replaced by a mutually beneficial relationship of reciprocity allowing, for example, the exchange of ideas and advice.

Key Challenges and Lessons

Although overall the project was deemed a success, three students did not complete the project. Two students had unresolvable timetabling issues and one student's interest tapered off. As the university timetables were not released until the start of Trimester 2, we found it near impossible to match students and staff timetables. Furthermore, juggling timetables with dissertations and exams meant that students suddenly found themselves struggling to prioritise the project:

I think because the majority of it was focused in Trimester 2, there wasn't much time for either staff or student to arrange these observation dates, there were some slots available for me to observe but they were very specific and they were only over the space of like two weeks or so and then, after the 2 weeks were over, it would be coursework hand-in dates and Easter revision and Easter holidays and stuff (Laurence, student).

We found that the staff benefited most when their students observed more than one lecture or workshop, allowing the students to observe a range of different teaching practices. Organising the focus groups provided a logistical challenge and often only two or three students turned up. However, even these conversations provided rich sources of feedback, and the students found it reassuring when the attendees' views aligned with their own review notes:

I've basically learned how important conducting meetings and focus groups are to the development of changing ideas and stuff. I've realised how important it is to keep contact not just with the main person you're working with, but also how important focus groups are in supporting your ideas... Because it's one thing, suggesting a way to improve something, it's another thing having other people's views to back up this change, or improvement... through the focus groups it was nice to see sort of shared ground between myself and the people I was interviewing. (Laurence, Student)

Reviewing staff member's feedback did not work so well. We had stumbled upon a grey area of ethics. Even though the marked assignments that were reviewed were anonymised, the submitting student had not given permission for their work to be included in the project. This made some staff members uncomfortable. Furthermore, we felt we had not provided adequate training for the students in critically reflecting on assessment and feedback techniques so the scope for this feedback was limited.

As mentioned previously, the research team were very interested in exploring how the student and staff relationships developed. As the project progressed, it became clear that an unanticipated disjunction between student and staff practices of communication was affecting this development. We had requested that the pairs correspond via email yet soon realised that many students did not check their email accounts nearly as regularly as we had expected.

Once this issue was identified, some pairs turned to other social media methods, such as Facebook and mobile phone texting, in order to ensure messages were being received:

Lucy (student): to be honest I wish I would have checked emails better because I know that is what has let me down throughout this whole project... my email etiquette... so now that I have realised that I will check my emails daily...

Megan (staff): Although you did come up with the solution of texting to get through that...

We also questioned how much Jenny should intervene as a facilitator. Some students required more prompting than others, but we were conscious of not turning this into a prescriptive exercise, thus reasserting traditional power relationships. However, our findings suggested that student-staff relationships needed to be facilitated by providing good quality training and on-going support, otherwise some, or many, of the partnerships were likely to flounder.

The relationship development was also hampered if the pairs were dispersed over different campuses. ENU is spread over three city campuses. Many felt that those pairs who were on the same campus had more opportunities to randomly 'bump into' their other half, prompting them to complete the review exercises. Ursula and Jenny now reflect on two important issues arising from the study: further exploration of the notion 'collegiality,' and the incorporation of taught feedback practices into student curriculum design.

Ursula

As previously mentioned, I had initial concerns about the need to protect my time for my own studies. However, the recruitment, training, and the review exercises were spread over two trimesters, which enabled a manageable workload. It also helped that both of us were situated on the same campus. Encouraging the organic relationship development, communication practices and shared responsibility between staff members and students was a clear strength of the project. However, an issue for consideration could be to encourage both staff and students to proactively surface issues of what it means to them individually to work as 'colleagues' together. This might help mitigate occasions where communication etiquette reflected different styles and preference for timeliness, for example, where students did not always confirm their attendance for proposed meeting dates.

Jenny

Ursula's views represent a number of issues raised during the focus groups, providing useful suggestions on how to improve the training workshops and support provided to the students and staff. This included designing an additional workshop on actually writing down the feedback once the project had started, the creation of a *Student-Staff Collegiality Commitment* document, dedicated Moodle Community pages providing resource and support, and extensive promotional materials to access 'hard to reach' students and encourage recruitment. The Student-Staff Collegiality Commitment would be an important adjustment to this project. Laura, a staff member, explained how this would work:

It would almost be like you [both staff and student] could come for an hour and a half, two hours, and actually workshop those expectations so that at the end of two hours everybody goes out with the idea of what it is that is expected of them. So from both sides they can both talk about what is that colleagues are, what you think the contact is, what the expectations are.

Finally, Ursula raises a valuable issue for considering curriculum design.

Ursula

In my experience, university students develop a range of critical analysis skills during their academic studies. However, within our studies, we are rarely presented with opportunities to advance our analytical abilities to include the provision of developing performance feedback skills. I consider that the ability to provide such non-judgemental, constructive feedback that still enables a positive and productive on-going relationship is a transformative and sophisticated core workplace skill. The *Students as Colleagues* training was clearly focused on, and successful in developing this essential workplace skill to deliver constructive feedback to staff members in a professional manner, thus enabling students to feel equipped and confident. As reflected in the Higher Education Academy's framework for student engagement through partnership (2015), the provision of transformative experiences for learning, dialogue, and inquiry are essential elements of developing student engagement. Perhaps training in providing feedback is something that should be on offer to all students during their studies, and could be embedded into the curriculum?

Future Directions for *Students as Colleagues*

Since the completion of the pilot project, *Students as Colleagues* has been incorporated into the university's 2020 strategy as a response to its objectives of promoting student engagement with decision-making and adopting a continuous improvement approach to teaching and learning practice. The project is now going through a transitional stage as it becomes embedded as a voluntary professional development option for all staff and students at ENU facilitated by DLTE team members. We have trained the second cohort who are as enthusiastic as the pilot group. The project was widely disseminated by DLTE and *Students as Researchers* at conferences and workshops over summer 2015. Other UK universities showed considerable interest in implementing this initiative into their own practice. Consequently, we are developing training materials that will be Open Educational Resources and available to external colleagues (<http://staff.napier.ac.uk/services/dlte/resources/SAC/Pages/SAC.aspx>).

Overall, we conclude that the approach of involving students as colleagues in the review of teaching practices can be powerful and transformative for both parties. There are challenges in doing this, not least in negotiating and recognising inherent differences in roles and experience; however, these enrich, and complement, the process. Explicitly adopting values of respect, reciprocity, and the acceptance of taking responsibility for all facets of the project, including the research elements, helped to ensure a thoroughly positive experience for both staff and students. Many of the students expressed a sense of empowerment by contributing to ENU's agenda of improving teaching and learning. They had developed new responsibilities to themselves, others and the wider academic community. Furthermore, this collaborative approach may also prove to be an effective means to evolve aspects of the UKPSF to reflect and promote important developments in student partnership activity.

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