# Peer Review of teaching

## Introduction

At first it seemed fortunate that I was teaching in Winter Term Two and could concentrate on other aspects of my programme e-portfolio. Having a bit more time to organize, develop and then deploy my observation form (for example)—rather fortuitous, eh? Well, not exactly…

I am a planner and a reviser. I like to timetable projects over the long term, delineate processes and benchmarks, and leave lots of room at the end of a project's life for wrapping things up. To some extent I did this—successfully, I would argue—with respect to my course observation form. The first iteration (found **here**) was finalized in late November; the **final version** was ready in early February. In reality there were several iterations before and after: I like to write, reflect, park, re-read, edit, re-write.

Having organized observations in online courses in my role at CTLT I was mindful of some operational considerations. First, there's little value in doing observations in the onboarding/settling in process that happens in the first week or two of a course. Second, until the first Add/Drop date passes, online course communities rarely "gel": it takes another 2-4 weeks for the level of interaction to develop into something of a dynamic. Third, it is important to review the term plans for an online course and pick a week that is either: 1) representative of the sorts of learning activities commonly deployed in the course; 2.) has some sort of special learning activity—usually synchronous—that merits observation and substantive feedback; or, 3.) both 1 and 2. Finally, while a reviewer need not be a subject matter expert, s/he should have experience teaching online, since online "teaching" often looks rather different than its face-to-face (F2F) counterpart.

Finding two reviewers with online teaching experience was straightforward, since there were only three others in our group with any online teaching experience. One colleague, Amrit Mundy, is someone I have worked alongside on a few past projects: I was confident she understood the context in which I taught, and she has a post-graduate credential in learning technologies. The other person, John Dumbrille, works in workplace learning. I understand John's context, having been in a workplace learning role at the Vancouver 2010 Olympics for a year: in hindsight I assumed a level of understanding of my context that John doesn't have.

During my course there are two synchronous sessions. The first is usually in week six or seven, but other timetabled commitments meant it was in week eight this term. While two weeks might not seem to be a huge difference, there were only five weeks left in term for students to integrate what they encountered in the session—five versus seven weeks, in other words. Since the next synchronous session is during week ten, week eight—mid February, in other words—it would be.

So observation forms were distributed, course access arranged, students were advised who these "lurkers" are and why they are there, and everything was sorted. In online courses the course site is generally seen as the course syllabus, so with some orientating instructions both observers were unleashed. Show time!

## About Amrit's review
Amrit's familiarity with higher education, learning technologies, online pedagogy and the tools we use at UBC (WebCT Vista, Wimba Classroom) are some of the reasons her

review was of such value. She did a thorough, thoughtful job, and offered a number of valuable insights.You can read her review [here](#).

In many instances I agree with here; below I focus on a few points that merit unpacking:

> **End of module syntheses**: I already synthesize each week's discussion. Amrit's suggestion I do the same thing as each module ends is a great one.
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> **Offering more literature**: this has been a persistent question since we started developing this course in 2009: should there be more, particularly with respect to theoretical/conceptual frameworks for technology selection. The tack we chose was to emphasize two conceptual ones (Chickering and Ehrmann and Chickering and Gamson), and one that is both conceptual and operational (Bates and Poole). This creates a conceptual scaffold where all students are using a common framework not unlike a clinical reasoning model in problem-based learning. Over the other four modules students engage with a number of literatures, technologies, and learning activities: we do not want to overload them.
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> **More examples earlier in the course related to platforms**: this too is purposeful. From my experience, emphasizing examples too early on gives students a false sense of simplicity/linearity where complexity better reflects the norm. Over the term we work through DVD, online, and blended delivery platforms, LMS- or non LMS-supported. We also have some specific learning activities at the end that synthesize this knowledge.

Amrit's given me a few things to work with—and a strong sense of confidence that I am already a good teacher.


## About John's review

Unfortunately, I feel like John Dombrille's review (complete version here) is something of a missed opportunity. He seemed unable to divorce the look, feel  and structure of WebCT Vista from the elements of course structure and aesthetics under my control. This makes sense to some extent: John does not work in a learning management system (LMS, of which WebCT Vista is one example) space, except as a member of this programme. When I pointed this out, he seemed unconcerned: he certainly did not consider adjusting his review in light of this. Very disappointing, particularly his lack of collegial language.

John also has little (or no) higher educational teaching experience: in hindsight I think this is an absolute requirement for this task. His relatively sparse feedback is often cursory—unless discussing web design.  He observed a *Wimba Classroom* session, not a "weeble" one, something that's rather unambiguously  explained in four places in the course site. In suggesting I have a "written" agenda" on the screen during Wimba…I did. In suggesting I direct student to other, more self-directed resources for building their technical competencies…I do, in a comprehensive ELearning toolkit. His suggestion that I need not be an expert on the key technology through which the students complete their summatively assessed assignments quite frankly baffles me: how can I assess their work using a tool if I am not expert with it; how can I help them troubleshoot when they run into hiccups?

When I first read John's review I was annoyed. After considerable reflection I am…more than annoyed.


## Going Wayback

While preparing this aspect of my e-portfolio I came across an interesting document: a peer review of my teaching from 2001. At the time I was in the midst of my doctoral program and asked one of the senior faculty in the department—who was not a member of my advisory committee—to offer her feedback. You can read the report here.

Back then there was little talk about "peer review of teaching", which has changed subsequently. Most of my colleagues in my program thought it a bit strange—perhaps foolhardy—to invite criticism of something for which many of us had received little or no professional development. Although I cannot claim to have always been a great teacher, I have always felt a fundamental confidence in my abilities—and an equal desire to take advantage of opportunities to improve my practice. Rather surprisingly, as my career has evolved and progressed I am more circumspect, more tentative about such things.

Dr. Tom's report was for my first teaching e-portfolio—which I took down at the start of this program, in anticipation of it being significantly reworked after its completion. In fact, it will look rather different.

## Reflection

These are not the first times I have had my teaching peer reviewed. During my doctoral studies I requested one of the senior faculty (full professor) in our department to review my teaching. After returning to Canada some years later, another faculty member reviewed my teaching as a sessional. In both instances there were many things I agreed with, a few I did not, and several that offered me an opportunity to learn to be a better teacher.

I am always willing to become a better teacher.

These, however, were face-to-face, seminar format courses: one undergraduate and one graduate. There remain relatively few members of the UBC professoriate who teach any courses that are wholly online. In fact, because of my role in CTLT I am often approach as such an expert. As this programme comes to a close I can that I have been a scholarly practitioner of teaching in higher education. So much of what I do (or do not do) is purposeful. Does that make me an expert? I am not sure.

So I was very much looking forward to having my *online* teaching reviewed by peers. Writ large, I am pleased with the process—and what I have gleaned from both reviewers. One reviewer gave me a comprehensive, collegial, candid review of my teaching, based on an understanding of the subject matter and online modality. The other gave me little of substance with which to work: he did, however, help me articulate much more clearly the importance comprehension, collegiality and candour in the peer review process. All three elements are important.

ETEC565A will next be offered in Winter Term One of the 2012/13 academic year (September 2012). That offering will be on UBC's new LMS platform, Blackboard Learn 9. After this term ends I will need to begin work on the transition of the course site (with the heavy lifting done by CTLT's Distance and Blended Learning team) to Blackboard. Part of this involves identifying tools in a new system that replace ones in Vista: this

could be a relatively simple transition or a painful one, depending on how comprehensively UBC IT will have been able to integrate supplemental technologies.

This term's offering represents a refreshed version of the course, so I won't be doing that again for September. But I will look for ways to integrate some of Amrit's feedback.

And hopefully the difference between Blackboard and Vista will address some of John's. ;)