

## Reflection on my peers' teaching

Formative peer review of teaching (PRT) is a process of paradoxes. It is designed to help improve practice rather than performance manage. The relative lower stakes aspect of formative PRT leads some to deprioritize formative reviews, since they do not “count” towards tenure, promotion or re-appointment. There is also a persistent discourse around “objectivity” around evaluation of teaching in general; formative PRT seems to work well when processes are informed by overarching principles of good (PRT) practice, but tailored to a specific teaching context.

All of which is a lot for some folks to get their heads around, particularly if they view research—since there is a data collection and analysis element of peer review of teaching—as a positivist, quantitative process. I am not one of those persons; nor are any of the three persons whose teaching I evaluated for this element of the program. Thankfully!

Having been somewhat immersed in campus-wide conversations around the summative peer review of teaching, shifting to a formative approach for this program has been very interesting. Below I describe and reflect three somewhat different formative PRT experiences collecting evidence and giving feedback to three different educational professionals.

### Amrit

Amrit Mundy is Instructional Designer and ELearning Project Manager in the University's Human Resources division. She is cross-appointed to my unit (CTLT) and collaborates with our Distance and Blended Learning team on various digital learning projects. Her primary project is *Managing @ UBC*, a self-directed online program for persons new to UBC, or staff new to managing staff at the University. I have been aware of this project since Amrit joined the University, having been brought in at a few points to provide feedback and suggestions on the overall design and approach. I think my familiarity with the program, along with our existing, collegial relationship of mutual respect, were what inspired Amrit to ask me to review part of this program. Amrit does not teach at UBC per sé, and the program materials themselves are, broadly speaking, the instructor of *Managing @ UBC*. So reviewing her course content and presentation (within WebCT Vista) become the focus on my formative review.

*Managing @ UBC* offers its participants a non-linear, iterative program through which to acquire and refine management competencies, including knowledge of policies and procedures and how to respond to commonly faced scenarios, along with opportunities for reflection on practice. There are parallel services for coaching, peer-to-peer interactions and (unstructured) networking to supplement the online content. Inherent in *Managing @ UBC*'s design is a tension between wanting a program that is wholly self-directed—and therefore not timetabled—which leaves no scope to embed interactive learning activities...since there is no guarantee *more than one participant* will be working through the same module at any given time. In terms of program design, this presents a significant limitation.

The process we negotiated was:

1. Amrit developed a feedback form for me to use
2. We met to discuss the review process,
3. I worked my way through part of a course module, using the feedback form
4. I returned the completed form to Amrit
5. We chatted about what I found, as well as the process

[Click here to review the completed form.](#)

This was an interesting experience. The course design overall for Managing @ UBC is robust and constructively aligned (Biggs, 2003). The materials are well-written for a generalist, professional audience. The site design is user-friendly and conducive to reading extensively in manageable “chunks” of text. The content, however, would benefit from some element of interactivity: it is entirely “student-content” structured (Anderson, 2008), with no scope for interaction with other students (different pacing and entry points into the program) or an instructor (since there isn’t one). I argued the wholly self-directed design might merit rethinking, in order to allow new managers to interact with one another, perhaps on cohort (Monthly? Quarterly? Term?) basis.

## **Tracy**

Dr. Tracy L. Friedel invited me to review her teaching in her course *Theory and Dimensions of Place-based Learning: Ecohumanist, Critical and Indigenous Lenses*, a graduate seminar in the Faculty of Education. The target audience is magistral students in their first or second year of study, though doctoral students also enroll. Community-service learning (CSL) is an integral aspect of this course; the course is design to maximize learner participation. Students lead portions of sessions, small group work is sometimes embedded in sessions, and there are “learning trips”. As a result, class sessions some weeks are cancelled in lieu of other individual and collective learning activities.

Process wise, Tracy forwarded her course syllabus to me several weeks before our pre-observation meeting. We then met to discuss the course and review process, at a relatively high level. Before the class session she forwarded an observation form.; however, scheduling constraints meant I could only observe one hour of her seminar on one specific date. As a result, the form was of greater value for note-taking than report writing, since there was only one learning activity (a small group task with wider group reporting) during the session.

Contrasted with Amrit’s course, however, I had more sources from which to draw upon for my review. The syllabus proved very important: it helped contextualized the observed session within the overall course design. The syllabus was also the space where I could consider the assessment strategy for the course. My observation focused on how she managed the learning activity that day, along with some queries and discussion we shared whilst the groups were working. Tracy also provided a backgrounder on the session’s activities, along with copies of student handouts, her PowerPoint slides, and a formative assessment form that students completed for each other’s presentations.

Overall I was impressed by Tracy’s low-key, focused and inviting approach to teaching. Her students were engaged, attentive and industrious—all during the penultimate session of the term, a period where many students’ interests and energies wane.

## **Carol-Ann**

I found it difficult locating a teaching award winner who teaches any wholly online courses who was teaching their online course during the certificate program. I found one Killam Teaching Award Fellow, Dr. Darlene Redenbach, who teaches online, but her course is in the pilot for UBC Connect (the new learning management system, or LMS): she felt this term was not a good one for such an observation.

Instead I decided to leverage this requirement of the FCP to learn about one sort of teaching I have no experience with: large lecture halls. I have heard from various colleagues over the years that there are ways to move beyond a *transmission* perspective (Pratt; various) in such a space. I wanted to know more. In my role in CTLT these sorts of questions (viz. “how do you integrate active learning into large lecture halls?”), arise fairly frequently.

Dr. Carol-Ann Courneya, a member of UBC’s 3M National Teaching Awards Council, agreed to let me sit in on one of her lectures in the Undergraduate Medical Program (UMP; sometimes called the MD Program). Having been a lecturer in medical education I was confident that the context in which she taught would be familiar (and it was). Since Dr. Courneya was extending a collegial courtesy to me, I did not process this as a formative peer review; instead it was a chance to glean some useful information.

Overall, I was fascinated by the lecture hall teaching enterprise overall and particularly impressed with Dr. Courneya’s teaching. This was an instructive and valuable experience for my curriculum leadership role rather than for my own teaching (right now, at least).

## **Summing up**

There were a number of take-aways from this process. First was that online teaching remains marginal—given little attention, or at least little attention to its particular components and issues—with respect to peer review of teaching. I was largely left to my own devices to adapt various strategies for face-to-face PRT. Second, the generosity of colleagues to share their teaching spaces and their teaching expertise with me made the process very rewarding: sharing with teachers about the passion for teaching excellence is a gift. Finally, a focus on the quality of teaching—within a largely qualitative framework—seems to provide the most useful data, in terms of improving teaching practice.

## **References**

Anderson, T. (2008). *Towards a Theory of Online Learning*. In: T. Anderson & F. Elloumi (Eds.), *Theory and Practice of Online Learning*. Edmonton AB: Athabasca University. Accessed online 3 March 2009 [http://www.aupress.ca/books/120146/ebook/02\\_Anderson\\_2008\\_Anderson-Online\\_Learning.pdf](http://www.aupress.ca/books/120146/ebook/02_Anderson_2008_Anderson-Online_Learning.pdf)

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*. New York: Open University Press.