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Using Case Studies as a Lens to Observe Teaching Evaluations

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This paper presents the observations of three case studies, reflecting on the practices undertaken in various teaching evaluations. The case studies provide some insight into how many international institutions of higher education follow very traditional evaluation processes, even though they may differ significantly in cultural diversity and organization. Secondly, the paper emphasises the lack of alignment in evaluation practices when universities try to seek more effective teaching and learning outcomes using these traditional instruments as the conduit. More effective teaching and learning could be accomplished through more aligned and reflective evaluation practices.

Keywords: teaching, learning, teaching evaluations, peer observation, case studies

1. Introduction

The higher education sector and universities in general, are in a quandary. There is increased pressure for everyone from administration, colleges, faculty members and students to perform and improve. The increasing marketisation of information and knowledge production for a knowledge economy; advances in the use of information and technology, and competitive educational forces pose new demands and challenges for educators to "keep up". Challenged by the role of funding in research and teaching, universities have to accommodate the demands of governments, industry stakeholders and the community in general in the performance of their graduates. Employers too, are becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the inability of many students to apply decontexualised concepts and skills learned in class, to problem contexts beyond the classroom (Ball and Wells, 2006).

The various audits, evaluations and reviews within higher education have become a contentious issue; for example, governments in the UK, Australia and US now require universities to be judged on their performance in teaching (*and the facilitation of learning*), to meet both regulatory and funding requirements. Secondly, there is an equally divisive issue. Challenged by a greater diversity in educational disciplines, increased student expectations (from teaching and learning), and new demands in course design and delivery, there is also a growing emphasis on developing professional teaching qualifications in higher education. Of course, the paradox is that most faculty teachers in higher education do not have formal teaching qualifications. Moreover, as Donnelly (2007) advises, the educational discourses enmeshed in higher education these days are not straightforward. Many universities now require a range of "generic skills and competencies" to be taught, practised and demonstrated by students on graduation. Teaching is not only a complex process involving the dynamic interaction between the teacher, the students and the content knowledge; but, equally, the reflective interactions that take place.

Debate and dialogue around what constitutes good teaching and good learning has led most universities to conduct evaluations of teaching, often from very different perspectives. Course and subject evaluations, student evaluation of teaching (SET), student feedback surveys, student experience surveys, teaching and peer teaching evaluations are some of the many evaluation and measurement instruments adopted.

2. Observation of Teaching

This paper examines a selection of those evaluation approaches, as a participant observer of three separate international universities using both summative and formative instruments for evaluation. The summative evaluation instrument provided in each case by the university, and the formative data gathered from students and peer teachers by the teacher involved. The universities include: a multi-campus public university from Australia, with 35,000 students; a private international University in Malaysia with approx. 4,000 students; and a smaller private University in Saudi Arabia with 2,200 students. In each case, the teacher involved had introduced a variety of innovative teaching methods aimed at increasing student engagement and interaction, and sought feedback for both personal and organisational needs.

As Gibbs and Habeshaw (2002) point out, relying solely on student evaluations is not sufficient on its own to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across departments. On the one hand, we elicit feedback from students' evaluation of teaching (SET) to serve as an important component of many university and faculty evaluation systems. On the other hand, students may assess these in a contrary manner, basing their evaluation on their own conception of what constitutes "good or bad teaching" (Biggs, 2003). This may reward/penalize teachers who are using methods derived from conceptions other than from the students' perspective. Either by design or default, institutions often place great weight on student evaluation data in making decisions that impact faculty in terms of rewards, career progress and/or professional growth. It is critical that any evaluation instruments be designed and constructed in such a way as to provide valid and reliable information for the specific purposes intended.

Peer observation is considered to be another vantage point to improve the quality of teaching and learning, through the sharing of good practice (Lomas and Kinchin, 2006). Martin and Double (1998) believe that in an educational setting, a process of peer observation that encourages and supports reflection is likely to have important benefits in terms of the enhancement of teaching skills. Peer observation follows on strongly from Kolb's experiential learning cycle and reinforces the notion of a reflective practitioner (Kolb, 1984). The culture and philosophy behind peer observation fosters willingness for faculty to share and provide feedback about their teaching. This helps develop trust, encourages honest and open exchange in reflections of teaching, and facilitates organisational support in preparation, observation and reflection of practice. Peer review is often put forward as a part of professional development program for both new and established staff, and as a means of being able to foster discussion and dissemination of good teaching practice. More often than not, this facilitates deeper reflection on the effectiveness of the participants' own approach to teaching and learning. Equally, it is strongly argued that peer observation can increase the participants' awareness of the student experience of learning, and hence, in understanding what good practice of teaching is, focus more closely on a student-centred approach to teaching and learning (Donnelly, 2007).

Gosling (2002) identifies three models of peer observation, each of which aims to enhance quality of teaching in universities;

- The evaluation model – where senior staff observe other staff;
- The developmental model – experienced educational developers observe lecturers; and
- Peer review model – involves lecturers/instructors observing each other in practice.

Peer observation of teaching can therefore be used not only in a variety of contexts, but it can also be employed as a critical reflective device for teachers to reflect on their own teaching practice and engage in active self development. However, not all reports on peer observation are positive. Cosh (2002) argues that there seems to be no real evidence that people develop and improve through the judgement or comments of others. Resistance may stem from faculty being defensive and sensitive to criticism, and secondly, unsympathetic or even hostile to change their personal approach to teaching.

The final type of evaluation was informed through student feedback, gained from open-ended anonymous questionnaires. The evaluation was conducted by the teacher in each case, seeking students' response to the teaching approach and methods presented throughout the course. Specific attention was drawn to the practice of new activities they had encountered and other general feedback including their planning, motivation, learning efforts and time management activities.

3. Research Context

The researcher, as the teacher involved in the following case studies, had concentrated on adopting and practising a student-centred approach to learning. Biggs (2003) describes this as focusing on what the student does, and recognises teaching as a means of supporting student learning, espousing an approach that fosters deeper learning. In this practice (of learning), a critical aspect is not only to challenge students to explore and criticize their own learning practices, but also encourage conscious reflection from the teacher as part of the cycle. According to Brockbank and McGill (1998), it is this framework of reflective activities that can contribute to transformational learning – or in this case, learning about learning.

The teaching/learning framework adopted seeks to improve student learning outcomes by actively engaging students in participation, and encouraging more independence and responsibility for their own learning. The framework has a focus on:

- Creating more visible and obvious links between lectures, tutorials and assignments (constructive alignment: Biggs, 2003);
- Transitioning students learning practices from surface learning behaviours and attitudes to more profound and deeper style of learning (Entwistle, 1997);
- Increasing interaction, communication and feedback mechanisms, cultivating student reflection processes, enhancing learner awareness and ultimately improving comprehension (Laurillard, 1993);
- Critical pedagogy that allows students a more active and critical role in learning activities (Bransford et al, 2000);
- Encouraging students to adopt more peer interaction with their colleagues (Halloran, 2008); and
- Incorporating a process of continuous improvement that could be beneficial for both instructor and learner in the practices of teaching/learning (Lomas and Kinchin, 2006).

At the forefront of the strategy is a simple cycle, incorporated into the course teaching and learning activities, to engage and observe the students' learning behaviours and practices at a more personal level; a Personal Learning Practice (Halloran, 2008). The learning cycle is an exploratory model that embeds the range of experiential and reflective practices in situ. That is, encourages students to develop the capability to apply (and re-apply) formal knowledge into their own understanding or "knowledge maps".

Although this objective relates to the highest level of Biggs's (2003) SOLO taxonomy phase (i.e. extended abstract), the conceptualization of new knowledge is considered a continual process of knowledge creation. Students were also encouraged to maintain their own personal learning journal. This was to be a reflective journal that they believed encapsulated their thoughts and (learning) processes in the discovery and awareness of new knowledge and insights within the course. Further advice to students indicated that reviews and informal feedback would occur on the journal regularly, (so long as they attended the class); and that their learning journal would contribute to their overall grade (as an assessment item).

The thematic analysis of this research explores three areas of evaluation data: university designed student evaluation of teaching (SET) surveys, peer teacher observations and student feedback obtained from within the course. In each of the following case studies, the student evaluation of teaching (SET) followed established international practices with standardised questionnaires, customary administration and instruction procedures, and orthodox distribution and publication of results. While the questions may have differed slightly in syntax, each survey covered the general nature of student evaluations including: content and objectives, expertise of teaching staff and their teaching methods, assessment procedures, and workload and study behaviours.

Similarly, the student feedback sought through formative anonymous instruments explored study behaviours and patterns, assessment conduct and feedback, and general teaching observations including problems they may have encountered. The peer evaluations for each case were compatible instruments, each an expression of course goals, achieved learning outcomes, mastery of content, effective use of teaching methods and level of interaction and engagement with students.

4. The Case Studies

Each of the case studies involves courses taken over one full semester. Each employed multiple evaluation instruments including; student evaluations of teaching administered through University supervision, formative student feedback collected by the teacher/researcher and peer teaching observations. In two cases, the peer review model was employed and in the other, the evaluation model was employed.

4.1. The Australian Experience

Teaching a core project management course of 30 postgraduate students, in an ICT faculty; feedback was gathered using both summative and formative methods. The class was a unique assembly of 25 international and 5 domestic students from 15 different countries, with 17 males and 13 females. The overall pass rate was positive with only two failures (both having abandoned the course after the due date for withdrawing had passed). The University has in place a formal student evaluation period, at the closing stages of the semester, with faculty required to administer a voluntary questionnaire to all participating course students. The student evaluation survey can be either in paper form or web-based, and has ten mandatory questions (used university wide), with up to another ten allowed from a selection bank of over 120 enquiries regarding areas of teaching, feedback, tutorials, lectures, assessment, level of motivation and support etc. If undertaken in paper form, the survey is administered by someone other than the teacher. The web-based survey had a response rate of 48%, with overall feedback from the survey signifying excellent teaching outcomes with a mean score of 6.1 (on a likert scale of 1–7) for all 17 questions answered. The highest mean score was recorded for the topic of motivation and inspiring students (6.4), and the lowest (6.0) for alignment of assessment items with course objectives.

The second episode of evaluation was informed through student feedback, gained from open-ended anonymous questionnaires conducted prior to final examinations, eliciting their response to the teaching methods and approach encountered. Students were asked to respond to questions, on whether they had adopted or changed their learning strategies, what new "teaching & learning" insights had been observable to them, any issues and difficulties they had encountered and an overall reflection of their own learning experience in the course. The response was varied, with some students indicating positive reaction to active engagement and peer participation, while others revealing indifference to the new learning approaches. General comments related to many differences in cultural understanding including integration into the local community that sometimes led to more informal learning difficulties. For example, many of the international students had typical language and communication difficulties that created certain impediments, however, more complex and intimate problems surfaced through the interactions required in the team project for the course. This was observed when students had mixed with other students not from their own background.

Lastly, a senior colleague was asked (by the teacher) to undertake a peer observation of teaching using a standard evaluation form developed by the University's teaching & learning unit. Feedback highlighted very positive response towards interactive teaching practices and student engagement, with constructive comments reflecting enthusiastic student peer to peer discussions observed throughout the session.

4.2. The Malaysian Experience

The course being evaluated was an elective eBusiness course in the Business faculty, with a cohort of 56 students. While there were a majority of domestic Malaysian students (75%), many had relocated and transferred to the city for study purposes. There were 24 females and

32 males, with a pass rate of 90% (of 6 failures, each failed to submit at least one major assessment item). In 2005 a new University wide system for unit evaluations was approved which required all course units to be evaluated at least once per year, that included ten common items, with up to ten additional quantitative items added by a faculty in order to produce a common faculty unit evaluation form of no more than 20 questions. All results from student evaluations of units are posted on the University's web site that provides a level of transparency and accountability, but teaching personnel details are omitted from the publication.

In this case, feedback indicated an overall mean score of 3.99 (likert scale 1–5), with the highest sectional rating (4.48) attributed to the teachers' willingness to assist students (either during or outside lectures) with difficulties that they had with lecture content. This was followed closely by the teachers' motivation and level of interaction (4.38). The lowest rating (3.41) was slightly incongruous with the overall results; highlighting students own motivation and level of interest in the class as problematic; closely related to not wanting to learn or develop further understanding of the actual subject undertaken. These lower scores may have been attributed to the status of the course as an elective in the faculty.

Anonymous feedback was also sought from students, with topic attention specifically given to the adoption of new teaching practices including peer group and class activities, and use of their reflective journal. The feedback correlated poor motivation, lack of planning and inadequate time management issues as specific learning difficulties. However, a number of students commented that the "learning journal" appeared to be a laborious task (of writing, reflection and more writing), but there was motivation to continue developing their own learning skills and knowledge. Secondly, it became evident that social engagement was highly valued when classroom discussions and workshop style activities were undertaken, with students actively seeking (positive) reinforcement from the instructor and their own peers.

A "critical friend" (Lomas and Kinchin, 2006) was sought to observe a teaching session and provide feedback for the peer evaluation. A generic form was adopted from resources in the University's higher education centre, and utilised for the class. Peer feedback highlighted high levels of interaction and engagement with the students demonstrating willingness, confidence and respect to engage with the instructor and their peers.

4.3. The Saudi Arabian Experience

Teaching a core Ethics class of seventeen undergraduate students (in an all male college) in a computer science faculty, the student evaluation survey was administered by University administration. The teacher was asked to leave the room while students completed the survey. The survey follows a generic structure adopted University wide that utilises a 5 point likert scale across 19 questions. There is also an open ended response section for comments with regard to any aspect not covered by the list of questions. The evaluation form covers general student-related information, class/time management, specific questions relating to teacher evaluation and a somewhat arbitrary question concerning their expected grade for the course. After the evaluations, results are made known to the Dean with a more general report provided to all individual faculty members. The overall mean for all questions was 4.7/5, with teacher motivation and knowledge of subject areas rating highest. The lowest ratings were derived from questions related to student attendance and availability of allocated resources for the course.

Student feedback was sought using anonymous written feedback, with topics alluding to teaching methods, learning strategies they had employed and any problems and issues they had encountered. Although many students highlighted that they were unaccustomed to some of the more interactive teaching practices involved, they enjoyed the experience and were enthusiastic to continue the practice. Some students commented that they were definitely unaccustomed to the physical activities involved in taking class and journal notes for reviewing purposes. However, they did comment that it appeared to assist their understanding and comprehension, particularly for developing their English skills.

The peer observation approach was conducted using an "evaluation model" with three colleagues selected by the faculty executive to conduct a faculty wide review of all teaching staff.

Feedback was given as a generic report to all faculty highlighting inadequacies of some teaching practices, and positive indicators in other areas. As these did not specifically identify any one faculty member, it was difficult to ascertain any purposeful meaning to evaluation feedback.

5. Discussion

Using three case studies has not only provided a mechanism for reflection on multiple sources of data, but has also allowed the inquiry to be viewed through the lens of a real-world phenomenon over an extended period (Yin, 1984) i.e. the observation of teaching evaluations conducted throughout the semester. In construction of the researchers' understanding, the empirical case study data not only relies on the researchers' knowledge and active participation, but equally, to be aware of the generalisability and intersubjectivity in the analysis of the interpretations observed. Gidden's (1984) refers to the double hermeneutic, that is, that the researcher also influences the interpretations and, equally, is influenced by the process itself. So it is with this in mind that the researcher makes the following contributions.

From the teacher's perspective, there are still questions regarding the validity of some student evaluations of teaching that were conducted across all three campuses. This was particularly worrying when evaluation criteria appeared to be based on institutional and student variables, not on actual teacher effectiveness in teaching. Moreover, a major concern observed was that often they were undertaken for one purpose and sometimes used for another. For example, renewal of contracts, or allocation to certain courses as punishment if course/teaching performance was poorly evaluated. Collecting data too early in the semester or too near to exam time, too short a period of peer observation, too small a sample of responses or not giving students or peers sufficient time to complete the evaluations, may create disparity or inaccuracies in the overall results. Moreover, unless students and teachers know exactly why the data is being collected, it may present opportunity for criticism for reasons other than those intended.

General to all campuses was the notion that students were not only interested in more interactive teaching approaches, but in many cases wanted to develop their communication skills. Aligned with this was the conception that they also wanted to be able to cultivate their independent learning skills and not be penalised for making mistakes when they do attempt new techniques and skills. It appeared this was not traditionally valued in many of their course philosophies. This also needs to be reinforced and emphasised with teaching practices. Likewise, teachers need to be able to create, innovate and experiment and not be constrained by formal adherence to "invalid teaching observations". Unless there is alignment of the institutions goals with evaluation objectives (and enhanced student learning), it seems that teacher evaluations will continue to create misunderstandings and confusion as to their value. The vital concern here is that when various forms of evaluation are not triangulated and coordinated together, each on their own may well be taken out of context in understanding teacher effectiveness and, consequently, the value of student learning.

As Donnelly (2007) suggests, as evaluations are a sensitive and personal process, it is important to have agreed and decipherable objectives in terms of what types of improvement are being sought. Otherwise, the various forms of observation and evaluation performed may present a fractured and distorted view of the overall teaching approach employed. Further, distortions in the results can emerge if attention is not given to biases that may exist: for example, the "new" teacher whose personality and style are more observable in terms of motivating behaviours, presenting caring and empathic support of students etc, may/may not influence student's perceptions of the teacher as an effective educator. Likewise, the impact of a teacher's engaging or entertaining presentation style on student's learning may convince students of effective teaching practices being conducted.

Lomas and Kinchin (2006) describe how student and peer evaluations not only act as quality enhancing tools for the institution, but can also function as an integral part of a teacher's professional development. From the researcher's perspective, peer review was seen as a positive and reflective paradigm that not only linked application of (new teaching) theory to practice, but required honest and candid appraisal of one's own experiences, supported through peer discussions and feedback. In the Malaysian case, the teacher was awarded a teaching honour after submission of a teaching portfolio that incorporated evidence from all three evaluations conducted throughout the semester.

Likewise, independent of the evaluation initiatives, teachers should have freedom to access and interpret the "results" of such measurements and make their own decisions on action to be taken. Caution should also accompany the attempt to mix both summative and formative data if results are considered on a purely summative basis. While all of the peer evaluation programs emerged as valuable and effective instruments, they still require being better coordinated with improved preparation and planning that includes pre-observation and post-observation activities. Indeed, all teaching evaluation programs need to be reviewed as part of an overall quality assurance process that evaluates their value and effectiveness. This was not the case in all three studies, with no one institution merging or correlating the various sets of "observation" data that were available. However, using a combination of student evaluations, qualitative student feedback and peer observation data cannot only present a more "holistic" view of the teaching and learning context, but be evaluated itself from a more standardised position. Thus, the evaluation programs themselves can be evaluated from a quality perspective, to provide assurance that the outcomes are definitely aligned with the goals and objectives of the teaching and learning strategies proposed. As Biggs (2003) advises, we need to be assured that the institutions align their objectives of quality teaching with an agenda of delivering higher education that is both transparent and practical.

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