

Peer review of teaching to promote learning outcomes



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In 1990, American educator Ernest Boyer¹ asked us to reconsider scholarship. In doing this he recognised not only the importance of teaching, but also that it was undervalued. Boyer concluded that for teaching to become valued it needed to be evaluated as rigorously as research is and suggested, among other things, that peer evaluation was an effective means of assessing quality – just as it is in research. Boyer noted that peer evaluation of teaching was not commonly practised in American higher education. The situation remains similar to this day in Australia with peer review of teaching (PRT) being uncommon².

Ask yourself: *How much feedback have I had about my teaching and its effectiveness for engendering strong learning amongst my students?* Most Australian universities mandate student evaluation of teaching in some form, so Australian educators will probably have student feedback. Maybe you have reflected on your teaching and how well your students have learnt the subject (or not), but you may not have obtained feedback from peers. If you are a new teacher, then possibly you have yet to be given any feedback; nevertheless there you are teaching in higher education. Contrast this with the amount of peer feedback obtained by researchers from supervisor comments, grant application and journal article reviews and seminars, as well as informal comment from research colleagues. While research is a highly visible activity, teaching appears to be largely hidden from our peers. The focus of this paper is to urge you to reconsider the role of PRT in developing good teaching practices in order to engender deep learning amongst your students.

What is PRT?

Firstly, although PRT can be used managerially to evaluate academic performance, this paper focuses entirely on the collegial use of PRT in which it has an academic developmental purpose

of enhancing student learning outcomes. In essence, PRT is voluntary, collegial, confidential, thought-provoking, embedded in critical reflection of one's teaching and reciprocated. It provides opportunities for learning by both the reviewer and the reviewee; it models good practice and opens the door for mentoring less experienced teachers. By providing alternative viewpoints about teaching, PRT can initiate uncomfortable reconsideration of the assumptions we all make about our teaching practice. Brookfield³ discusses the vital importance of "hunting assumptions" about our teaching, in order that we can know why we do what we do. Without critical reflection, assumptions underlying our teaching can remain untested. For example, our experiences as learners heavily influence our practice as teachers³. We may falsely assume that what worked for us, will work for our students. To have a colleague review our teaching practice can provide data to help us critically and rationally understand our teaching activities and whether or not they are effective. Finally, PRT offers opportunities for both the reviewer and the reviewee to cast themselves as learners, which can open their minds to new or different ideas and perspectives of good teaching. Both are impelled to reconsider their own roles in their students' learning.

PRT can involve review of classroom teaching (peer observation of teaching), of the curriculum, of the appropriateness of the assessment to evaluate the learning outcomes, of the teaching resources used or all of the above⁴. The decision, which belongs to the teacher being reviewed, should be informed by the teacher's initial reflection and what questions they have formed regarding the effectiveness of their teaching practice.

Why would we use PRT?

PRT has many advantages that are conferred on both the reviewer and reviewee⁴. Firstly, advice is specific for the teacher and context being reviewed rather than a generic comment about good teaching taken from the literature⁵. Teachers can learn at a practical level the things that make classes work better. Secondly, teachers can learn new pedagogical approaches and even change their philosophy of teaching on the basis of an effective PRT. Bell⁶ describes PRT as helping improve teaching skills, pedagogy, teacher confidence and the congruence of the reviewee's theories of teaching with their practices. Consequently, when integrated with ongoing reflective practice on teaching, PRT helps teaching evolve to match changing classroom dynamics. It helps clarify educational aims and provides evidence to support rational decisions, such as modifying learning outcomes to better reflect the overarching aim of the subject being taught. Additionally, the act of PRT in the classroom demonstrates the importance of reflective practice to students – students see the teacher being reviewed and responding rationally to

points raised by the reviewer. It also helps develop collegiality amongst staff within a department and, by engendering critical self-reflection, enhanced professional development via rational planning for teaching improvement⁶. By using collegial PRT, teachers can expound their own theories of teaching and will gain confidence if faced with compulsory PRT for promotion or other employment-related reasons. A further benefit is that, by developing the scholarship of teaching as espoused by Boyer, PRT data may be used in scholarly publications.

An emerging challenge for many academics is the increasing use of online or blended learning approaches to provide greater flexibility for the student population. For some teachers, this will mean learning new pedagogies and methods of teaching, so even experienced teachers will require feedback on their practices. The lack of knowledge of PRT in e-learning and whether or not it is qualitatively different from face-to-face teaching are discussed by McKenzie *et al.*⁷ and Wood and Friedel⁸.

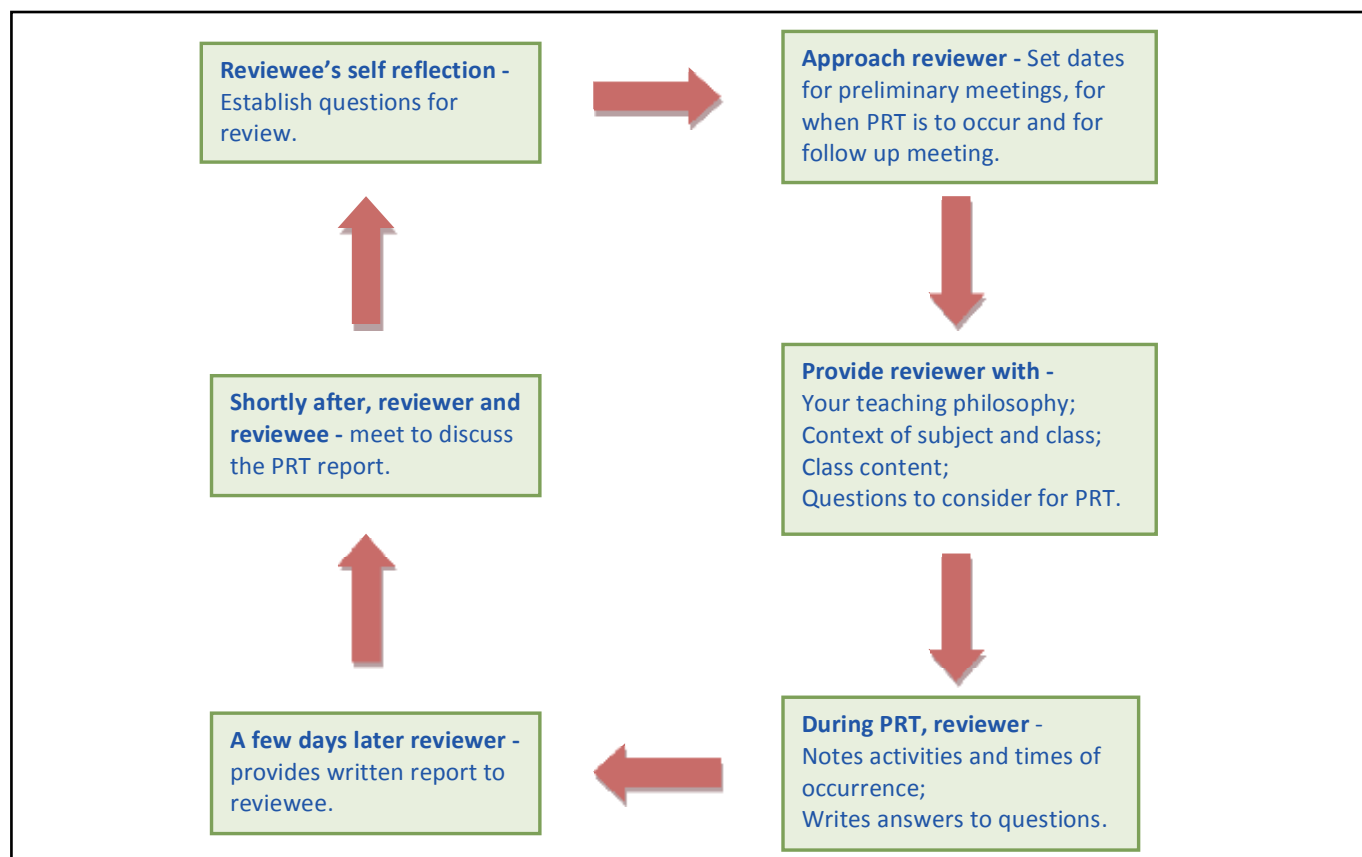
How to carry out PRT

Although PRT does not appear to be practised systematically throughout Australia, it is very easy to find information about PRT on many Australian university websites. Many comment that it is highly beneficial and may also provide advice on how to carry out and use PRT; for example, the Universities of [Queensland](#), [Tasmania](#), [NSW](#) and [South Australia](#). There is common ground

across the literature on how to practice PRT [for example points 3, 6, 9, 10 below, as well as the online university links listed above]. Where it is used for academic development PRT is most effective when it is:

1. Embedded within the reviewee's self-critique of their teaching.
2. Voluntary – the reviewee wants feedback on their teaching.
3. Controlled by the reviewee – who determines the reviewer and makes the initial approach. The reviewee should clearly define the limits of the review to ensure that their aims for it are met. By doing this the reviewee gives the reviewer permission to critique particular aspects of their teaching.
4. Highly structured – with times for preliminary meetings and follow-up discussion. Outcomes are written and provided shortly after PRT and then discussed.
5. Confidential – thus both reviewer and reviewee can speak clearly.
6. Able to recognise the teaching strengths of the reviewee. In this sense, the primary purpose of PRT is to build from the teacher's strengths in order to improve learning outcomes.
7. Able to identify areas of teaching practice that are not working as well as they could and to enable the reviewee to work through and solve any such problem areas.

Figure 1: A cyclic mechanism for including PRT with ongoing development of teaching.



8. Collegial – the reviewer couches their critique in terms directed objectively to the teaching reviewed, rather than the characteristics of the reviewee. So although PRT is evaluative, it should be non-judgemental.
9. Reciprocal – which furthers collegiality and open discussion of teaching and learning in order to improve student learning.
10. Openly discussed afterwards by the reviewee with other colleagues – although it is confidential initially, a teacher can expand the impact of PRT on their teaching by more broadly discussing the outcomes.

Conclusion

Clearly, strong views in favour of PRT have been expressed in this paper. From personal experience I have found that PRT has transformed aspects of my teaching, in particular keeping the thought of the student in the forefront of my mind as I plan a teaching activity: *What will the learner be doing in this class? How can I maximise the learning by the students?* However, although PRT can greatly improve teaching and therefore learning, it does require the teacher to open their work up to critique. The communication skills of the reviewer will have a significant influence on whether or not the critique is accepted. PRT requires us to explain why we do what we do, and if we cannot, then we are impelled to reconsider our thoughts. This is disquieting, but by definition so is all learning. We ask our students to accept this disquiet every day we take a class and challenge their knowledge, concepts and beliefs. So why shouldn't we be prepared to do the same?

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Biography

Chris Burke is a senior lecturer and degree coordinator in the NCMCRS. He has a strong interest in teaching and has taught in microbial ecology and aquatic ecology for nearly 20 years. In 2007 he was awarded a Carrick Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning and is currently a UTas Teaching Fellow.