The benefits of peer observation of teaching for tutor development

Dr Amani Bell and Dr Rosina Mladenovic

Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Sydney

Rm 389 Merewether Building (H04)

The University of Sydney NSW 2006

Phone: +612 9036 5489

Fax: +612 9351 6620

a.bell@econ.usyd.edu.au (now amani.bell@sydney.edu.au)

Abstract

Peer observation partnerships can help teachers improve their teaching practice, transform their educational perspectives and develop collegiality (Bell 2005). This paper describes the peer observation model used in the tutor development program in the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Sydney, and reports on the effectiveness of this exercise using quantitative and qualitative data from five sources. Results from 32 peer observations reveal both the common strengths and the areas in which tutors need to develop their teaching practice. Ninety four percent of participants found the exercise valuable and 88% said that they would change their teaching as a result of the exercise. This model can be applied in academic development programs in any discipline and suggestions for augmentation and improvement are provided.

Introduction

Our study is situated in the context of the literature on academic development. Over the past 20 years a body of research has emerged with a focus on teaching from the perspective of the teachers themselves (Åkerlind 2007). These studies show two main conceptions of and approaches to teaching, namely teacher-focussed conception with a content-centred approach and student-focussed conception with a learning-centred approach (Martin and Ramsden 1992; Halliday and Soden 1998; Kember and Kwan 2000; Åkerlind 2003, 2007; McKenzie 2003). It is this framework that informs our research.

This research adds to the literature on academic development and is focussed on tutor development, in particular, the use of peer observation of teaching. Our review of the

literature detailed below, reveals that if conducted under supportive conditions, there are numerous benefits of peer observation of teaching. However, there are only a few studies on peer observation in tutor development programs, which is in line with Bell's (2002, p. 8) statement that: "it is difficult…to find quantitative evidence of the effectiveness of peer observation of teaching because of the nature and context of the practice". To address this gap in the literature, this paper explores the effectiveness of peer observation of teaching within an academic development program.

Peer observation of teaching is a key element of academic development, yet it is not widely reported as part of tutor development programs. Peer observation of teaching offers many benefits such as improvements in teaching practice and the development of confidence to teach and learn more about teaching (Bell 2005). However there may be negative aspects of peer observation including that it may be seen as intrusive and challenging academic freedom (Lomas and Nicholls 2005). These negative aspects can be overcome in conditions where peer observation is designed to be non-judgemental and developmental rather than evaluative and externally required (Lomas and Nicholls 2005).

Prior literature provides evidence of the effectiveness of expert observation of tutors' teaching practice yet there is very little research about peer observation of tutors, even though the study by Sparks (1986) showed peer observation of tutors to be more effective than expert coaching or workshops alone. This paper reports on a peer observation exercise that was implemented within a Faculty based tutor development program.

Literature review

Bell (2005, p. 3) defines peer observation of teaching as a: "collaborative, developmental activity in which professionals offer mutual support by observing each other teach; explaining and discussing what was observed; sharing ideas about teaching; gathering student feedback on teaching effectiveness; reflecting on understandings, feelings, actions and feedback and trying out new ideas." Our review of the literature revealed very few studies on peer observation of tutors, however there are two main research areas that inform our study: 1)

peer observation of academics at lecturer level or above and 2) expert observation as part of tutor development. The literature review is organised as follows: first we provide a summary of the benefits and negatives of peer observation of teaching and we then review the literature on expert and peer observation as part of tutor development programs.

Peer observation of teaching

Peel's (2005) review of the literature on peer observation of teaching reveals that it is used for two main purposes: development or performance management. Our focus is on the use of peer observation for development. Developmental peer observation of teaching can be formal, as part of an academic development program, or informal and may sometimes occur naturally within a team teaching environment. Numerous benefits of peer observation have been described in the literature including: improvements to teaching practice, development of confidence to teach and learn more about teaching, transformation of educational perspectives (Bell 2005); the development of collegiality, including more respect for the approaches of colleagues (Quinlan and Åkerlind 2000); and integration of tutors into the department (Allen 2002). Peer observation of teaching provides a forum where teaching practices are shared rather than remaining a private activity (D'Andrea 2002a), and this encourages reflection on teaching and fosters debate about and dissemination of best practice (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005). Peer feedback can be used as evidence for teaching award or promotion applications (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004) and complements student evaluations since academics provide a different perspective (Hutchings 1996). Finally, peer observation of teaching provides a model of peer and self assessment for students (Napan and Mamula-Stojnic 2005).

Peer observation can be challenging as it often involves written critical reflection, exploring successful and unsuccessful teaching experiences and providing and accepting feedback (Bell 2005). There can also be negative aspects of peer observation that deter academics from engaging in the process. Peer observation of teaching may be seen as intrusive and challenging academic freedom, academics may be concerned that what is reviewed may not be representative, accurate or generalisable, and that observers may not objective (Lomas

and Nicholls 2005). In addition academics may be experiencing change fatigue, and may also resist changes that are seen as managerial and time consuming (ibid). Further, while peer observation of teaching may contribute to individual development, it is not always seen as enhancing wider developmental initiatives (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004).

These barriers and negative experiences highlight the need for conditions where peer observation of teaching is more likely to work, including: non-judgemental and developmental feedback from observers, peer observation occurring on an annual or biennial cycle, departmental leadership in planning and carrying out a peer observation program, opportunities for training in peer observation skills and institutional rewards and incentives to demonstrate that peer observation is valued (Lomas and Nicholls 2005). The peer observation exercise described in this paper was specifically designed to overcome the barriers listed above. This was achieved by encouraging the tutors to provide non-judgemental and constructive feedback, embedding the exercise within the Faculty-led tutor development program which is offered twice a year, guiding tutors through the stages of the exercise and rewarding tutors by remunerating them upon completion of the exercise.

Expert and peer observation as part of tutor development programs
The need for effective, systematic, evaluated development programs for tutors has been reported for many years (e.g. Carroll 1980; Savage and Sharpe 1998; D'Andrea 2002b; Sutherland 2002; Dearn et al. 2002; AUTC 2003; Bryson 2004; Smith and Bath 2004). Alongside and in response to this need, there is also a well developed literature on tutor training and development that covers many aspects and approaches (Smith and Bath 2003; 2004). While peer or expert observation is not listed explicitly in their reviews, there are several studies on expert observation of teaching as part of tutor and teaching assistant training courses.

Expert observation was part of the graduate assistants' training program reported by Gilbert and McArthur (1975). Each teaching assistant was observed three times over a semester, each instance followed by a conversation based on the detailed notes of the observer. The

observation aspect of the program was rated fairly highly by tutors as helpful but some tutors found the presence of the expert observer made them very nervous. Carroll (1980) reviewed several studies that used observation of teaching as a way of determining whether tutor training produced differences in teaching behaviour. Of thirteen studies all but one found general or statistically significant positive changes in teaching behaviour due to training. One of the studies was a doctoral thesis by Dalgaard, some of which was later published as Dalgaard (1982). In the study, tutors were videoed teaching before and after attending training. Tutors viewed their videos with an experienced teacher and the teacher used a questioning technique to help the tutor self evaluate their teaching and to set goals to improve their teaching. Tutors in the training group received significantly higher final teaching scores from trained raters than the control group after the scores were adjusted for initial differences in teaching skill. Tutors rated the videotaping as the most useful aspect of the training.

Abbott et al. (1989) reviewed the literature on teaching assistant training from 1980 to 1988. The authors cite two additional studies that reported positive effects for tutor training programs that included videoing of teaching along with feedback from expert teachers. One of the studies, by Hendricson et al. (1983) was of seven graduate students whose lectures were video taped while an expert observer attended and made notes. The observer's comments were reviewed with the observee, who was then provided with a copy of the comments, the video and a self-evaluation form, followed by further discussions with the observer to identify areas for improvement. The procedure was repeated after 14-22 weeks (ie in the next semester). The subjects with the lowest initial teaching scores improved significantly over time. The other study, by Bray and Howard (1980), found that teaching assistants who received expert consultation on videos of their classes received higher ratings from trained raters, improved self-reports of teaching and higher student ratings of teaching methods, relative to a control group. The authors suggested that "videotape feedback with consulting is the most effective method in helping TAs become better instructors." (p. 69).

Savage and Sharpe (1998) reported an introductory study of intensive expert observation, feedback and coaching of *one* teaching assistant. The program resulted in improvements to

her teaching in several areas and this was validated using student feedback. Nicolettou and Flint (2004) reported qualitative evidence that tutors valued the expert observation component of a tutor training program at an Australian university. Expert observation is also a compulsory component of training for new tutors at the University of Southern Queensland (Fowler 1996) but data on effectiveness is not reported. More recently, Hatzipanagos and Lygo-Baker (2006) reported that expert observation of 48 new teaching staff, including graduate teaching assistants, was developmental and encouraged critical reflection.

There are two studies that utilised both peer and expert observation of tutors; however the effects of the expert observation and the peer observation cannot be examined separately. Teaching assistants who underwent a program of expert and peer mentoring and observation had significantly lower levels of anxiety about teaching at the end of semester and higher student evaluations of their teaching compared to those in a group who received training only (Williams 1991). In another study of peer observation within a training program for graduate teaching assistants, expert observers found that the teaching assistants needed development in facilitating inquiry based learning (Roehrig et al. 2003). The authors had several recommendations on how to improve the situation including the teaching assistants observing an experienced tutor or lecturer who was good at facilitating student interaction and inquiry. The authors did not comment on whether the teaching assistants benefited directly from the peer or expert observation, and indeed noted that no graduate teaching assistant "talked about the importance of observing a peer as a means to improve instruction" (Luft et al. 2004, p. 222).

Sparks (1986) evaluated three methods of developing high school teachers via a control group who attended workshops, a group who participated in the workshops plus peer observations and a third group who participated in the workshops and received in-class coaching. All groups received expert pre and post observations of their teaching. The peer observation activities were found to be more effective than coaching or workshops only. Sparks (1986, p. 223) postulated that "just watching a colleague teach may have been a

powerful learning experience" and noted that the peer observation group developed strong collegiality and high morale.

A framework for academic development

The aim of the peer observation exercise within our tutor development program is to provide an opportunity for what Åkerlind (2007 p.36) terms 'conceptual expansion'. The exercise was designed to encourage tutors to specifically consider good teaching practice from the students' perspective i.e. a student-centred conception of teaching. This was achieved by basing the peer observation form on the University of Sydney's '*Teaching in tutorials'* student feedback form. Hence the tutors were using a similar form to that which students use to evaluate tutorial teaching, thus encouraging the tutors to take a student-centred approach to the exercise. The form was developed based on a strong emphasis on "…the student experience of the teaching and learning environment and its relation to student learning, as opposed to a focus on the teacher (e.g. Biggs, 2003; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Ramsden, 2003)." (Ginns 2007 p.1)

Our context

The Faculty employs a large number of casual academic staff (160 in semester 1 2005, alongside 188 full time academic staff) as is common in Australian universities (e.g. Kift 2003) in response to increases in student numbers and shortages of full-time academic staff. Tutors[1] are primarily employed in the Faculty from semester to semester on a casual basis to teach small groups of up to 20 undergraduate students (classes can be larger at postgraduate level) and undertake associated marking and one-to-one consultation with students. Tutors are crucial to the student experience, yet tutors are often inexperienced teachers (Kift 2003). The Faculty recognised the need to provide training and development for tutors, and the tutor development program had been operating at the Faculty level for a year at the time of this study. The peer observation exercise was introduced in 2005 and was the first time in the Faculty that such an exercise had been offered on a broad, formal scale.

The overall development program then consisted of three development sessions per semester plus the peer observation and self reflective exercise. These activities were available to both new and experienced tutors. The first session helped tutors prepare to teach their first tutorial, with information and activities on excellent tutoring, ice breakers, tutorial lesson planning and setting expectations. The second session focussed on the outcomes of the peer observation exercise including resources and suggestions regarding common areas in need of improvement. This development session was in part a videoconference with the University of Melbourne, where the Faculty of Economics and Commerce uses an expert observation model to enhance tutor development (Morris and Mladenovic 2005). The third session centred on giving in-class feedback and feedback on assessments and also provided information on ways tutors can gather and use feedback on their teaching.

The peer observation exercise is an integral part of the program and gives tutors the opportunity to learn more about their teaching by observing another tutorial and by providing feedback to the tutor in a supportive and non-judgmental manner. Peer observation of teaching can encompass many aspects of the teacher's role including lectures, tutorials, on-line teaching and curriculum design including assessment (Hatzipanagos and Lygo-Baker 2006). However, given our tutors are primarily responsible for tutorial teaching and have little or no involvement with lecturing or curriculum and assessment design, the exercise focussed on tutorial teaching (including aspects such as preparation, learning activities and feedback to students).

Method

In Semester 1 2005, the Faculty's 160 casual tutors (i.e sessional staff) were invited to participate in a voluntary paid peer observation exercise. Fifty two tutors elected to do so, and self-selected a tutor 'buddy' from their discipline area. Participants were advised that the exercise was to be completed in the spirit of collegiality, confidentiality and with an intent to support tutor development. The tutor providing feedback was instructed to observe unobtrusively and not intervene in the tutorial. Tutors attended each other's tutorials for the

full length of the class and reviewed the tutor's lesson plan, which was provided to them at or before the start of the tutorial.

Tutors completed a peer observation proforma during the tutorial, which they then refined and typed up after the class. The form (see Appendix) was based on the University of Sydney's (2005) student feedback form for tutors. The idea behind this was to encourage tutors to think in terms of what is important to students; i.e. to take a student-centred approach to the exercise. Further, they could potentially compare the peer feedback with student feedback.

Tutors then received the confidential written feedback from their buddy. All tutors' peer responses were collected and condensed in order to provide anonymous summarised feedback on common issues for all tutors. A session was then convened in which tutors discussed their experiences of the exercise and the academic developer provided guidance and further resources in relation to the areas identified as requiring development.

Data

Together with the peer observation forms, we also collected data from the development session, a survey at the end of that session, a survey at the end of semester and a focus group, which provided five sources of data in forms that were quantitative and qualitative, oral and written. University ethics committee approval was granted and permission was sought from tutors in order to publish the results; 32 of the 52 tutors (i.e 61.5%) gave their permission.

When reporting the results, evidence of positive feedback on each of the items in the peer observation form was reported as good teaching practice, and the converse as teaching practice requiring development. This is justified given the University of Sydney's '*Teaching in tutorials'* student feedback form was developed based on the literature on student learning and good teaching practice (Ginns 2007).

Results

Peer observation forms

The collated analysed results from the observation forms provide insights into the areas of teaching practice that were going well for tutors and the areas requiring further development.

Insert table 1 here

Table 1 shows that the peer feedback was very positive on the whole. In general, tutorials were well integrated with the rest of the course and tutors were enthusiastic. However, the feedback identified that tutors could develop their skills in managing group interaction and encouraging participation. The peer observers noted that over half of the tutors did not ask for feedback on the tutorial observed. The collated data suggests that there was no uniform understanding of when to ask for feedback and the most useful way to collect feedback. Table 2 contains quotes from peer observers illustrating examples of good teaching practice and areas requiring further development.

Insert table 2 here

Peer observers were also asked to list the three best things about the tutorial, and three suggestions for improvement. These comments were grouped by the authors, and fell naturally into four categories: 'Helped students understand the material'; 'Student participation'; 'Presentation skills and visual aids' and 'Structure and timing' (Table 3). The comments provide an insight into tutors' understanding of good and poor teaching practices.

Insert table 3 here

The peer observation forms asked tutors: "Have you found this to be a valuable exercise? Provide reasons for your answer." Thirty of the 32 peer observers indicated that they found the exercise to be beneficial. Most of the positive responses were about the benefits of observing another tutor. Comments included:

"…observing [the tutor] will help me to improve my own performance as a tutor. Sitting with the students as an independent observer provides a fascinating perspective that may not be obvious to the person at the front of the room."

"Provides an opportunity to 1) reflect on colleague's teaching style 2) to share ideas/thoughts and teaching experience 3) to sit back and think what you would do given the same situation"

Only two tutors mentioned the feedback given by their colleague as being valuable e.g. "Helpful to get someone's honest assessment of my tute". Only one mentioned the chance to give feedback to a colleague: "Besides hopefully contributing to my colleague's development, the exercise allows me to reflect on my own performance."

While most tutors found the peer observation valuable, 1 said N/A, and 1 did not: "No. I felt that I could be using the evaluation hour to improve my teaching methods in other ways (for example, doing extra preparation for my next class". It is interesting to note that this tutor received only positive feedback from their peer, with only two very minor suggestions for improvement.

Tutors were also asked "How will you change your teaching practice as a result of this exercise?" Tutors suggested a wide range of ways in which they intended to change their practice. The most commonly reported change was encouraging more student interaction (eight tutors). Other changes included reflecting more on their teaching, being more enthusiastic and using visual aids. While 28 tutors said that they would change their teaching as a result of the exercise, four did not e.g. "I will not change my tutoring." "Not much".

Development session

During the development session that was held shortly after the peer observations were conducted, there was a semi-structured discussion about the exercise. Tutors were asked

how helpful they found the feedback, how they felt about having someone observe their teaching, and what forms of feedback they would like to receive in future.

Several tutors responded that they found the feedback to be helpful, particularly observing someone else teach e.g.:

"I found it very helpful because I'd done a lot of teaching but hadn't necessarily concentrated on tutorial style…So it was very helpful to have somebody sit in and particularly then to sit in on my partner's tutorial and see that he was using some of the techniques that had been discussed early [in the development program], like breaking the group up into smaller groups… I incorporated that last week in my tutorials, it worked very well."

Even experienced tutors commented on the importance of getting feedback from a peer e.g.:

"I think it was…important in terms of the content, somebody to observe how you present the content to the students. I'm an accountant and I have more than 10 years experience in accounting behind me. So sometimes I was worried whether I'm using terminology that the students would understand, given that I was teaching them something like ABC in accounting to me. And having someone observing me, observing my tutorial, was good in terms of telling me whether the terminology that I was using was really understandable by the students."

Only two tutors spoke about how they felt about someone observing them teach. One tutor was not nervous about it as he was used to presenting to students and didn't feel that the observer made any difference. The other tutor was apprehensive that she would receive only negative feedback from the peer observer, but after completing the exercise was relieved that both positive and negative points were covered.

An interesting finding was that most tutors agreed that they wanted expert as well as peer feedback on their teaching:

"I agree that a little bit of both would provide a great balance - to have an expert come in for one hour a semester would be fantastic to pick up on the teaching expertise from that expert and likewise to be able to have us feeding into each other's tutorials as well and observe what's going on in other tutorials is fantastic as well. And I think one of the overall objectives that that balance would achieve is that it would kind of reduce the variability in the quality of the tutorials."

End of development session and end of semester feedback

Table 4 indicates that tutors viewed the peer observation exercise favourably, with 84% of tutors at the development session reporting the exercise as at least somewhat helpful, and 100% of tutors completing an end of semester survey saying they were at least somewhat satisfied with the exercise.

Insert table 4 here

Table 5 shows that peer feedback whether alone or in conjunction with other forms of feedback is highly regarded by tutors (88% in total). There was also a strong demand for expert feedback (68% in total).

Insert table 5 here

Tutors' suggestions for improvements to the exercise

In the end of semester survey, tutors made several suggestions regarding the peer observation exercise. These suggestions included incorporating expert observation (3 comments), allowing a longer timeframe for the exercise (2 comments), having a shorter timeframe (1 comment), ensuring the observed tutorial was randomly selected (1 comment), incorporating mentoring by experienced tutors (1 comment), having more than one peer observer e.g. groups of three (1 comment), and adding a rating system (1 comment). At the focus group, which three tutors attended, tutors commented that having two new tutors engage in the exercise together meant that tutors did not receive expert advice on their teaching, although they did become more aware of different styles of teaching by observing

their peers. The focus group participants suggested that tutors be given the choice to engage with a more experienced tutor or the unit coordinator. These suggestions for improvement provide valuable ideas for future iterations of the exercise.

Discussion

Observed practice

The collation of the peer observation data formed a large dataset which enabled us to identify common developmental needs. The common overall areas that needed improvement were group interaction, collecting feedback from students and giving feedback to students. Although collecting student feedback was discussed at the tutor orientation session and tutors received proformas they could use to collect student feedback, it did not occur frequently in the peer-observed tutorials. It is difficult to know if this is representative, as perhaps student feedback was collected in other tutorials or at the end of semester. Tutors could also develop their skills in managing group interaction and encouraging participation. The need the develop these skills has also been found by Hendricson et al. (1983), who reported that one of the most frequently mentioned weaknesses of 7 graduate student lecturers was lack of student participation. Roehrig et al. (2003) also noted that the graduate teaching assistants in their study thought that students learned passively, and that this was consistent with the faculty culture of a transmission mode of teaching. Support was provided in these areas in the development session following the exercise and the findings also informed future iterations of the development program; we added a session on techniques and activities that encourage student involvement in and commitment to learning.

Effectiveness of peer observation for tutor development

Our study shows that tutors found the exercise to be helpful and that most tutors intended to change their teaching practice as a result of the exercise. A key benefit for tutors was being able to observe a peer teaching. This seemed to be more highly regarded than the feedback received from peers. This finding reinforces that of Sparks (1986, p. 224) who found peer observation in a group of high school teachers to be more effective than expert coaching and

inferred that this may have been due to the learning involved in observing another teacher; getting new ideas by watching and then reflecting on their own teaching.

It is not known whether our findings represent significant, lasting transformation of tutors' educational perspectives. Peel's (2005, p. 495) reflection on her own experiences of peer observation is that "observation of teaching is not sufficient to enhance teacher performance in the classroom" and that improved teaching competence depends on individual perceptions, individual reflective ability, the use of personal insights and engaging with the literature. However, we have anecdotal evidence in that, a year later, tutors are still commenting that they found the exercise to be valuable and have been extolling its benefits to new tutors. If a single expert review session can produce a significant, sustained change in teaching (Hendricson et al 1983) and if a short professional development course can bring about conceptual change (Ho, Watkins and Kelly 2001) then perhaps we can hope that our exercise has achieved the same. At the very least, participation in the process indicates willingness or readiness to change or to start thinking about it (Wlodarsky 2005).

It is pleasing that very few tutors reported anxiety about their colleagues coming into their class to provide feedback. Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005) reported examples of academics being concerned about the confidentiality of the peer observation process, the difficulties in giving and receiving criticism and the potential negative impact on staff relationships. Other studies also report nervousness about peer or expert observation (e.g. Fowler 1996; Gilbert and McArthur 1975). Lomas and Nicholls (2005) propose that these fears can be dispelled by implementing observation schemes in a sensitive and supportive manner. We certainly took care to provide support including guidelines, non compulsory participation, paid participation and opportunities for discussion of issues. We ensured that these principles aligned with the practice of the exercise. It is encouraging that these measures resulted in little reported anxiety about the scheme. We hope that we have contributed towards creating a supportive peer observation culture, as per the need expressed by a lecturer interviewed by Kane et al. (2004, p. 305):

"we should build up a culture amongst our teachers that we will actually watch each other do the process and learn from each other; that there will be enough kindness and gentleness, that we can honestly talk about the mistakes in our teaching as well, or at least the less effective things, as well as the things that work very well."

A strength of our exercise is that it was integrated with an academic development program and was not stand-alone. The peer observation exercise focussed tutors on the students' experience of the tutorial, while the development sessions facilitated tutors' reflective practice as well as feedback on assessment among other things. This allowed for a more holistic approach to tutor development. It is acknowledged that tutor development is a continual process and this initial experience is only one of many that tutors will engage in during their academic careers.

A key feature of the peer observation exercise was that tutors were able to share results and issues in a collaborative way. The dataset gave tutors more to reflect on regarding their teaching, as the combined data covered more areas than may have been contained in their individual feedback forms. In addition, individuals were able to see that their strengths and weaknesses were perhaps common to a larger group, and learnings from the exercise were reinforced by discussion. The data may have also provided ideas that tutors could experiment with in tutorials, to see if it enhanced their teaching experience and/or their students' learning experiences. The exercise also helped us to plan further development activities, including support sessions and resources. The collated feedback was also used to improve future tutor development sessions. For example, Table 4 was distributed to new tutors to help them focus on key areas that are important for effective tutoring.

Expert versus peer observation

Many tutors requested expert observation of their teaching in addition to peer observation. The request for expert feedback could be partly due to tutors being concerned that their peers might be too inexperienced to provide valuable feedback (Fowler 1996). There are some examples of expert observation already occurring in our Faculty in an ad hoc fashion as well

as a structured program at the University of Melbourne (Morris and Mladenovic 2005). From anecdotal evidence, it seems that it is sometimes the unit coordinators (lecturers in charge) who feel reluctant to offer to observe their tutors, as they are worried that tutors will find it too intrusive and intimidating.

Even though tutors wanted expert observation in addition to peer observation, there are benefits of the peer observation approach. A key benefit is that tutors are able to observe and reflect on a fellow tutor's teaching. This is not necessarily the case with expert observation which is often one-way. A further benefit of peer observation is that it is effective in terms of resources. Expert observation might involve one or a few experts having to observe every tutor, which would be a large outlay of time.

Limitations & future research

The limitations in our study provide a focus for future research. Peer observation is most useful when it encompasses multiple data sources alongside observation of teaching such as student evaluations, analysis of curriculum design, expert feedback and self reflection (D'Andrea 2002a). Our study would have been strengthened by the inclusion of student evaluation data, however this was not available as university policy does not require compulsory student evaluations of tutors. Tutors may choose to collect formal student feedback but this information is confidential and only viewed by the tutor. In future we will endeavour to seek tutors' approval to collect and access student feedback pre and post the peer observation so that we can determine if the students report any changes to teaching. An alternative or additional way of seeking student feedback could be interviews with students as per Quinlan and Åkerlind (2000). A longitudinal study of tutors would also help determine whether there have been lasting changes in teaching as a result of the exercise. We may also extend the exercise by incorporating an option for expert observation.

Conclusion

The peer observation exercise described in this paper was an effective component of a Faculty-based tutor development program. Tutors reported that they found the exercise

valuable and that they intended to make changes to their teaching practices as a result. The collated data indicated that there were common areas that needed improvement: group interaction, collecting feedback from students and giving feedback to students. These areas have since been given additional emphasis within the tutor development sessions.

Endnote

[1] In other national contexts tutors are referred to as casual tutors, casual academics, teaching assistants, graduate teaching assistants, adjunct faculty, sessional staff and part-time tutors.

Appendix: Peer observation proforma[1,2]

Tutor Development Program - Peer feedback Exercise
Faculty of Economics and Business, University of Sydney

Tutor's
Name_____**Discipline**_____

Peer Feedback provided by name _____**Discipline**_____

1. The aims, objectives and structure of the tutorial were clear (e.g. lesson plan/outline used)

2. The tutorial was well integrated with the rest of the course.

3. The tutor effectively managed the tutorial group interaction.

4. The tutor developed good rapport with the students and responded to their needs.

5. The tutor's speech was easy to understand.

6. The tutor explained things well and the examples used helped the students to understand the topic.

7. The tutor encouraged students to actively participate in the tutorial.

8. The tutor's feedback helped students to learn.

9. The tutor was enthusiastic about and interested in the topic.

10. The tutor asked for feedback on the tutorial from students.

11. Please list the three best things about the tutorial

12. Please list three suggestions for improving the tutorial.

13. Comments on the lesson plan e.g. activities, structure and timing

14. Have you found this to be a valuable exercise? Provide reasons for your answer.

15. How will you change your teaching practice as a result of this exercise

---

[1] Adapted by Rosina Mladenovic, from The University of Sydney (2005) Institute of Teaching and Learning's Tutorial Teaching Questionnaire
[2] The actual form provided was two pages long, this has been compressed to save space.

References

Abbott, R. D., Wulff, D. H. & Kati, Szego C. (1989). Review of research on TA training. (In Nyquist JD, Abbott RD and Wulff DH (Eds). *Teaching Assistant Training in the 1990s. New directions for teaching and learning* (pp111-124). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.)

Åkerlind, G.S. (2007). Constraints on academics' potential for developing as a teacher. *Studies in Higher Education*, 32, 21-37

Åkerlind, G.S. (2003). Growing and developing as a university teacher – variation in meaning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 28, 375-390.0

Allen, L. (2002). "Consenting adults in private"- union and management perspectives on peer observation of teaching. Retrieved January 17, 2006, from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record&section=generic&id=26

AUTC (2003). *Training, support and management of sessional teaching staff.* Final report to the Australian Universities teaching Committee. (University of Queensland Teaching and Educational Development Institute)

Bell, M. (2002). Peer observation of teaching in Australia. Retrieved January 17, 2006, from http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?id=28&process=full_record&section=generic

Bell, M. (2005). *Peer observation partnerships in higher education*. (NSW, Australia: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc.)

Bray, J. H. & Howard, G. S. (1980). Methodological considerations in the evaluation of a teacher-training program. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 72(1), 62-70

Bryson, C. (2004). Strategic approaches to managing and developing part-time teachers. Retrieved 4 June, 2007, from

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=20358&prompt=yes&filename=PTT00
4

Carroll, J. G. (1980). Effects of training programs for university teaching assistants: a review of empirical research. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 51(2), 167-183

Dalgaard, K. A. (1982). Some effects of training on teaching effectiveness of untrained university teaching assistants. *Research in Higher Education*, 17(1), 39-50

D'Andrea, V. M. (2002a). Peer review of teaching in the USA. Retrieved January 17, 2006, from

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?id=29&process=full_record&section=generic

D'Andrea, V.M. (2002b). Professional development of part-time teachers in the USA. Retrieved June 4, 2007, from

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/embedded_object.asp?id=17302&prompt=yes&filename=WDP0
01

Dearn, J., Fraser, K. & Ryan, Y. (2002). *Investigation into the provision of professional development for university teaching in Australia: a discussion paper*. (Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.)

Fowler, B. (1996). Increasing the teaching skills of teaching assistants through feedback from observation of classroom performance. *The Journal of Graduate Teaching Assistant Development*, 3(3), 95-103

Gilbert, C. P. & McArthur, J. F. (1975). In-service teacher preparation of French Graduate Assistants: design and evaluation. *The French Review*, 48(3), 508-521

Ginns, P. (2007). Reliability and validity of student evaluation of teaching surveys for lecturers and tutors. Working paper, Institute for Teaching and Learning, University of Sydney.

Halliday, J. & Soden, R. (1998). Facilitating changes in lecturers' understanding of learning. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 3(1), 21-35

Hammersley-Fletcher, L. & Orsmond, P. (2004). Evaluating our peers: is peer observation a meaningful process? *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(4), 489-503

Hammersley-Fletcher, L. & Orsmond, P. (2005). Reflecting on reflective practices within peer observation. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(2), 213-224

Hatzipanagos, S. & Lygo-Baker, S. (2006). Teaching observations: promoting development through critical reflection. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 30(4), 421-431

Hendricson, W. D., Hawkins, D. W., Littlefield, J. H., Kleffner, J. H., Hudephl, N. C. & Herbert, R. (1983). Effects of providing feedback to lecturers via videotape recordings and observer critiques. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, 47**,** 239-244

Ho, A., Watkins, D., & Kelly, M. (2001). The conceptual change approach to improving teaching and learning: An evaluation of a Hong Kong staff development programme. *Higher Education*, 42, 143-169

Hutchings, P. (1996). The peer review of teaching: progress, issues and prospects. *Innovative Higher Education*, 20(4), 221-234

Kane, R., Sandretto, S. & Heath, C. (2004). An investigation into excellent tertiary teaching: emphasising reflective practice. *Higher Education*, 47, 283-310

Kember, D. & Kwan, K. (2000). Lecturers approaches to teaching and their relationship to conceptions of good teaching. *Instructional Science,* 28, 469-490

Kift, S. (2003). Assuring quality in the casualisation of teaching, learning and assessment: towards best practice for the first year experience. ultiBASE March 2003 Edition. Retrieved March 30, 2006, from http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/Articles/march03/kift1.htm.

Lomas, L. & Nicholls, G. (2005). Enhancing teaching quality through peer review of teaching. *Quality in Higher Education*, 11(2), 137-149

Luft, J. A., Kurdziel, J. P., Roehrig, G. H. & Turner, J. (2004). Growing a garden without water: graduate teaching assistants in introductory science laboratories at a doctoral/research university. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 41(3), 211-233

McKenzie, J. (2003). *Variation and change in university teachers' ways of experiencing teaching.* Unpublished PhD: University of Technology, Sydney.

Martin, E. & Ramsden, P. (1992). An expanding awareness: how lecturers change their understanding of teaching. *Research and Development in Higher Education*, 15, 148-155

Morris, G. & Mladenovic, R. (2005). Tutors talk: Inter University Perspectives on Observation of Teaching. *Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australia HERDSA News*, 25(3), 27-29

Napan, K. & Mamula-Stojnic, L. (2005). A process that empowers: self and peer assessment as a component of education for sustainability. (In P. Kandlbinder (Ed.), *Making a difference: 2005 Evaluations and Assessment conference* (pp97-106). Sydney: University of Technology Sydney.)

Nicolettou, A. & Flint, S. (2004, July). *Holistic approach to professional development and support for sessional teaching staff.* (Paper presented at the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia conference, Miri, Sarawak)

Peel, D. (2005). Peer observation as a transformatory tool? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(4), 489-504

Quinlan, K. M. & Åkerlind, G. S. (2000). Factors affecting departmental peer collaboration for faculty development: two cases in context. *Higher Education*, 40, 23-52

Roehrig, G. H., Luft, J. A., Kurdziel, J. P. & Turner, J. A. (2003). Graduate teaching assistants and inquiry-based instructions: implication for graduate teaching assistant training. *Journal of Chemical Education*, 80(10), 1206-1210

Savage, M. P. & Sharpe, T. (1998). Demonstrating the need for formal graduate student training in effective teaching practices. *Physical Educator*, 55(3), 130-137

Smith, C. & Bath, D. (2003). Evaluation of a networked staff development strategy for departmental tutor trainers: benefits, limitations and future directions. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 8 (1/2), 145-158

Smith, C. & Bath, D. (2004). Evaluation of a university-wide strategy providing staff development for tutors: effectiveness, relevance and local impact. *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 12 (1), 107-122

Sparks, G. M. (1986). The effectiveness of alternative training activities in changing teaching practices. *American Educational Research Journal*, 23 (2), 217-225

Sutherland, K. (2002). *Maintaining quality in a diversifying environment: the challenges of support and training for part-time/sessional teaching staff.* (Paper presented at the 2002 Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia conference)

University of Sydney (2005). *Institute for Teaching and Learning Tutorial teaching questionnaire.* Retrieved February 2, 2006, from University of Sydney, Institute for Teaching and Learning website: http://www.nettl.usyd.edu.au/FEEDBACK/preview.cfm?qu=tt

Williams, L. S. (1991). The effects of a comprehensive teaching assistant training program on teaching anxiety and effectiveness. *Research in Higher Education*, 32(5), 585-598

Wlodarsky, R (2005). The professoriate: transforming teaching practices through critical reflection and dialogue. *Teaching & Learning*, 19(3), 156-172

Table 1: **Summary of peer observer responses** (n= 32, percentages in parentheses)

Statement on feedback form	Positive	Needs work	N/A or blank
1. The aims, objectives and structure of the tutorial were clear (e.g. lesson plan/outline used).	26 *(81%)*	5 *(16%)*	1 *(3%)*
2. The tutorial was well integrated with the rest of the course.	30 *(94%)*	1 *(3%)*	1 *(3%)*
3. The tutor effectively managed the tutorial group interaction.	22 *(69%)*	9 *(28%)*	1 *(3%)*
4. The tutor developed good rapport with the students and responded to their needs.	27 *(84%)*	5 *(16%)*	0
5. The tutor's speech was easy to understand.	27 *(84%)*	5 *(16%)*	0
6. The tutor explained things well and the examples used helped the students to understand the topic.	25 *(78%)*	6 *(19%)*	1 *(3%)*
7. The tutor encouraged students to actively participate in the tutorial.	24 *(75%)*	7 *(22%)*	1 *(3%)*
8. The tutor's feedback helped students to learn.	22 *(69%)*	9 *(28%)*	2 *(6%)*
9. The tutor was enthusiastic about and interested in the topic.	29 *(91%)*	3 *(9%)*	0
10. The tutor asked for feedback on the tutorial from students.	13 *(41%)*	17 *(53%)*	2 *(6%)*

Table 2: Quotes from peer observers illustrating examples of good teaching practices and areas requiring further development

Statement on feedback form	Good practice	Development needed
1. The aims, objectives and structure of the tutorial were clear (e.g. lesson plan/outline used).	"The lesson plan was drawn up on the board at the beginning of the tutorial, making it clear to students what the agenda for the day's class was to be. This included approximate times and also a description of the following tutorial, which I found to be an excellent idea."	"The aims and objectives were discussed in general terms. A more precise outline of the structure at the beginning…would reassure students that their questions will be dealt with…"
2. The tutorial was well integrated with the rest of the course.	"Yes, the skills and concepts covered were central to the overall theme of the course. Furthermore, the tutor demonstrated how the concepts can be applied to solve more complex problems emerging later in the course and in the workplace."	"Could have reviewed the prior tute before starting and could have referred to concepts previously covered."
3. The tutor effectively managed the tutorial group interaction.	"Yes! This was one of the biggest strengths of the tutorial. He put them in groups to answer some of the questions and effectively managed interaction between the students. Facilitated learning."	"The class does not seem to be enthusiastic in terms of group interaction. The material in the course does not lend itself to large group interaction. However, more encouragement to actively participate rather than passively doing so, may make this class more enjoyable."
4. The tutor developed good rapport with the students and responded to their needs.	"Yes. [The tutor] used her sense of humour to relate to the students and also related the course material to their own experiences which was great."	"Relates well to students and is sympathetic to their needs. Top down approach however, with the teacher always the focus of the activity."
5. The tutor's speech was easy to understand.	"Yes, it was very clear and concise. He also used overheads to write on which complemented what he was saying."	"The tutor's speech was at times mumbled and sounded uncertain…More confidence would no doubt fix this problem."
6. The tutor explained things well and the examples used helped the students to understand the topic.	"The tutor explained things well and used his own examples plus examples set by the lecturers to help demonstrate principles."	"…he perhaps spent a little too much time explaining some concepts for one or two people when he could of done (sic) this in consultation."
7. The tutor encouraged students to actively participate in the tutorial.	"Oh Yes! [The tutor] split the class into left hand side, the middle students and right hand side students and would then ask for volunteers from each area to assist in answering some of the questions. [The tutor] was very positive even when a student answered incorrectly."	"Tutor should encourage participation by asking them to answer questions rather than giving them himself. If singling out students for different responses is required then do so"
8. The tutor's feedback helped students to learn.	"Yes. She provided feedback on student answers and provided them with other or alternative points or views."	"Some additional questioning to verify how well students absorbed the feedback would provide an effective check e.g. revisit the same concepts applied in alternative conditions."
9. The tutor was enthusiastic about and interested in the topic.	"Very enthusiastic and this encouraged a positive feel in the tutorial and a keenness amongst the students."	"The tutor's tone of voice throughout the tutorial was similar and not that enthusiastic, however the tutor did seem to find the topic interesting."
10. The tutor asked for feedback on the tutorial from students.	"Yes, [the tutor] asked which questions they found the hardest and what issues they might have had with this week's work."	"Feedback was not asked for."

Table 3: Collated, grouped comments from peer observers in response to 'please list the three best things about the tutorial' and 'please list three things for improving the tutorial. (The numbers in brackets indicate the number of comments made).

Best things about the tutorial	Suggestions for improving the tutorial
Helped students understand the material (30) Well explained concepts (10) Good understanding of course/topic (6) Good preparation (4) Good examples/answers (3) Checked student understanding (3) Good introduction (1) Checked students preparation (1) Referring to other practice opportunities plus revision sheet for exam (1) Advice and tips on group projects (1)	*Helped students understand the material (18)* Relate to relevant examples e.g real world (5) Check understanding (4) Build students knowledge more/go through major concepts (4) Check students have completed pre-work (1) More emphasis on key points of questions (1) Integrate prior tutes (1) Explain methods more (1) Refer to students to textbook for extra examples (1)
Student participation (28) Good class interaction (26) Use of name tags (2)	*Student participation (23)* More time for student discussion/encourage participation (11) Use students names more (4) Get groups to present to the class (1) Ask particular students to contribute (1) Acknowledge students' answers (1) Don't spend too much time on individual student's questions (1) Ask students to respond to points made by other students (1) Don't ask particular students to contribute (1) Direct answers to whole class (1) Encourage active listening (1)
Presentation skills and visual aids (15) Enthusiasm (6) Good use of overhead/visual aids (5) Humour (3) Step by step instructions on blackboard (1)	*Presentation skills and visual aids (12)* Greater use of visual aids e.g. diagrams (4) Don't speak while writing on the board/speak louder (2) Don't use orange markers (1) Use OHP to reduce chalkboard use (1) Dim the lighting so slides can be read (1) Write neatly (1) Use more humour (1) Be more friendly (1) More confidence (1)
Structure and timing (12) Clear and well structured (7) Clear learning objectives (2) Concise overview and summary (2) Kept on track (1)	*Structure and timing (10)* Better timing so material is covered (5) Be more flexible to suit students' interests (2) Pace is too fast (1) Let students finish the questions first; don't interrupt their work (1) Use a lesson plan to help with timing (1)
Other (5) Small class size (3) Asking for feedback via survey (1) Good discipline(1)	*Other (4)* Encourage students to arrive on time (1) Make sure enough seats (1) Non-tutorial students occupying lab wasted tutor's time (1) Manage quiet chatting (1)

Table 4. Tutors' evaluations of the effectiveness of the exercise

End of session survey: How helpful was the peer feedback? (n=31)		End of S1 survey: Satisfaction with peer feedback exercise (n=23)	
Very helpful	26%	Very satisfied	35%
Helpful	42%	Satisfied	52%
Somewhat helpful	16%	Somewhat satisfied	13%
Unhelpful	16%	Unsatisfied	0%

Table 5. End of session responses from tutors on what forms of feedback they would like to receive in future (n=31)

Form of feedback	Percentage of tutors
Self evaluation	5%
Peer feedback	12%
Expert feedback	5%
Self & Peer	15%
Self & expert	2%
Peer & expert	24%
All of the above	37%