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Peers can teach a thing or two

**PEER review** is a well-established practice in higher education to monitor and enhance the quality of research. Why, then, do we tend to avoid peer review as a legitimate process through which to evaluate and improve the quality of teaching?

Ask most academics whether they'd be comfortable having one of their peers review their classroom teaching tomorrow and, more often than not, they'd probably rather give that a miss, thank you very much.

Yet the same academic might happily have a papers and grant applications under review with a journal, conference committee and grant review panel and might wonder at the question if you asked about their level of comfort with peer reviews in this domain.

Peer review is what we do as academics. Yet we don't really like to do it around teaching. Why not?

Some argue that peer review of publications are necessarily anonymous and that peer review of teaching cannot be. But there are counterpoints to the assumptions that underpin this argument.

First of all, the argument isn't strictly factual. If you take a broad (and accurate) understanding of peer review of teaching, it incorporates much more than classroom observation, although this is the most common form of teaching review by peers.

However, curriculum design, materials content, assessment tasks, online arrangements and the rationale and justification for any or all of the above, as well as numerous other aspects of teaching, can be peer reviewed and can be done so anonymously. And this happens all the time.

For instance, anonymous peer review of teaching is exactly what I do as an assessor for the Carrick Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

In that role, I review particular aspects of my colleagues' teaching, without meeting them or observing them teach.

Alongside other members of a small panel of reviewers, I critically examine the carefully prepared documents that outline specific dimensions of reviewees' teaching and then we make decisions about the quality of teaching and learning on the basis of evidence and arguments provided.

Just as peer review of research must always ultimately be about enhancing the quality of research, peer review of teaching must be about enhancing teaching and learning. If that is the case, it is hard to sustain the argument about the necessity for anonymity.

In order to provide helpful feedback and encourage positive change when it is needed, frank and open dialogue between reviewer and reviewee before and after the review is ideal rather than a drawback.
Teaching is a complex business and working to improve it will probably be more effective if there is direct exchange between the two parties, and if nuanced understandings of objectives, intentions, decisions and implementation are discussed.

When the results of peer review of teaching are to be used for appraisal purposes, some checks and balances are appropriate in order to ensure the absence of bias, positive or negative, and to ensure the appropriate management of written reports that result from the peer review of teaching process.

I am working with colleagues from the universities of Melbourne and Wollongong on a Carrick-funded project examining some of these issues.

We would do well in higher education to embrace a set of processes in which we trust, and to apply them to teaching and learning, where their increased use would have myriad benefits.