



Embracing peer review of teaching: promoting the ‘why’ within third-space education

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Abstract

This case study explores how a Learning Development team has moved from a peer-observation to a peer-review process over the last five years, examining the rationale, development, and impact of the change in approach. The move to a peer-review process has emphasised a focus on holistic activity, through the connection of individual and group reflection on practice. We argue that the implementation of a peer-review process offers a way to recognise and ‘frame’ the complexity of career development for third-space educators (Veles and Carter, 2016). This is achieved by providing space in the process for individuals to develop their expertise, participate in peer discussions, share findings, and contribute to the shape of the team’s strategy. Importantly, the adopted peer-review process promotes ‘collegial conversations’ (Quinlan and Åkerlind, 2000, p.101) that are built on trust (O’Keeffe et al., 2021), rather than snap judgements about teaching. Consequently, we suggest that our peer-review process is an enabler for us as third-space educators to articulate the impact of our practice through both theoretical and practical lenses, helping us to influence positive change within contemporary higher education.

Keywords: Learning Development; third-space educator; peer observation; peer review; professional development.

1. Peer review of teaching in higher education

The production of research has traditionally been aligned with academic career trajectories, which means that peer review, often seen as 'an essential component' of contemporary higher education, is usually framed through a focus on the writing of scholarly publications (Ware, 2008, p.1). As educators working in the third space between professional services and academia, Learning Developers do not typically have the same contractual or professional compulsion to undertake research (Syska and Buckley, 2022). However, peer review can be an equally valuable tool in sustaining and developing professional identities in the third space. The key difference is how peer review is used within these roles. As Hilsdon (2011, p.14) argued, a distinguishing feature of Learning Development practice is its 'emphasis on examining how students experience and make sense of learning activities and academic practices'. Focusing on students' perspectives shapes how Learning Developers can meaningfully participate in peer review as a praxis-orientated way to engage with, reflect on, and develop their roles. This approach requires a shift from the peer review of research to the peer review of teaching.

This emphasis on the peer review of teaching is distinguished from peer observation (Hendry et al., 2020). Although peer review may include the observation of sessions, it has a broader remit that emphasises a focus on the full nature of the work undertaken by Learning Developers. Peer review incorporates how we offer formative feedback to students, how we design learning materials, and how we negotiate with stakeholders across the university, including academics and colleagues working across the third space. Gosling (2014, p.18) advocates for such a holistic approach, arguing that it shifts the focus from the 'performativity' of observed teaching towards 'a model of peer review of teaching, learning and assessment that is more flexible and more inclusive of the complete range of activities involved: designing, delivering and assessing teaching and learning'. In essence, this way of engaging in peer review seeks to examine how we help students make sense of and get the most out of their experiences in contemporary higher education.

There has been a renewed focus on the quality of teaching in higher education, as demonstrated by the recent refinements made to the Teaching Excellence Framework (OfS, 2022). With this context in mind, this case study explores how the peer review of teaching has been embedded into our work as Learning Developers over the last five years. We highlight how the changing nature of the team's remit has shaped the design of

our peer-review process, which is inextricably connected to our understanding of our purpose as third-space educators. Moreover, we explore how the adoption of a teamwide peer-review process can support the promotion of Learning Development within internal and external communities. Through this, we demonstrate the impact and value of our work and offer a meaningful opportunity for individuals to engage in their own professional development.

2. Professional development for third-space educators

Peer review lends itself to effective professional development when it is offered through a supportive lens. This potential is heightened when considering roles that occupy the growing third space. The articulation of third-space professionals' identities has advanced to now incorporate professionals who participate in multiple and diverse spaces and consequently require varied support mechanisms (Whitchurch, 2024). Although all roles require training and support, the complexity of these requirements can be especially challenging for third-space roles, as these positions remain relatively underdeveloped. Such support should be aligned to career progression, but also, and unlike academic pathways or roles that are traditionally found in professional services, often must advocate for the legitimacy of their third-space position. As Bickle et al. (2021, p.136) note, the expansion of such roles in higher education is not only shaped by conflicting factors, but their emergence also raises questions about how the professional identity of this group of staff can be 'moulded and maintained' across the sector.

This problem has also been identified by Hains-Wesson and Rahman (2023), who argue that although third-space ecosystems are central to teaching and learning in higher education, there is a risk that these roles will continue to be seen as an anomaly without suitable advocacy, mentoring, and opportunities for promotion. Denney's (2021) examination of the trajectory of women in the third space echoes these findings. All the participants in her research created their own pathways to promotion rather than using existing routes that can be found in other roles (such as the academic pathway from lecturer to professor). Subsequently, there is a need to move away from conceptualising a traditional career ladder to a career frame (Veles and Carter, 2016) that encompasses the complexities of roles within the third space. McIntosh and Nutt (2022) have proposed ways in which some of these complexities can be overcome. These include creating spaces to

build on and recognise expertise, with communities of practice¹ being highlighted as 'hallowed' examples of how to achieve this through thematic working (para. 7). Additionally, they recommend developing the legitimacy of roles by moving rhetoric away from what tasks are completed to focusing instead on the way and how of work, to encourage a transdisciplinary view that deepens understandings of the third space. They also suggest making room for evidenced-based professional development that provides 'spaces for blended professionals to work with others [...] to reflect on their work, to speak, to write, to publish, to reflect, to mentor and be mentored, to coach and be coached, and to be and to have role models' (para. 10).

The centrality of these components to the validation and enhancement of the role of third-space professionals is evident in our team's peer-review process. This process has been developed to ensure that, as Learning Developers inhabiting the educational third space, we support and encourage individuals to engage in professional dialogues. These dialogues not only foster an understanding and celebration of the complexities of our roles, but also strengthen our team dynamics by creating communities of practice connected by integral themes to respond to critical drivers in contemporary higher education. Our peer-review process blends 'teaching, tutoring, research, and the design and production of learning materials' (Hilsdon, 2011, p.14). It is intended to shift our roles from the periphery defined by the descriptive 'what' to ensure confidence in the expression and visibility of our placing amongst university strategy, pedagogical developments, and career progression.

3. Exploring our team's approach to the peer review of teaching

The implementation of our peer-review process was in part a response to shifts in both the roles and the broader structure of our team within the wider third space of our university. In 2019, our team moved from being third-space professionals who occupied multifaceted roles, blending the provision of academic development with pastoral support and guidance, to working distinctly as third-space educators. This change foregrounded the place of pedagogically informed and evidence-based teaching at the core of our roles. Earlier iterations of peer observation in our team had necessitated a focus on monitoring

¹ Wenger (1998) described a community of practice as a group of learners who share a common passion for what they do and learn how to do it better through regular interaction with one another.

adherence to processes and procedures, especially focusing on accurate referrals and signposting for welfare concerns. The creation of a distinct Learning Development team required a different approach, providing us with the opportunity to reconsider how peer review can inform and support both individual and teamwide professional development. Central to this change was the consideration of the work of the team beyond the delivery of taught group sessions, which allowed for discussion and sharing of practice across all aspects of our work. This broader focus has also allowed us to draw more fully on the varied experiences and diverse voices of team members, many of whom bring experience from roles in other educational contexts. In doing so, we have been able to tease out synergies by exploring our shared commitment to the professional values of Learning Development that underpin our practice (ALDinHE, n.d.; Briggs, 2018; 2024).

3.1. Overview of our peer review of teaching process

Since 2019, we have engaged in a teamwide peer-review process each year. This takes place across the second half of the academic year, typically from January until the end of the summer term, which provides a six-month period for groups to engage in and reflect on the process. Providing this extended period helps to avoid potential challenges of coordinating activities around multiple other priorities. Collective milestones are provided for each group, helping them to manage their commitments and frame the initial group meetings where practical arrangements are made. Carrying out observations over an extended period also acknowledges that there are fluctuations in teaching patterns, the needs of students and academic colleagues, and the wider demands on the service, mitigating the risk of diary clashes that would probably occur over a shorter, fixed period. The timeframe also recognises that the groups need time to establish relationships (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). Final group presentations are scheduled to take place after the end of the teaching and assessment period, creating further space for reflection in the peer-review groups and for ideas to be shared and discussed within the wider Learning Development team.

Our peer-review process has five distinct stages:

1. **Initial group reflection:** this takes place in assigned peer-review groups based on a theme and agreed focus. The overarching theme emerges each year through regular discussions that take place during team training and meetings.

2. **Individual reflection:** this informs the peer-review process and connects to areas of development that individuals may have identified as part of their annual performance development review.
3. **Peer review:** participants in each group review each other in different elements of their roles, including teaching, one-to-one support, and feedback provided on students' writing. Everyone acts as both a reviewer and reviewee in their assigned group. Live observations are supported by meetings held between the reviewee and the reviewer. Through these conversations, the specific context for the activity is explored and a shared focus is agreed upon for the review.
4. **Group presentation:** collective discussion of key learning points from the process takes place, linked to relevant scholarship of teaching and learning and the university's strategies. The groups use these discussions to create presentations through which they share their learning with the wider Learning Development team. These presentations are accompanied by an extended question-and-answer session to help tease out and draw together wider themes.
5. **Wider influencing:** reflections and key learning points from the process are shared beyond the team at conferences or through the creation of scholarly outputs. These outputs and the conversations emerging from peer review influence the team's input into strategic planning. Moreover, areas for enhancement or further discussion inform the design of the team's annual away days and professional development programme.

3.2. A small-group approach to the peer review of teaching

We adopt a small-group rather than a paired approach in our peer-review process, enabling a greater number of voices to be included. Bringing together varied perspectives is designed to be non-threatening due to the small size of the groups (each comprising of four or five participants). The small groups are designed to foster an environment in which colleagues can 'learn optimally' through 'the opportunity to collaboratively construct knowledge with peers about teaching problems that are related to their own experience' (Quinlan and Åkerlind, 2000, p.143). Furthermore, the presence of multiple participants provides greater opportunities for 'genuine dialogue' to emerge, as individuals offer feedback from multiple perspectives rather than potentially getting stuck in a stalemate between two sides (Arao and Clemens, 2013, p.136). Ultimately, this approach is intended to foster a 'brave space' (Arao and Clemens, 2013), in which each group strives to develop

a collective response to the team's agreed focus. In this way, our process is designed to negate the risks of conversations veering towards, or reinforcing, dominant approaches rather than the exploration of nuances in pedagogical methods and critique based on reasoned judgements (Kinchin and Gravett, 2022).

The encouragement of such 'brave spaces' is also reflected in the group allocations, as these are consciously constructed to consider individuals' prior experiences, different interests, and their roles within the team. Importantly, managers participate fully in the peer-review process as equal members of their groups, rather than in a managerial capacity. A senior manager, who is not part of the review process, acts as a neutral mediator should conflicts or issues arise. This structure helps to mitigate concern over the impact of feedback on team relationships, which can be a potential barrier to the successful implementation of a peer-review process (Lomas and Nicholls, 2005). It also means that the benefits of engaging in peer review are afforded to all members of the team, rather than a select few.

Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that peer review should also provide a space for individuals to develop as reflective practitioners, addressing areas for development and building on their strengths. As Al Qahtani et al. (2011) highlight, supportive feedback at the individual level also serves to develop self-monitoring and autonomy in work and facilitates self-regulation. Accordingly, our peer-review process has been developed to incorporate opportunities for both one-to-one and collective discussion, recognising that these formats provide a platform for different (but equally valuable) conversations that inform new understandings and enhance practice.

In offering individual feedback, emphasis is placed on providing areas for discussion instead of areas for 'development'. This framing provides an opportunity to explore aspects together, including why an action was taken or how someone has worked with an academic teaching team to shape a session. The review documentation offers colleagues an 'honesty box', which serves as a space where the reviewee can reflect on the choices that underpinned their approach. For example, this could involve considering if they took a risk with a new approach in a session or if they wanted to focus on a 'difficult' aspect of their teaching. In this way, feedback serves to promote honest reflection and a developmental discussion between the reviewer and the reviewee. A sense of trust and

safety is something that O’Keeffe et al. (2021, p.270) highlight as critical in creating ‘the optimal climate for effective conversations about practice’, which is a key intention of our team’s peer-review process.

3.3. Navigating challenges

It is important to acknowledge that as our peer-review process has developed, we have encountered some unanticipated challenges. One emerging consideration was to offer more structured documentation and guidance for meetings between colleagues to provide consistency in approach and ensure that meetings and accompanying notes did not become onerous. This change acknowledged that team members have varying levels of experience and confidence in giving and receiving peer feedback. This recognition was made more apparent as changes to the structure of the team saw the recruitment of colleagues from a wider variety of contexts, whose experiences included graded observations used in schools or processes linked to formal appraisals.

Another consideration was ensuring that the peer-review process explored our provision holistically, moving beyond a focus predominantly on classroom observation to incorporate other elements, including one-to-one support and written feedback. Our transition to a group-based approach centring around a common theme therefore addressed the challenge of ensuring that all team members, irrespective of their roles, could contribute effectively. Alongside facilitating equal and meaningful participation, this shift has also strengthened the team’s understanding of how different elements of our service are interrelated—thereby enriching reflection and discussions about service development.

Incorporating these extensive discussions into a short presentation format initially proved to be difficult for the groups. To address this, we extended the group presentations (from 20 to 45 minutes), providing time for feedback to be shared in a comprehensive way that continues to be accompanied by an expanded discussion with the entire team for each peer-review group.

4. Impact: how peer review shapes our team and its strategies

There is no singular route into the third space, nor, by extension, into Learning Development as a profession (Syska and Buckley, 2024). Instead, as we have noted, the transition into this space often requires different levels of support depending on prior experiences. For individuals moving from the traditional academic route who might not have previously engaged in the peer review of teaching to those who come from a school or further education background where peer review is perhaps tainted by Ofsted, our process encourages a place to develop individuals' identities as Learning Developers through its grounding in individual and group reflections.

Arguably, a key strength of our process is its celebration and recognition of each team member's professional identity, alongside their contribution to the collective both in the team and as part of broader internal and external communities. Moreover, our holistic approach encourages the team to consider our provision from a student's perspective. This presents an opportunity to reflect on different threshold concepts² to critically consider why we do what we do. This approach can lead to discussions about the rationale underpinning our work, including the design and delivery methods we adopt. In turn, these discussions can help us frame how our work contributes to the university's strategic priorities, such as reducing awarding gaps. Consequently, the emphasis we place on reflection encourages attention to shift from day-to-day activities to foster a higher-level understanding of the 'why' to support a pedagogy of Learning Development. Through doing so, our peer-review process ensures that everyone in the team has access to and gains confidence in the full nature of their roles.

Our team's approach encourages the development of growth mindsets because it does not support snap judgements about an individual's teaching, nor does it risk the problems associated with false praise (Dweck, 2007). Instead of being grounded in 'peer judgements about teaching', focus is placed on sustaining meaningful 'collegial conversations' (Quinlan and Åkerlind, 2000, p.101). These conversations shift attention from the reviewer offering solutions from a position of power, instead foregrounding reflection through questioning

² Meyer and Land (2005, p.3) suggest that grasping threshold concepts involves individuals in 'opening up a new and previously inaccessible way of thinking about something'. Edwards (2011) created a set of threshold concepts for 'generic' Learning Development work, whilst White (2023) has more recently explored the development of threshold concepts for Learning Development practitioners.

and exploratory practice (Gosling, 2014). As such, we have seen how the peer review of teaching can drive practice in positive and meaningful directions. Importantly, it allows us to acknowledge that as Learning Developers we all engage in our work in slightly different ways. These differences should be celebrated: just as the team does not have a homogenous identity, nor do our students. Different approaches work in different contexts. The key is that our choices are grounded in research and strategy.

Our peer-review process is intended to empower our team on both an individual and collective level. Individuals are encouraged to build on their pedagogical interests, helping them to shape their career frame instead of mandating a one-route ladder within the third space (Veles and Carter, 2016). On an individual level, this is aligned with team members progressing through recognition schemes, including ALDinHE's Certified Practitioner (CeP) and Certified Leading Practitioner (CeLP) of Learning Development and Advance HE Fellowships. Additionally, the process helps to ground our work in research-informed practice. Team members are encouraged to communicate their evolving understanding of their identities as Learning Developers through various professional avenues, including publication, communities of practice, and at conferences. In this way, our peer-review process helps team members to establish their 'credibility in the academic space' (Whitchurch, 2013, p.11). At a team level, the discussions throughout our process influence and shape the creation of team projects and guide the agenda for our annual away days. Through doing so, the process shapes our engagement with short and long-term strategies and the university's key performance indicators (KPIs).

5. Closing comments

Being an educator working in the third space of higher education can be a challenging and even lonely place. These roles do not have the traditional progression routes that typify academic career pathways. However, this break from convention equally provides opportunities to develop novel approaches that subvert traditional frameworks in higher education. In this case study, we have shown how the concept of peer review can be repositioned from an emphasis on research to teaching. Focusing on peer review through teaching arguably helps third-space educators, including Learning Developers, in working together to make meaning out of their practice. Being privileged to undertake such an in-depth peer-review process can be considered a key contributor to the advocacy of a

pedagogy of Learning Development. Ultimately, our peer-review process is an enabler for us as third-space educators. It helps us to lead conversations that are grounded in theoretical and practice lenses so that we can clearly articulate the 'why' of our practice and, in turn, influence positive change within contemporary higher education.

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