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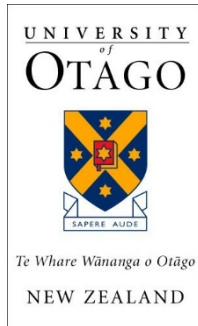
A framework for enhancing teaching culture and practice

Dr Tracy Rogers, Dr Rob Wass,
Dr Julie Timmermans, Professor Clinton Golding

August 2019

AKO
AOTEAROA

UNIVERSITY
of
OTAGO
Te Whare Wānanga o Otāgo
NEW ZEALAND

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abstract

This project sought to investigate the influence of a peer observation of teaching initiative on the teaching practice and culture within the Division of Humanities at a New Zealand university. The Teaching and Learning Circles (TLC) initiative is a voluntary, non-evaluative, reciprocal peer observation of teaching with an emphasis on collegial dialogue and self-reflection. Due to the flexibility of the Teaching and Learning Circles framework, this approach to peer observation of teaching is transferrable to any tertiary context, including formal tertiary institutions as well as informal teaching/education contexts such as Adult and Community Education and Private Training Establishments.

In this project, Teaching and Learning Circles formed across the Division, consisting of three to four teachers each, who observed each other teaching. Pre and post observation meetings were held in a social environment to help foster collegiality and encourage supportive conversations about teaching. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine of the 23 university teachers (including the research team) who enrolled in the Teaching and Learning Circles initiative. The interviews were coded thematically, using an inductive process. The findings suggest that taking part in a Teaching and Learning Circle was a positive learning experience that provided participants with an opportunity to engage in collegial conversations about teaching; reflect upon their teaching practice; gain non-evaluative feedback on their teaching; and in turn, enhance their teaching. Although the original framework for the initiative did not include peer feedback on teaching, all the participants sought to gain constructive comments on their practice; stating that there were very few opportunities to do so outside the formal peer review of teaching process.

The participants believed that Teaching and Learning Circles have the potential to enrich the teaching culture within the Division, but contended that any significant change would be gradual; hindered primarily by the private nature of teaching that currently pervades the teaching culture in the University.

Recommendations summary

The Teaching and Learning Circles initiative sits outside the formal evaluation model of peer review that University teachers often experience when seeking promotion or confirmation. Teaching and Learning Circles instead provide a social and non-judgemental platform for teachers to discuss, reflect upon, and enhance their teaching practice based on reciprocal observations of peers' teaching. Following Chism (2007) regarding the importance of gathering staff evaluation of a peer review of teaching programme (or similar), we interviewed teachers who participated in the TLC initiative. Drawing on their feedback, we recommend the following aspects be included in the framework of a Teaching and Learning Circles programme:

1. TLC members should be given autonomy to decide the purpose and structure of their TLC (i.e. members can decide whether to seek feedback on their teaching or not);

2. Departmental and Divisional leadership is crucial for the promotion and sustainability of the programme;

3. A co-ordinator is required to oversee the administrative tasks of forming Teaching and Learning Circles, and provide information and support to TLC members (or potential members);

4. Participation in Teaching and Learning Circles must be voluntary, and any data generated from the observations must remain the property of individual TLC members;

5. Three members per TLC appears to be the ideal number for managing time constraints and workload. However, a TLC may have four members if teachers' schedules permit; and

6. Ideally, observations should take place in the first five weeks of semester, before workload increases with the likes of assessment marking.

INTRODUCTION

The Teaching and Learning Circles initiative is "about starting a conversation with others about your teaching" (Ian).[1] The impetus of the Teaching and Learning Circles initiative is to foster collegiality and enhance the teaching practice and culture within an institution. As David Gosling (2014) argues, it is also important that an institution embeds a culture that values and openly discusses teaching. One way of achieving this is through the introduction of a peer review or observation of teaching programme. If the programme is conducted in a supportive and respectful manner, then the process can have a positive impact on staff morale, and can affect change by fostering a culture of reflection and personal development (Murphy Tighe & Bradshaw, 2013).

Teaching and Learning Circles is best described as a hybrid of peer observation of teaching and collaborative peer review of teaching; with a strong emphasis on sociable, dialogical interactions amongst Teaching and Learning Circle members. The concept for the initiative sought to provide university teachers with an opportunity to informally observe cross-disciplinary teaching contexts, and meet socially to reflect upon and share their learnings. The proposed framework did not include providing peer feedback. The decision to omit peer feedback was based on research literature about the benefits of observing others teach (Cosh, 1998; Torres, Lopes, Valente, & Mouraz, 2017), and staff anxiety about evaluative feedback on their teaching (Farrell, 2011; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; White, Boehm, & Chester, 2014). However, as the findings reveal, all the teachers who participated in Teaching and Learning Circles sought peer feedback on their teaching; highlighting (1) the importance of providing autonomy in voluntary peer review/observation of teaching and (2) the limited opportunities for University teachers to engaged in peer feedback on teaching outside the formal peer review process.

In this section, we briefly outline literature exploring the affordances and challenges of peer review or observation of teaching. We then discuss the details of our study, including the structure of the TLC initiative, participants, and methodology.

Peer observation and review of teaching: the literature
Literature on peer observation and review of teaching is vast, and the terms, peer observation and peer review are often used interchangeably. In this project, we define peer observation of teaching as not requiring the observer to provide feedback on the observed teacher (see Hendry, Bell, & Thomson, 2014). Peer observation offers teachers with the opportunity to observe different teaching approaches, question their own knowledge, and reassess their own teaching approach; which may all lead to active self-development (Cosh, 1998). However, Byrne, Brown, and Challen (2010) argue that mandatory, one-off observation of teaching leads to little critical reflection and is not sufficient when seeking to improve teaching practice. Instead, they suggest that the collegial intent of the peer observation programme be emphasised, and that staff be allowed to exercise autonomy regarding their choice of peer observers and focus of development.

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

Peer review of teaching, on the other hand, often involves feedback being provided to the observed teacher for a variety of purposes (Gosling, 2014). There are three models of peer review of teaching; evaluative, developmental, and collaborative, according to Gosling (2014). The evaluative model[2] is used for assessment, appraisal, promotion, etc. The developmental model involves educational experts who assess academics' teaching and make recommendations for further development in teaching. The collaborative peer review model has a collegial intent, clear purpose (improve teaching through dialogue and reflection, and stimulate improvement), and outcomes (analysis, reflection, improvement of teaching/learning, shared knowledge).

The collaborative model is considered the most effective if the aim is to improve teaching quality and encourage self-development (Gosling, 2014; Grooters, 2008;Martin & Double, 1998) . Collaborative peer review of teaching does not involve third-party observations; thus mitigating the power differentials inherent in the evaluative and developmental models of peer review of teaching (Gosling, 2014; McMahon, Barrett, & O'Neill, 2007).

A collaborative peer review of teaching programme may encourage the development of a culture of staff collaboration or collegiality, and increased self-reflection for development purposes (Martin & Double, 1998; Murphy Tighe & Bradshaw, 2013; White et al., 2014); as well as affirm effective teaching practice and stimulate increased awareness of students' learning needs (A. Bell & Mladenovic, 2015). Moreover, peer feedback can supplement student evaluations (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005), and can be used as evidence for promotion (A. Bell & Mladenovic, 2015).

Peer review of teaching can foster or enhance a teaching culture if it is conducted in a supportive and respectful manner, time is allocated for professional development, and leadership support is clearly demonstrated (Wingrove, Hammersley-Fletcher, Clarke, & Chester, 2017). If the aim of peer review of teaching is to enhance teaching practice and culture and allow for personal development, as in our study, then it is best not linked to the appraisal system, used to determine promotion, or used to determine performance-related pay (M. Bell & Cooper, 2013; Gosling, 2014).

Introducing peer review/observation of teaching to staff is not without its challenges. The foremost challenge is staff anxiety about being observed and reviewed by peers (Farrell, 2011; Fernandez & Yu, 2007; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Lomas & Nicholls, 2005; McMahon et al., 2007; Murphy Tighe & Bradshaw, 2013; White et al., 2014). Although, Farrell (2011) notes that anxiety is generally contained to the initial experience, and that the event is usually viewed as positive and productive (if conducted in a supportive/non-judgemental environment). Other barriers to participation are a lack of evaluation resources, overburdened faculty, time constraints (timetabling restrictions), pessimism about the reported benefits, lack of peer review training, observer subjectivity, and lack of a reward system for teaching achievement (Chism, 2007; Fernandez & Yu, 2007; Lomas & Nicholls, 2005). To overcome these challenges, Chism (2007) suggests staff autonomy with regard to selecting their observer, providing clear goals and procedures to staff, addressing the emotional concerns (e.g. anxiety) of staff, and embedding a culture that values teaching. Other important considerations include strong academic leadership

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[2] A very regulated evaluative model described by Klopper and Drew (2015) involves two expert observers (a discipline/topic expert and a teaching expert) who observe a teacher, gather feedback from students, and then provide a formal evaluation report.

and participation; a voluntary opt-in/opt-out process; clear goals, definitions, and procedures; adequate resources (including time and training); and a culture that values teaching (M. Bell & Cooper, 2013).

Teaching and Learning Circles: our study

Set in a New Zealand university, the Teaching and Learning Circles project was instigated by the Associate Dean Academic for Humanities, who sought to enhance the teaching culture and practice within the Division. The acronym, TLC, which is usually associated with the phrase, tender loving care, aptly captures the aim of the project, which was to stimulate supportive conversations about good teaching practice, celebrate teaching, and enhance the culture of teaching in the Division.

The TLC initiative is voluntary and modelled on 'Teaching Squares'; a "non-evaluative process of reciprocal classroom observation and self-reflection" designed by Stacy Grooters (2008, p. 3). The idea of a conversation circle underpinned the framework, and shares similarities to an Ako Aotearoa funded project that used learning and sharing circles to foster collegial conversations (see Summers & Betts, 2015).

Methodology

A Teaching and Learning Circle consists of three or four members (i.e. teachers). Teachers from different disciplines are assigned to a TLC by a co-coordinator or form their own TLC. Twenty-three university teachers (including the research team) registered to participate in a TLC. Two teachers had to withdraw due to work commitments, resulting in six TLCs operating across two semesters.

The process involved three stages: a pre-observation meeting, observation of teaching, and a post-observation debrief meeting. The pre- and post-observation meetings take place in an informal setting (usually over coffee or lunch); allowing members to develop a rapport and share aspects of their teaching. The pre-observation meeting allowed members to set the purpose of their TLC and coordinate their teaching schedules and observation times. Each member then participated in reciprocal observations of teaching, allowing all members of a TLC to observe each other's classes. Following the observations, they gathered again to talk about what they learned from their observations of their peers' teaching. An online guide to the process was made available via the Division of Humanities homepage.

For this study, TLC members were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview after the commencement of the teaching period.[3] Nine teachers agreed to participate, and the interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The audio recordings were thematically coded by the first author, using Atlas.ti data analysis software.

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[3] Ethics approval from the participating institution was sought and gained prior to recruiting the participants.

The following dominant themes were identified: reasons for joining a TLC,

- benefits of the TLC initiative,
- perceived barriers to participating in a TLC, and
- perceived influence of the TLC initiative on teaching culture.

These were then further analysed for connections to our research question: To what extent, or in what ways, does the Teaching and Learning Circles initiative influence teaching practice and culture in the Division (or department)?

Other members of the research team reviewed the findings and provided constructive feedback on the conclusions drawn.

The following section presents the findings of this study, and reveals the modifications made by the participants to the structure of the Teaching and Learning Circles; highlighting the importance of staff autonomy in a voluntary peer review/observation of teaching initiative.

FINDINGS

Using TLC to enhance teaching practice and culture

At the time of this report, Dr Ben Schonthal, one of the teachers who participated in a Teaching and Learning Circle (but was not interviewed for the project), received a University of Otago Teaching Excellence Award. When asked, in a media interview, how he strengthened his teaching practice, he had the following to say:

> "A good example is the Teaching and Learning Circles, introduced by the
>
> Division of Humanities in 2018, in which three or four lecturers would attend
>
> each other's classes and then meet afterward to offer suggestions – these
>
> informal yet focussed 'peer review' processes have been particularly helpful.
>
> (Division of Humanities, 2019)"

Dr Schonthal highlights some of the key findings of this study regarding the affordances of a voluntary, unofficial peer review of teaching programme.

The participants suggested that Teaching and Learning Circles enabled teachers to engage in collegial conversations about teaching; reflect upon their teaching practice; gain honest and supportive feedback on their teaching from colleagues outside of their own department; and make changes to enhance their teaching practice. These affordances of the TLC initiative had the potential to enrich the teaching culture within the Division, according to the participants. Although, we acknowledge, as one participant stated, that there might not be "radical transformation overnight", the TLC initiative was about "creating the culture [of teaching]. And that's the key thing" (Martin).

The following four themes illustrate how Teaching and Learning Circles may enhance teaching practice and culture within a Division. It is important to note that although the four themes are presented separately, they are strongly intertwined, with changes to teaching

practice dependent on the preceding three themes: collegial conversations about teaching, observations and self-reflection, and peer feedback.

Collegial conversations about teaching

> "I think part of creating a teaching culture is by having those teaching
>
> conversations with those who are around you that you see more often, so
>
> manufacturing those conversations are going to work well if you are going to
>
> struggle to get those conversations with the people around you." (Ian)

Ian underscores the central motivation for joining a TLC and key benefit of the initiative, identified by all participants. Most of the participants felt that teaching was a solitary activity with little existing opportunities to discuss teaching practices in a supportive environment. The informal and voluntary nature of Teaching and Learning Circles provided a supportive environment for teachers to engage in "the culture of talking to each other about teaching" (Mei).

The cross-disciplinary nature of Teaching and Learning Circles was particularly valuable because participants were provided with the "unique opportunity to talk with people across the Division" (Evelyn), chiefly "people across the Division who also care about teaching" (Lucas). Teaching and Learning Circles thus provided an informal, yet important, networking opportunity for staff, as Siobhan explains:

> The other cool thing about the Teaching and Learning Circles I think is the fact
>
> that you get to meet and get to know other people not in your department in
>
> a way that you can't really develop those kinds of relationships in regular life
>
> unless you're sitting with them on committees and meeting them regularly.

The pre- and post-observation meetings enabled participants to engage in conversation about teaching not often available to teaching staff outside their own teaching team or formal peer review of teaching.

> It goes back to having the opportunity to talk about teaching so that it gives
>
> you the mind space to reflect upon your own [teaching]. It's that constructive
>
> alignment of seeing others and talking about the ways they get their class to
>
> work and being able to talk about your own process with them that is
>
> probably, what I think, is missing if I do it with peer review (the formal
>
> process). (Ian)

Ian added that it was important to combine observations of teaching with collegial conversations in order to gain a better understanding of teachers' intentions in their practice. He, and others, believed that the dialogical nature of the initiative mitigated judgemental comments, and enabled members to seek solutions and support from each

other. In another Ako Aotearoa funded project, Smith et al. (2012) similarly found that open, but focused conversations contributed to trainee teachers' effective experiences during practicum.

Teaching and Learning Circles, with its emphasis on collegial conversations and support, offers a mechanism for developing communities of practice across the Division, and thus fostering a stronger teaching culture.

> This [Teaching and Learning Circles] develops more of a community of
>
> teaching within our discipline and Division where there are a lot more
>
> similarities in how we do things and how we think about things, but also just a
>
> community of scholars. (Siobhan)

Peer review of teaching programmes, if implemented correctly, can encourage the development of communities of practice though emphasis on collegiality (White et al., 2014). In other words, Teaching and Learning Circles mirror the collaborative approach of co-teaching; which is considered a community of practice. A community of interdisciplinary teachers can overcome the isolated practice of university teaching (Pharo et al., 2014); a sentiment shared by many of the participants in this study.

Surprisingly though, whilst all the participants highlighted collegial conversations as the key benefit (and drawcard) of Teaching and Learning Circles, many of them had not discussed their involvement in a TLC with colleagues within their department. One participant stated that it was difficult to raise the topic with colleagues who did not share a similar interest in teaching. "They feel more threatened by it, and would be 'But why are you asking me to join a [Teaching and] Learning Circle? Do you think I have a problem with teaching?'" (Martin). However, Ian was keen to raise the idea with four-member teaching team. His team was relatively young and worked with the same cohort of students. He believed that Teaching and Learning Circles would allow them to "expand the conversations they have at the moment" to include discussion about individual teaching approaches rather than concerns about particular students. Likewise, observing each other teach would provide further insights, as discussed next.

Observations of teaching and self-reflection
Observing a colleagues' lecture was a unique experience for many of the participants. Lucas for example, had not observed a colleague's full lecture since starting at the University in 2011. The participants were able to observe teaching from the students' perspective as well as "monitor what the students were doing in the lecture" (i.e. students' behaviour and level of engagement) (Evelyn). From the students' perspective, observers were able to experience the different styles of engagement as well as the influence of the physical environment on the learning context (e.g. use of microphone and impact of lighting).

> It was good to act like a student so that some of those things that teachers tell
>
> us, even though they are very passionate, it doesn't resonate or is hard The to
>
> follow. So, a presentation style, what's effective, and what could be improved,

> I could kind of pick up some of that, you know as an observer rather than the
>
> teacher. So, it was good to flip and play a different role. (Mei)

The peer observations prompted self-reflection, and in some instances, led participants to consider the importance of seeking regular student feedback on all aspects of the teaching environment.

For some of the participants, the observations gave them a unique opportunity to observe award-winning teachers.

> Attending other lectures were more helpful [than the feedback], just because
>
> you get a comparison point with other successful lecturers, it can give you
>
> ideas that you hadn't been doing, or see it in action if you had only heard
>
> about it. (Lucas)

Lucas was interested in gaining fresh insights into teaching from an academic in his TLC who, like himself, was an award-winning teacher. Mei was also keen to observe an award-winning teacher. She argued that teachers could benefit greatly if teaching-award recipients were willing to open their classrooms for peer observations. Research literature suggests that by observing others, teachers are made aware of different teaching approaches, are encouraged to questions their own knowledge, and reassess their teaching approach (A. Bell & Mladenovic, 2015; Cosh, 1998; Hendry et al., 2014).

The participants also enjoyed the cross-disciplinary nature of Teaching and Learning Circles, which allowed them to observe different teaching contexts, and gain "ideas that you may never have thought of in the context of yourself from a different discipline" (Ian). Cosh (1998) suggests that observations can encourage active self-development. This is evident in Ian's remarks about reflecting on the viability of trying a new teaching approach. He said that new teaching ideas might need to be "crowbarred" into different teaching contexts. However, he believed that it was through this active engagement in reflexivity and problem solving that teaching development took place.

The observations also provided the participants with positive affirmation about their own teaching practice. As mentioned earlier, the participants felt that teaching was mostly a solitary activity with little opportunity for feedback on their teaching. The observations thus provided indirect feedback by allowing participants to make comparisons between their own and others' teaching practice. "I was mostly reassured that a lot of what I am doing is what other people are doing" (Todd). Todd wanted to ensure he was engaging effectively with students in a large first year paper. He was able to observe three similarly large lectures, and asses the various approaches used in different disciplines.

Although all the participants spoke of the learnings gained from the observations, they all disclosed that they joined Teaching and Learning Circles to gain peer feedback on their teaching. One participant contended that feedback from his fellow TLC members provided additional information that was not available through observations alone.

Non-evaluative feedback on teaching

As stated previously, peer feedback was not included in the TLC framework promoted to Humanities staff. However, the participants highlighted in their interviews that they all sought feedback on their teaching or "purposefully wanted help on improvement" (Lucas). All the participants stated that there were limited opportunities to gain non-judgmental feedback on their teaching. For many, their only (and often last) experience of receiving peer feedback on their teaching was for the process of confirmation (or tenure, as known elsewhere).

An environment of trust and cooperation were essential in the Teaching and Learning Circles; echoing the features of other peer observation of teaching programmes focused on development (Byrne et al., 2010). McMahon et al. (2007) found that if there was trust between colleagues, then the observed teacher felt more inclined to teach a challenging lesson in order to gain insightful feedback from their trusted peer. In our study, trust was particularly pertinent if members of a TLC included gathering student feedback. In this instance, the teacher being observed needs to "trust in the people you're with because you're giving up ten minutes of your lecture time and you're thinking what are they talking about to my students" (Martin).

The participants were interested in receiving feedback from colleagues outside of their discipline. A similar sentiment was expressed by sessional tutoring staff in an Ako Aotearoa regional project, *Using mentor and peer observation to enhance the practice of short term contractual (tutoring) staff* (Wass, Rogers, Howell, Hartung, & McIntyre, 2019). Observations conducted by peers outside of one's discipline encouraged observers to focus on the teaching practice rather than the content (Torres et al., 2017). However, one participant in this study noted that her peers' lack of knowledge of the course content and design led to constructive feedback that was mostly irrelevant.

The feedback process differed between each TLC. As mentioned above, one group included informal student feedback along with their own observations. Another followed the informal feedback model of Start-Stop-Continue.[4] Others used a two-column approach where one column noted strengths during the lecture and the other column was used to record areas for improvement. Yet another approach was used by a four-member TLC. In their case, they recorded a timeline of teaching activities (i.e. a description of what was happening) during the observation. Following their observation, they added personal reflections for each of the activities observed. These reflections were typed-up and shared with the observed teacher and other members of that TLC. After all the observations were complete, the four members met socially to talk about their experiences.

As stated, the original TLC framework presented to staff did not propose members provide peer feedback. It is therefore not surprising that participants had mixed feelings about providing and receiving feedback. Mei, for example, felt uncomfortable with providing feedback to colleagues, because she was unsure where to 'draw the line' with the level of critique she offered others. "Writing feedback was a little hard, because you want to be nice but feel that you have to provide some suggestions for improvement, so it would be great to just sit in and not worry about giving feedback" (Mei).

Others felt the feedback was not as constructive as they wished. In other words, "It wasn't a

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[4] See http://www.bu.edu/ctl/teaching-resources/start-stop-continue/

full peer review in that it was a critique" (Lucas), and comments were mostly positive. Although the literature on collaborative peer review of teaching states that feedback should focus on affirming the positive aspects of peers' teaching (see Farrell, 2011), it is possible that the initiative's focus on developing relationships with cross-disciplinary colleagues hindered the participants' willingness to offer any critique. Todd explained the dilemma of providing constructive feedback whilst trying to maintain collegiality.

> I thought we were all so friendly and nice, and interested in being friendly and
>
> nice. There was very little in the way of negative comments for anybody; which
>
> is nice, but it meant that I thought there must still be things that I am doing that
>
> could be improved upon, and nobody told me anything like that. And, after a
>
> while I started to feel that I didn't want to be the one person saying negative
>
> things to everybody else, if everybody is being so supportive. (Todd)

Todd added that he actively inquired about areas for improvement during the post-observation catch-up, but members felt "reticent" or uncomfortable to offer suggestions that implied his teaching needed development. Another participant also echoed these sentiments. "I think we tried to be really nice to each other so most of the feedback was quite positive" (Mei). In her TLC, the feedback provided to each member was couched gently with reflective prompts added to encourage the observed teacher to consider alternative approaches. The observation and reflective notes approach is a key feature of Teaching Squares (Grooters, 2008), upon which Teaching and Learning Circles is based. Grooters (2008, p. 4) argues that self-focused observations and reflections encourage "a spirit of appreciation — even celebration" of peers' teaching, and avoid evaluative and or judgemental comments that could undermine the mutually-supportive environment of reciprocal peer observations. However, as indicated in the illustrative quotes above, participants sought support with identifying areas for improvement or enhancement.

There was one instance where feedback was offered in a non-collegial and judgemental manner, resulting in a negative experience for one TLC member.

Elizabeth described how one member in her TLC did not follow the collegial and social aspect of the Teaching and Learning Circles framework. Instead, the member delivered verbal feedback, along with observations notes, to her directly after her lecture concluded. The immediacy of the feedback disrupted her ability to reflect on her teaching, and undermined the collegial intent of the initiative. However, she was able to draw on this negative experience and ensure that her post-observation meeting with another TLC member was sociable and followed a more dialogical approach. She added that she still benefitted from receiving peer feedback because it was a good accompaniment to student evaluations. She felt that students were not experts in pedagogy and often made superficial comments on aspects such as appearance, so Teaching and Learning Circles offered another approach to enhancing her teaching.

Lastly, participants had autonomy over how they used peer feedback. For instance, feedback from peers could be used "for promotion or if you need more things to talk about in your self-reflection document (i.e. Teaching Profile)" (Siobhan). Some of the participants used the data to supplement student evaluations, and one participant, who was on the

confirmation path, sought to use the feedback to complement student evaluations of his teaching.

The collegial conversations, observations, self-reflection, and peer feedback prompted participants to consider making changes to their teaching.

Changes to teaching practice

All the participants spoke of making adjustments to the teaching. For some, the changes were subtle, such as using a microphone, or adjusting the lighting in the room. For others, they involved experimenting with new ideas gained from participants in a Teaching and Learning Circle. Siobhan was keen to use an activity she had observed for gauging students' prior knowledge of a topic; and Evelyn had gained feedback on how to foster group work in a large lecture; whilst Ian had devised a plan for working within a limited physical environment based on conversations with his other TLC members.

The insights gained through either conversations, observations, or peer feedback prompted the participants to reflect on how they could facilitate a better learning experience for students. Many of the participants taught large first year papers and were interested in facilitating and sustaining student engagement. Todd, for example, learned that when working with abstract ideas, posing direct, personal questions to students, stimulated stronger engagement. Evelyn, on the other hand, gained valuable insight into managing dominant students in a large lecture. She explained that she planned to use the strategies she observed next semester when she coordinated group-based assignments. Arguably, the participants were more cognisant of different teaching approaches; including what worked well in their current teaching practice, and what could be changed to improve student engagement.

CONCLUSION

The Teaching and Learning Circles initiative provided university teachers with a unique opportunity to converse with, and learn from, others who share a passion for teaching. The findings highlight how Teaching and Learning Circles can enhance teaching culture and practice, but also signal that university teachers feel isolated in their teaching practice. Unlike research where collaboration and peer review are common practice, teaching is highly individualised and private (Chism, 2007), "and there's a bit of a barrier to letting other people in" (Martin).

The key challenge in this project was recruiting university teachers to participate in Teaching and Learning Circles. Only 19 teachers (excluding the research team) signalled their interest to participate in the TLC initiative, despite widespread promotion at the inaugural Division of Humanities Teaching and Learning Symposium and via email broadcasts and the Divisional webpage. The interviewed participants identified staff anxiety about peer observations, time constraints, and "scepticism about the initiative" (Todd) as the key factors that may have hindered staff uptake. There is also a possibility that some staff misunderstood the purpose of the initiative, and thought that the observations would be evaluative in nature.

Recommendations

To address these concerns, we recommend the inclusion of a TLC co-ordinator. The co-ordinator is responsible for managing the formation of TLCs, and informing participants about the purpose and structure of the initiative. Additionally, leadership is key in promoting and sustaining a programme such as Teaching and Learning Circles. Leaders may include Heads of Departments, academic development staff and department or subject leaders responsible for the enhancement of teaching quality. The best form of dissemination is through departmental meetings and teaching and learning symposia. Other studies on peer review of teaching have similarly identified that leadership support is crucial for disseminating the purpose and benefits of peer review of teaching (M. Bell & Cooper, 2013; Murphy Tighe & Bradshaw, 2013; Wingrove et al., 2017), particularly if participation is voluntary (White et al., 2014).

We contend that the voluntary, collegial, and flexible nature of Teaching and Learning Circles mitigate the barriers to sharing teaching practices with peers. In this way, Teaching and Learning Circles offer a unique opportunity for teachers from different disciplines to enhance their teaching through supportive dialogue with others.

The appeal of the framework is its transferability to any teaching context. Although, cross-disciplinary Teaching and Learning Circles are preferred, according to the participants, teaching teams could also benefit from the collegial intent and supportive approach fostered within a Teaching and Learning Circle. Therefore, it will be interesting to compare our findings with an in-progress Ako Aotearoa funded project, *Teaching and Learning Circles: Developing Reflective Practice and Enhancing Teaching Culture* (Sutherland & Elgort, in progress), that takes a more facilitated approach and is not cross-disciplinary in its formation of peer observation partnerships. Furthermore, future research could explore the impact of Teaching and Learning Circles on teachers working on distance-taught or online courses.

For those considering the implementation of a TLC initiative, we conclude with the following illustrative quote from Siobhan who skilfully captures the purpose and affordances of Teaching and Learning Circles:

> It was weird, but I wasn't anxious [about being observed] because I knew he was there for positive reasons. One of the things that I love about this peer review of teaching is that ultimately it is up to you to decide how to use it. So, his report will never be seen by anyone, and that it is my reflection on his report that will ultimately go into the formal record…The idea that you are not being graded, and it's much more collegial and more of a dialogue. You are reflecting on someone who actually knows how to teach giving you feedback, and the reason that they are in the room is to help and learn and not to attack you.

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