

A new twist in peer-interaction approaches for academic development

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Ongoing academic development is an expectation placed on teachers in higher education. The nature of the academic development can differ dependent on institutional policies, processes and the willingness of teachers to engage in improving their practice. Academic development approaches can be divided into two groups: approaches that feature an academic developer as expert; approaches that rely on the interaction of peers. This research aims to make a contribution to the latter by analysing both literature and practice and suggesting a new twist. Peer review of teaching and teaching circles are two widely practised peer approaches that have been implemented at our university for a number of years. Some organizational units mandate peer review. Peers are assigned and review processes are tracked. Teaching circles operate across the university. Academics respond to a call for interest and are assigned to circles. Our research focuses on comparing those approaches to a variation of the critical friend model, which was popular in the 1970s and used academic developers as experts to guide professional development. Our version is informal, works with peers but retains the asymmetrical nature of the relationship. Based on the literature and our own experiences with the three approaches, we have developed a set of factors that highlight their characteristics. Those factors have been used to explore strengths and weaknesses in the approaches in interviews with participants experienced in peer review and teaching circles. Our preliminary findings show that the strengths of teaching circles lie in relationship building and collegial support. This combines with a weakness in providing the individual academic with direct support for implementing changes in their teaching. The strength of peer review is in allowing academics insights into the teaching of others. A downside is the often narrow emphasis on teaching as lecturing, the one-off nature of the engagement and the danger of going through the motions to fulfil managerial requirements. An informal critical friend approach based on peers combines the elements of relationship building and collegial support with a specific focus on the teaching of one of the peers, giving enough input to facilitate development. Further studies have to show if the critical friend feels that they receive enough reward for their efforts and if the teacher feels they find enough stimulation from their non-expert friend.