

The challenges of evaluating teaching practice in Higher Education: An analysis using Brookfield's Lenses of Critical Reflection

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Abstract

As an early-career academic undertaking a post-graduate teaching qualification, I found myself wanting feedback on the quality of my teaching practice. This article explores the application of Brookfield's Critical Lenses of Reflection on teaching practice and methods for evaluation from a personal perspective. Links are made to the current evidence base, and examples from my own teaching practice are critically analysed. Using Brookfield's model as a guide, this article sets out my observations of evaluation, both as an early-career lecturer, and as a learner.

Keywords: Reflective practice, early-career academic, evaluation methods, self-reflection, peer review, module evaluation.

Introduction

As an early-career academic undertaking a post-graduate teaching qualification as an Academic Professional Apprenticeship (APA), I found myself wanting feedback on the quality of my teaching practice. I quickly identified that the concept of measuring quality or demonstrating excellence in teaching is well contested within the literature, with Wood and Su's (2017) small-scale study finding a wide variety in academics' understanding of what good teaching is and how it can be measured. Their study identifies that academics struggle to determine how they deliver good teaching, whilst suggesting that they can easily spot good practice in others (Wood and Su, 2017). Whilst that study was self-acknowledged as lacking objectivity beyond the modern-teaching-focused university, its findings fit with Brookfield's (1998a) observations that using only self-reflection on teaching practice can be problematic and insular. Recognising that relying on one's own perceptions of teaching practice was very limiting, lead Brookfield (1998a) to develop the Lenses of Critical Reflection, which utilise the viewpoints of our students, our colleagues, and the evidence base in literature in addition to autobiographical reflection. Through reflection on these differing viewpoints, Brookfield's model guides readers to become more aware of undercurrents of power dynamics, as well as gaining a better understanding of potential unintended consequences of our teaching actions (Brookfield, 1998b). Using Brookfield's model (1998b) as a guide, this article will set out my observations of evaluation, both as an early-career lecturer, and as a learner.

Autobiographical Lens

What does the literature say?

Brookfield's (1998a) autobiographical lens is about looking reflectively at one's own teaching practice, to identify what our students are experiencing; through that critical eye we have the opportunity to be more aware of how we work and the impact that could be having. Baume and Popovic (2016) describe this lens as critical self-reflection, questioning the nature and effectiveness of teaching practice, to understand how and why it is, or is not effective. Though temptations exist to write off personal experiences as insignificant, Brookfield (1998a) insists that self-reflection is one of the most important sources of evaluation of our teaching practice. This concept is well supported in current research (Baume and Popovic, 2016), with Sun-Keung Pang's (2020) study finding that teachers recognise the benefits of critical self-reflection on the development of higher standards of teaching. Whilst it is recognised that Sun-Keung Pang's (2020) paper was based on pre-adulthood educators' views, generalisation to adult-education is not unreasonable.

Civitillo et al. (2019) agree with these positive findings but also identify the other end of the spectrum, where poorly reflective teachers are less likely to question their teaching practice or change their beliefs about their teaching skill. One of the main limitations of self-reflection is that we are only capable of viewing our teaching practice through our existing knowledge, values, and beliefs. Other methods that fit under the autobiographical lens include purposeful self-reflections such as those used for assessment purposes in teaching qualifications, or applications for the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme, Collaborative Awards for Teaching Excellence, or Advance HE fellowship/accreditation.

Using Brookfield's autobiographical lens for evaluation

Self-reflection is a routine activity as an early-career academic, firstly due to coming from a clinical nursing background, where reflective practice was a core part of my role and professional responsibility (NMC, 2019); and secondly, reflection on teaching practice was a regular feature for learning within the APA.

Using autobiographical reflection, I identified strengths within my teaching practice such as offering a wide range of learning opportunities and activities, taking an equitable approach to students, and aiming for inclusivity in my teaching practice. The process identified that I have an emotional response to marking, for example becoming quite exasperated by poor scholarship. I also drew comparisons with the concept of imposter phenomenon (IP), described as a lack of faith in one's abilities, or a sense of fraudulence about success achieved (Shaked and Hau, 2021; Wilkinson, 2020). This is a phenomenon that I recognise within my own experiences of educating, the feeling of 'winging it' with my teaching practice. Whilst this does not directly affect the delivery of teaching, the 'never good enough' thoughts might

reduce my willingness to try new methods, take risks or expose myself to potential failure. Wilkinson's (2020) auto-biographical-ethnographic study tells us that failure to recognise and manage IP can lead to an individual becoming stressed, reduce their effectiveness, and impact job satisfaction. Whilst this study was based on Wilkinson's experiences, a method fitting Brookfield's autobiographical lens, the findings are well supported in other literature (Jeanmonod, 2022; Nedegaard, 2016; Rakestraw, 2017; Shaked and Hau, 2021).

Lens of our students

What does the literature say?

Brookfield's model (1998b) reminds us that it is the power of looking through others' eyes, with their differing knowledge, values, and beliefs, that gives us the truer, more rounded impression. Module evaluations are a common method of evaluating the quality of teaching, readily identifiable as fitting under the student lens and suggested by Brookfield as potentially being the most surprising of the lenses (1998a). Whilst module evaluation is a well-established practice in Higher Education (HE) (Ching, 2018) and considered relatively reliable, its effectiveness is debated in the literature, with Boring et al.'s (2016) complex quantitative paper identifying that student evaluations are commonly skewed by students' biases.

One significant challenge of module evaluation is students' reluctance to be entirely honest if they are identifiable within the evaluation (Brookfield, 1998b). Interestingly, Clayson and Haley (2014) suggest that most research into student evaluation assumes that the students are being entirely honest; experience alternatively suggests to this author that students will only be entirely open when anonymity is guaranteed. Clayson and Haley's (2014) study of marketing students in an American University (with therefore limited transferability to my field of UK nurse education) identified over 41% of students knew that untrue information had been included in an evaluation. It could be argued that the professional expectation of honesty and openness instilled in nursing students by The Code (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2015) would preclude this from being as significant a problem, however, this is no evidence to support or refute this.

Using the lens of our students for evaluation

As identified above, module evaluation has been widely adopted within HE, and module evaluations are expected within my discipline. Whilst there is much that I (and the wider module team) can take from feedback, such as emphasising/encouraging the positively reviewed aspects of teaching in future module deliveries, as well as making changes based on the negatively reviewed aspects. There is also much to be mindful of when reviewing data like this. Firstly, it is important to recognise that this feedback relates to the overall teaching on the module, rather than my teaching practice specifically. Secondly, anonymity is the standard of module evaluation within our university, aiming for honesty and openness

in the students' responses. Finally, I feel it is important to keep in mind there can be differences between what students want and what students need, often described as the balance between interest and outcome (Biggs and Tang, 2011; Newton and Miah, 2017; Race, 2014). Below are the questions asked of students in routine module evaluation at the time (University of Lincoln module evaluation questions, 2020):

What would you recommend to help encourage student engagement within this module?

What have I enjoyed about this module and why?

What I feel could be improved in this module and why?

Any other feedback you would like to include?

My observations on such narratives emphasise the importance for lecturers to consider the merit of any negative feedback, to identify if it is an issue that actually needs rectification, or instead, needing management of individual student's expectations. With all of that in mind, module evaluation remains a justifiable form of evaluative evidence that can provide high quality feedback at a much more operational level than measures such as NSS. One example of constructive criticism received during the evaluation of a module I taught on relates to the expectation of independent study and interaction with an online discussion board. With recognition that students may lack confidence in their ability to learn independently (Barrow et al., 2002; Yuan et al., 2011), I appreciated that many prefer greater guidance. Whilst I still view discussion boards as a legitimate learning tool and very much agree with Biggs and Tang's (2011) apprehension about giving students exactly what they want rather than what they need; I recognise that a greater level of coaching students in the purpose of independent study activities may help to set appropriate expectations on the interactions between peers being of value in learning. Other methods of evaluation that may fit under the lens of the student's eyes include National Student Survey data (NSS), local events to gather students' opinions (such as Speak Week), and feedback via the Student Reps system.

Lens of our colleagues

What does the literature say?

Brookfield (1998a) identifies the lens of our colleagues as obtaining a different version of events as viewed through *their* perceptions and experiences; the idea that we can see alternative viewpoints about our teaching practice, by critically discussing our practice with colleagues, and understanding their interpretation of events and outcomes. Of course, each of our colleagues bring with them their own specific view developed through the lens of their own practice, which could be just as biased, but Brookfield (1998a) champions the idea of sharing common problems to identify causes and effects that would not have occurred to us otherwise.

Using the lens of our colleagues for evaluation

As a means of evaluation, peer review is a well-supported process within HE (Horgan, 2003; Hargreaves and Page, 2013), however, it is not without its challenges. La Lopa's (2012) literature review on the topic summarises peer review as being of great benefit to teacher and reviewer alike whilst also acknowledging that it can induce anxiety, even amongst staff used to the peer review process in research. Whilst it is acknowledged that La Lopa's area of teaching practice is vastly different to mine, the joy of peer review is that differences in field and subject knowledge ensure the review is of the teaching practice, not the subject matter, so this summary of findings would be generalisable to all disciplines of adult education. However, since La Lopa (2012) does not disclose their literature reviewing process, the review lacks transparency. Included here is an example of a peer review template that was used to assess my practice as part of an assessment within the APA, the outcome of this review supported my application for HEA Fellowship, so the questions include references to the descriptors within the UK Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE, Guild HE, Universities UK, 2011):

<p>Opening of the session</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the participant introduce themselves to the session participant(s)? Did they do anything else to build rapport at the start of the session? • Were the learning outcomes and structure of the session made clear to the session participant(s)? • Were links between this session and others made clear (if appropriate)? (A1, A2)
<p>Delivery of the session</p> <p>Were the learning and teaching methods chosen appropriate for the session participant(s); the topic(s), the learning outcomes and the learning environment? (D2.iv, A1, A2, K2)</p>
<p>Does the participant demonstrate good knowledge of the subject material? (K1)</p> <p>Do they articulate this in a way that is appropriate for the level of the participant(s)? (D2.iv, A2, K2, V1)</p>
<p>Does the participant provide clear and unambiguous instructions to session participant(s) when setting tasks and activities? Do they indicate the time allowed and how the outcomes of the activity will be shared? Do they check for understanding before session participant(s) commence the task/activity? (D2.iv, A2, A4)</p>
<p>Does the participant make appropriate use of learning technology during the session? (D2.iv, K4)</p>
<p>Do they assess the learning of the session participant(s) using appropriate methods? Do they offer constructive and helpful feedback to support learning? (D2.iv, A2, A3, K5)</p>
<p>Does the participant take into account and respond to the needs of individual learners? (V1)</p>
<p>Does the participant employ appropriate techniques to engage all learners and ensure all learners have equal opportunity to engage? (D2.iv, A2, A4, V2)</p>
<p>Does the participant use appropriate techniques for summarising the session content and re-capping key learning points with session participant(s)? Is the take home message and any further work required clear? (D2.iv, A1, K5)</p>
<p>Session structure, timing, and presentation</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did the session run to time? • Was there an appropriate amount of material covered, and was the pace appropriate for the session participant(s)? • Was the participant able maintaining student engagement throughout the session? • Was there an appropriate balance between tutor led and participant led activity?
<p>Strengths Please use this box to highlight the positive aspects of the participants teaching practice and provide feedback on what they did well and why.</p>
<p>Areas for development Please use this box to identify areas where improvements to teaching practice could be made and offer advice on how the participant might go about doing this</p>
<p>Overall comments from the observer</p>
<p>Participant reflection on the session and feedback</p>
<p>Participant action plan</p>

Another example under this lens is the use of the appraisal system for career development, as an indirect form of peer review utilising a senior colleague rather than a peer. The peer review process identified many positives to my teaching practice, including my passion for the subject and use of teaching technologies; whilst also identifying a weakness related to my speed of content delivery at times being too rapid, most likely correlated to my passion and excitement for teaching the subject!

Lens of literature

What does the literature say?

Brookfield's final lens of literature helps education practitioners to identify and know their practice. Brookfield (1998a) himself recognises the limitations of this lens in relation to the dichotomy between those who teach and those who write about teaching; suggesting that practitioners are hesitant to access educational literature which they feel is unrelatable. This lens compliments the other lenses, encouraging teachers to consider their experiences, in addition to their students' and colleagues' experiences, under the illumination of current research and literature.

Using the lens of literature for evaluation

One of Brookfield's claims about this lens read as particularly pertinent to me, in that it suggests newer academics can fall into a trap of self-blame, the assumption that everything that goes wrong within the classroom is because of their personal ineptitude or inexperience (Brookfield, 1998a; Brookfield, 1998b). The suggestion is that the reading and understanding of education practice literature can help early career academics to see the wider picture of engagement or learning, avoiding self-blame or recrimination. The lens of literature frequently identifies areas of practice

excellence or alternative methods that I would like to experience or adopt, and so for me it seems to identify personal challenges rather than true weaknesses.

Where else could we look to evaluate?

In relation to UK practice, the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) was borne of a Government White Paper (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2016) with an agenda to publicly identify the 'best' teaching provision to drive up teaching standards across the HE sector. Whilst the concept came from good intentions: to drive up standards, give students a voice about the quality of education, and value teaching in the same regard as research; the implementation raised significant concerns, particularly around the metrics used to measure teaching quality (Wood and Su, 2017). As a data source for reflection, TEF could be considered as sitting outside of Brookfield's lenses, as it combines the student lens (National Student Survey data) with outcome data relating to employment or education.

It could be considered that the measures of student satisfaction and performance are poor proxy measures of teaching quality. Supporting this idea, in an independent review of TEF, Pearce (2021) recognised there is "no absolute measure of educational quality" and made numerous recommendations for revisions of the method. Wood and Su (2017) also identify concerns and challenges around the language used when discussing teaching quality. Recognising that everything being 'excellent every time' is an impossibility, the use of that language devalues areas of practice that truly are excellent.

Conclusion

In summary, whilst there are numerous methods to evaluate teaching practice, there are significant limitations, and no single method could be considered a source of truth. Observations of Brookfield's lenses (1998a) can encourage education practitioners to take a more rounded view of their teaching practice, considering it from all angles and viewpoints. Only then may they truly understand their strengths and weaknesses in teaching practice and take appropriate action.

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