Embedding an internal evaluation culture: Critical issues for consideration from an innovative model

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Abstract

Curriculum development and student feedback strategies in higher education contexts are entwined in multiple ways. The belief that curriculum development and student feedback are intricately linked as strong catalysts in the enhancement of learning has been exhaustively researched and promoted in the literature (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008; Hubball and Burt, 2004). Few institutions have addressed the need to connect the two portfolios in a meaningful way. However, one institution in Canada combined both components (curriculum design and student feedback) of higher education practice into a dynamic academic portfolio that engaged senior administrators, teaching staff, and students in dialogue. This innovative model of embedding an evaluation culture was both an exhausting and exhilarating experience. It brought to the fore many critical issues that require further consideration of the impact of the model on all stakeholders. This paper presents a constructive critique of that model with recommendations for advancing higher education practice in embedding an internal evaluation culture. Based on the application of the Canadian model, it was found that inherent in an embedded evaluation model are the following imperatives, among others:

- Equity, diversity and inclusivity
- Commitment from stakeholders (teaching staff, administrators and students).
- Respectful and transparent communication
- Proactive and future oriented goals

Key words: Evaluation culture, student feedback, curriculum design, student ratings of instruction

Introduction

Hubball and Burt 2004, p.53 assert that the

> "processes of developing and implementing learning-centred curricula are complex and intricately inter-related, that cannot be treated as discrete

entities, nor can they each be considered the responsibility of completely different people"

Developing and implementing learner-centred curricula implies that learners' voices are key to the task of curriculum design. Learner's voices are 'heard' through student evaluations however they are not adequately incorporated in curriculum design. The central place of student evaluation and feedback in the curriculum design process and the intricate linkage between the two components has been recognized in the literature (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008; Beran et al 2005) although the structural frameworks in higher education do not illustrate that connectivity in general. Structurally, the two components are often treated as separate entities in higher education institutions with curriculum design falling under the auspices of the academic units and teaching and learning centres and student evaluation and feedback located under university planning services and similar departments. The alignment of annual student evaluations (generated through the institutional evaluation systems) with curriculum design goals to improve learning is a desired goal, as noted in the literature. Often, student evaluations are rarely aligned to and integrated into the broader learning and teaching curriculum framework.

Hubball and Burt's assertion finds favour with Dalhousie University (hereafter referred to as Dalhousie or the Dalhousie model) in Canada because of the unique educational development approach taken by the Director of the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) to integrate curriculum design with student feedback into a single educational development portfolio. Responsibility for the administration of the institutional student evaluation had already been undertaken by the Centre. However, the new portfolio brought with it an educational development responsibility for the integration of both portfolios during consultations on teaching practice and curriculum design enhancement. Within and outside Canada, these two areas of learning and teaching are separated on a structural and organisational basis. Institutional structures usually define curriculum development as the responsibility of academic committees and of educational development professionals. Responsibility for the implementation of the student evaluation systems (through systems like the Student Ratings of Instruction) is located in the offices of the university administration. Discussion on structural issues is further developed in the section on background and context. The integration of these two portfolios created opportunities for information dissemination of the utility of student evaluations and an education drive among students, faculty and administrators, a shift in focus that was recommended by Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf (2008). Their study also concluded that it was time to move on from the older research agendas that were exhaustive in reaffirming that.

"Reliability and internal validity of course evaluations are now widely accepted by numerous scholars as evidenced by scores of grounded empirical evidence" (Gaverstock and Gregor-Greenleaf, p61)

The Dalhousie model is a creative and innovative response to Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf's (2008) recommendations to educate the campus community on the intricate relationship between student evaluations and curriculum design. In a constructive critique of the Dalhousie model, the author identifies positive aspects of the implementation of the evaluation policy together with concerns and challenges that emerged in initiating a dialogue on evaluation among all stakeholders. The paper draws largely upon the Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf comprehensive study on evaluation frameworks in 22 Canadian institutions as a framework for the discussion. It highlights critical issues for consideration in embedding an internal evaluation culture across a whole institution with

recommendations for improving future replicas of this model. Special attention is drawn to the following essential components as critical factors for success:

- Equity, diversity and inclusivity in policy implementation.

- Commitment from all stakeholders (teaching staff, administrators and students)

- Respectful communication

- Proactive and future oriented goals

Terms of reference are clarified next and this is followed by a brief review of the background, context and rationale for embedding an evaluation culture before concluding with recommendations for improving the conditions to ensure success.

Clarification of terminology

In this section, various terms are clarified as they are used in this discussion. *Curriculum design* is an umbrella term to describe a range of curriculum planning and review initiatives. In addition to this, *curriculum mapping* is used interchangeably, as relevant, to refer to both manual curriculum planning processes and to computer software like *Daedalus* invented by a professor in Computer Science at Dalhousie University. *Student evaluation* refers to processes that involve the evaluation of teaching through surveys and include various forms of feedback that are used to elicit student opinions and views on teaching and learning. *Student rating of instruction* (also known as student evaluation of teaching) refers to the institutional policy and survey instrument (paper-based and online version) that is used to gather student feedback on an annual basis.

Peer review or evaluation of teaching refers to the evaluation of teaching performance by peers and academic colleagues. Embedding a culture of peer review is another growing trend in Australian higher education and cause for more angst among colleagues because it is also being recognized as part of the 'the collection of data for use in processes of confirmation of appointment or as part of the case for promotion applications' (Harris et al 2008, p.8). Higher education institutions must be cautious in adopting peer review as part of the performance, tenure and promotion framework unless it subscribes to principles of equity. Further, peer review should only be conducted by those who understand the purpose of such reviews, originally framed within a developmental, reflexive paradigm with the primary objective of improving teaching. A more in-depth discussion on peer review lies outside the context of this paper.

An *evaluation culture* refers to the culture of assessing teaching and learning through various instruments for formative and summative purposes. *Formative* evaluations are usually of short term duration and provide more immediate information on areas that require improvement after which some improvements are usually implemented and/or discussed with students. *Summative* evaluations are longer term, annual processes that are institutional wide that serve a quality assurance purpose and ensure accountability and responsibility by all stakeholders. Information gathered through summative evaluations are expected to be used to improve curriculum design and teaching practice, institutional planning and to disseminate relevant information about the institutional profile on a national and international basis. As noted earlier, summative evaluations are being used more frequently in institutional decision making on employment performance reviews, promotions and tenure (Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, p.10) and are a cause

for grave concern among academic professionals. A recent Australian study suggests that the mandated use of evaluation as a quality control measure for teaching quality among academic staff may lead to grade inflation and ethical compromise.

> "One aspect of this increasing quest for quality has been a shift in the utilisation pattern of the SET instrument from one of voluntary use by academics to inform their own teaching practices, to that of mandated use by management in order to 'judge' academics for progression and promotion of their position and indeed overall job security. This shift in focus and usage has the potential to invite academics to inflate student grades, in order to achieve good SET results." (Reiss and Klotz 2011, p.117)

The notion of evaluation on teaching and learning strongly assumes that students understand the purpose of the evaluation and provide constructive feedback however there is little evidence in the literature to suggest that this is indeed the case. *Constructive feedback* as a distribution of the strengths and weaknesses (with suggestions for improvement) of teaching and learning design and practice for improvement as a desired outcome of evaluation processes but it is not a concept that is fully understood by students and one that has not been adequately discussed among students and teachers. In this paper, the terms *teacher, academic staff* and *faculty* will be used interchangeably when referring to those who are responsible for the design and delivery of the academic programs. References to *students* are made in relation to the student council bodies and representatives of the university and to student cohorts within programs to which the author was invited to facilitate discussion on student evaluation, constructive feedback and curriculum design. *Creative* refers to an unusual and unique approach whereas *innovative* refers to a new and alternate perspective in advancing the teaching and learning portfolio.

The background, context and rationale for implementing an evaluation culture at Dalhousie are discussed next. This provides an understanding of the impact of discussions about curriculum design and student ratings of instruction on academic staff, students, and administrators. More specifically, discussions led to a vibrant dialogue on evaluation that became an institutional cultural phenomenon within a period of six months.

Background and context

Curriculum design

Curriculum design initiatives were being implemented at Faculty and Program level, emerging as relevant and creative responses to various Faculty, Program, institutional and external needs and demands for curriculum review and restructure. There are multiple approaches to curriculum design and Faculties and Programs are in the best position to identify an approach that meets their program needs and their context. Computer software programs are available for curriculum mapping for those who prefer the use of software or for those who want to compliment manual processes with computer software processing. Dalhousie University had the advantage of the *Daedalus* curriculum mapping software invented by a professor in the Faculty Computer Science two years ago.

Examples of curriculum design initiatives include

- The College of Nursing embarked on a college wide review and revitalization project.

- The College of Pharmacy conducted a needs analysis survey of North American programs.

- The Kinesiology Program embarked on a curriculum assessment project to identify effective measures in promoting the discipline to prospective students.

- Oceanography engaged in new degree development and a review of the existing curriculum.

Although student evaluations are used for a number of different purposes in higher education, as noted by Beran et al (2005), their study (p.49) found that the feedback received did not impact change in teaching practice. According to them, the majority of faculty members

> "gave favorable responses about the usefulness of student ratings for improving quality of teaching and faculty members were positive about the student ratings, they did not generally use them to make changes in their teaching"

In the Dalhousie model, discussions on curriculum design and student evaluations were consistently interconnected with clear references made to the relationships, linkages and opportunities to improve teaching practice and learning design.

Discussions and consultations on curriculum design within and across the different programs led to animated discussions on student evaluations and the need to engage students in dialogue about their learning. This was welcomed by students who were already vocal in the campus media about their perspectives on the newly endorsed Senate Policy on the annual student ratings of instruction.

Engaging student dialogue on student evaluations

Student vocalization on student evaluation was visible in the campus media. It also demonstrated a deeper level of student engagement with the student evaluation dialogue through student media (for example, the Dalhousie Gazette) and is noted as a feature of student engagement unique to Dalhousie. In the 2011- 2012 academic year alone, the SRI policy implementation was monitored with special interest and reported in the student newspaper. Lypny's (2012) article, based on interviews with a number of stakeholders, articulates the significance of receiving and integrating student feedback, if the process is fully supported. Some of the misconceptions and misinformation about the purpose and use of the SRI is also evident among student and faculty comments in the article. The burden of responsibility and accountability for the integrity of the process and the effective implementation is with all stakeholders, as noted in the Senate Policy (5.0). Clark (2012) commented on the positive aspects of student access to SRI results under the Policy. He claimed that 'these changes point Dalhousie's SRI policy in the same direction as many other Canadian universities.' The successful inclusion of student access in the Policy is the culmination of a long consultation process among all stakeholders from two years ago. Ryan (2010) had reported at that time that while there were several contentious issues regarding student access to results, there was optimism among students about this development. Of course, raising the bar on accountability and responsibility also increases the impetus that it gives to the quality of education. Student engagement with the student evaluation information dissemination strategy at Dalhousie suggests that it is not only a high

priority on the student council agenda but that students do welcome participation and engagement in university policy development and implementation discourse.

In addition to this, the Dalhousie University student council and the student society in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences invited dialogue through presentations to their council members. Programs in Nursing and Management were proactive in integrating information dissemination sessions within scheduled classes, with the Nursing program leading the way. However, as noted earlier, the structural framework in higher education institutions generally divides the roles and responsibilities of curriculum design and teaching practice professionals.

Review of institutional structural frameworks

As is evident from browsing the web sites of teaching and learning centres in higher education institutions in Canada and elsewhere, institutional structural frameworks show evidence that curriculum and course design is placed under the auspices of the educational development centres. Responsibility for the student evaluation portfolio however is often located within the administrative units in which institutional policy and planning services or examinations are housed. Of special note is the fact that, responsibility for student evaluations remains divorced from its curriculum and course design bedfellow in a space that is external to the educational development centre and in some cases external to the institution. For example, at Concordia University the assessment of teaching is undertaken by a source that is external to the university, the Idea Centre which is a non-profit organization. This is an extreme response in seeking external sources to undertake responsibility for student evaluations in higher education and follows a model that originated at Kansas University in the USA. Gravestock and Gregor –Greenleaf (2008) provide an overview of the student evaluation models and trends in 22 post-secondary institutions in Canada and the USA outlining what is common and what is not. The integration of curriculum and course design and student evaluation portfolios in an educational development structure is not evident in their study. Their findings suggest that whereas the implementation of the evaluation process varied across institutions, the responsibility for course evaluations and analysis was with the administrative body in the university. They cite the example of the 'Office of Evaluations and Examinations at Michigan or Test Scoring and Questionnaire Services at Alberta'. Dalhousie University's unique educational development approach to combine both portfolios makes a historical statement in educational development and in higher education in Canada and in a North American context if we take the Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf study (2008) into consideration.

Rationale: Student Evaluation Policy development and implementation

Dalhousie's unique approach is rationalized within the pedagogical framework of the recommended alignment between the desired learning outcomes with the various components of curriculum design. In this case, it was fortuitous that the goals of the curriculum design initiatives were aligned to the evaluation results and vice versa. At Dalhousie University, the Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT), under various structural poses over the last two decades has been responsible for the facilitation of the implementation and analysis of the student evaluation process. More recently, the CLT was again involved in the redesign of the

institutional student ratings of instruction instrument and also led the initiative to devise policy through a university wide transparent process commissioned by the Senate. This culminated with the endorsement of the Senate Policy for the Student Ratings of instruction (SRI) in June 2011. Although SRI was part of the evaluation profile of the university for several years, the endorsement of a mainstream policy required cross-Faculty compliance to assure quality across programs. Responsibility and accountability for teaching and learning design and practice among relevant stakeholders, and transparency (with the newly incorporated clause to make SRI results accessible to all students via a password protected university student web portal) of results was included in the policy guidelines. With this came the responsibility of disseminating the Senate Policy over the academic year in addition to the commitment to act as a catalyst in transitioning the University from a strictly-paper based mode of student evaluation to the 'electronic - capture' mode. 'Electronic – capture' mode does not refer to 'online' student evaluations. The 'online' system is one in which students receive and respond to the evaluation survey via the web in asynchronous time. In the 'electronic –capture' mode, student evaluations will continue to be conducted in the classroom space in synchronous time however students will be able to access the survey and to respond via an electronic medium (smart phone, iPad, or computer, for example) of their choice. The advantage of the 'electronic mode' is that

a) Students will use an electronic device to receive and complete their evaluations within a specific time period in class.

b) Moving from a paper-based mode to 'electronic –capture' mode will have various time saving merits in relation to paper processing procedures.

c) Student written comments will be typed thereby increasing anonymity.

Positive spinoffs from the integration of curriculum design and student evaluation portfolios

Among the merits of the innovative approach at Dalhousie is the combination of two important portfolios (curriculum design with student ratings) to enhance learning and teaching. It was a bold step forward. This makes Dalhousie University a pioneer in advancing the educational development goal of improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning through the alignment of learning design and the evaluation of teaching. So what then are the positive spinoffs of such an insightful approach? First, it brought a logical framework into practice: this model presented incredible opportunities for engaging faculty, students and administrators on multiple levels in dialogue about student evaluation and curriculum design. Next, it broadened the approach to course and curriculum restructures and reviews in a way that encouraged creative energies to flow. Important to educational development is that it inspired meaningful exchange of learning and teaching challenges and opportunities and in particular, a rich educational synergy abounded in Faculties, departments and programs.

Evidence of critical engagement is demonstrated in the mutually rewarding exchanges among educational development professionals in the CLT and colleagues from various academic programs. Our point of entry into the dialogue was interspersed with issues arising out of student evaluation fora and curriculum design challenges. The following diverse range of strategies to effectively implement the Senate Policy on SRI demonstrated the depth and breadth of

engagement among stakeholders. The entry level of engagement differed widely among the different stakeholders but the angst about evaluations in general and about the personal and professional implications (tenure and promotions issues for academic staff and anonymity and quality of education delivery for students) was about the same. The most encouraging aspect in this creative and innovative approach was the level of optimism and enthusiasm evident among all stakeholders as they willingly participated in discussion forums and took ownership for implementing the evaluation policy.

Gravestock and Gregor – Greenleaf (2008) identified gaps in the models and trends in student evaluations that include: defining the expectations and vocabulary in teaching so that 'we can reach consensus about what constitutes teaching'; 'understanding evaluation users'; and 'educating evaluation users'. The Dalhousie model embraced all of these identified gaps and adopted the study recommendation by educating and understanding evaluation users.

Within eight months of the endorsement of the Senate Policy, the institution saw an increase in interest from all stakeholders about teaching effectiveness, and engagement on curriculum design:

a) New and expanding curriculum design processes were encouraged and supported by senior administrators and academics in a range of programs (for example, oceanography, nursing, kinesiology, dentistry, engineering, health promotion, and recreational and leisure study, engineering, and computer science).

b) Programs integrated educational information presentations on student evaluations and constructive feedback (for example, in nursing and management programs). Nursing pioneered this trend through the systematic integration of student evaluation discussion sessions on constructive feedback at all levels (first to fourth year). This was the proactive strategy of the Associate Director, implemented in November 2011.

c) Student groups engaged in discussion forums on the SRI through invited presentations at student council level (for example, the Dalhousie Student Union and the Dalhousie Arts and Social Sciences Society) and through media coverage of the SRI policy and implementation initiatives.

All the above initiatives demonstrate a vibrant spirit of engaging change and in enabling stakeholders to embrace the challenges and the opportunities. The culture of evaluation that permeated the campus community was exhilarating because of the rich and diverse dialogue that flourished. It was exhausting because only one educational developer was responsible for advocating the evaluation culture among academics, students and administrators.

Concerns and challenges

Although this unique model had a number of positive spin offs as noted above, various concerns and challenges emerged as the model was diffused. Concerns among academic staff included the following: granting student access to the results; effects of results dissemination on small and large course enrolments and introduction of bias in course selection; the immediate need to educate and inform students about the SRI policy and giving constructive feedback; and of highest concern was the significant weighting of and institutional reliance on annual

student feedback for promotions and tenure decisions. Academic staff suggested that evaluation processes should focus on evaluating learning effectiveness instead of teaching. Students raised concerns about the anonymity of their written comments and the consequences; their dismay that their feedback on an annual basis did not translate into a modified and restructured curriculum design; and that academic staff were not mandated to declare their results on the University web page. Administrators at different levels of operation were concerned with ensuring the smooth operation of the implementation process and were worried about the disconnect between the central policy implementation protocols, as expressed in the Senate Policy and the actual implementation of the policy within and across departments, programs and Faculties. Fear, suspicion and paranoia were expressed and noted in the discussions at varying levels of frustration.

The Canadian model brought to the surface a number of underlying tensions but also provided a rich array of opportunities for the modification of future models. Embedding an evaluation culture within an institution is a complex and challenging task.

Recommendations to enhance future models of embedding evaluation culture

The foregoing discussion on embedding evaluation culture in a Canadian university demonstrates that there is ample opportunity within institutional contexts to make evaluation a mainstream culture. This constructive critique suggests that there are positive aspects of evaluation culture that can be facilitated with ease and refined for more effective engagement. Of course, there are several aspects of the Dalhousie model that can be improved. For example, in the Dalhousie case, the initiative to embed an evaluation culture came from the CLT alone. A mainstream catalyst is required, such as a Faculty in which to establish the dialogue and then move the discussion and initiative collaboratively across Faculties. Other components that require improvement include: resources (staff resources, funds, and time to manage the huge initiative); ongoing engagement with the Promotions and Tenure Committee; and the opportunity to report on critical teaching development issues to senior administrators instead of the presentation of statistical reports alone.

The CLT and the educational development approach addressed some aspects of equity, diversity, inclusivity, stakeholder commitment, open communication, and some proactive strategies to engage the broader campus community however these remain inadequate and require further development. Recommendations for improvement are listed below.

- *Equity, diversity and inclusivity in the development and implementation of policy.*
  The process must subscribe to the principles of equity (to ensure that all stakeholders are treated with fairness), diversity (to include different perspectives and approaches), and inclusivity (to invite all stakeholder groups to the table).

- *Commitment to a holistic institutional framework (from teaching staff, administrators and students).*
  The campus community must be committed to the goal of embedding an evaluation culture.
  Commitment can be assessed through student, administrator and faculty

surveys and focus groups. Frequent information dissemination discussion forums (on curriculum design and on SRI) jointly facilitated by student, administrator and academic teams are recommended with visible action for change that will make commitment visible.

- *Respectful and transparent communication among stakeholders*
  The importance of respectful and transparent communication among all stakeholder groups is critical to the successful diffusion of the evaluation culture. Establishing trust within a respectful learning space is paramount.

- *Proactive and future oriented goals that support and progress the feasibility of the model*
  Throughout the process, all stakeholders must focus on future goals with the objective of responding proactively. Embed evaluation discussion opportunities within and across Faculties and invite interested stakeholders to identify themselves and self-select roles. Introduce support initiatives with funding, graduate assistantships, and time-release options.

Conclusion

Although Dalhousie may have a long journey ahead, it will remain a pioneer for some time to come. The collaborative partnerships promoted through evaluation and curriculum design dialogue among faculty, students, and administrators defined the protocols for a transparent and enabling information dissemination strategy. As stakeholders continue to take ownership for engaging and shaping the internal evaluation culture, they will build sustainability through their collective commitment.

Embedding an evaluation culture within higher education institutions requires not only the foresight of visionary individuals but it also requires institutional commitment to establish a culture of trust and respect among stakeholders. Fear, suspicion and paranoia among stakeholders are a recipe for disastrous consequences. Fear of retribution in the form of employment setbacks, professional victimization, and failure in program assessments must be removed. Suspicion about the punitive use of evaluation data must be addressed. Paranoia can only be confronted if there is commitment to open dialogue, shared agendas and respectful exchange of views and ideas that will benefit everyone. Higher education institutions must continue to advocate for an evaluation culture that will uphold quality education, equity in design and delivery, diversity in approach, and inclusivity in reach.

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