Embracing the cactus

A presentation about peer review to the Jeanz Conference,

AUT University,

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This presentation examines some of the findings from my MPhil research into the benefits and challenges of AUT's peer review process in terms of student learning.

The participants were final year communications degree students majoring in journalism.

Students peer reviewed each other's news stories on a weekly basis during semester one 2013.

Data was collected before and after they completed the peer reviews.

With a little help from my friends...

"A student's colleagues often represent the least recognised, least used and possibly the most important of all the resources available"
(MacKenzie, Eraut & Jones, 1970, p. 125).

AUT has used peer review in teaching News Reporting since 2008. Students fill in a peer review sheet, online or in hard copy.

AUT UNIVERSITY **COMMUNICATIONS**

NEWS REPORTING 2013: PEER REVIEW

PART TWO: Peer editing *(To be filled in and signed off by peer editor)*
Peer editing is about learning from other people making mistakes! It helps you to become more astute with your own writing.
(Have you edited this person's work before? If so, they need to find someone else to do it this time.)
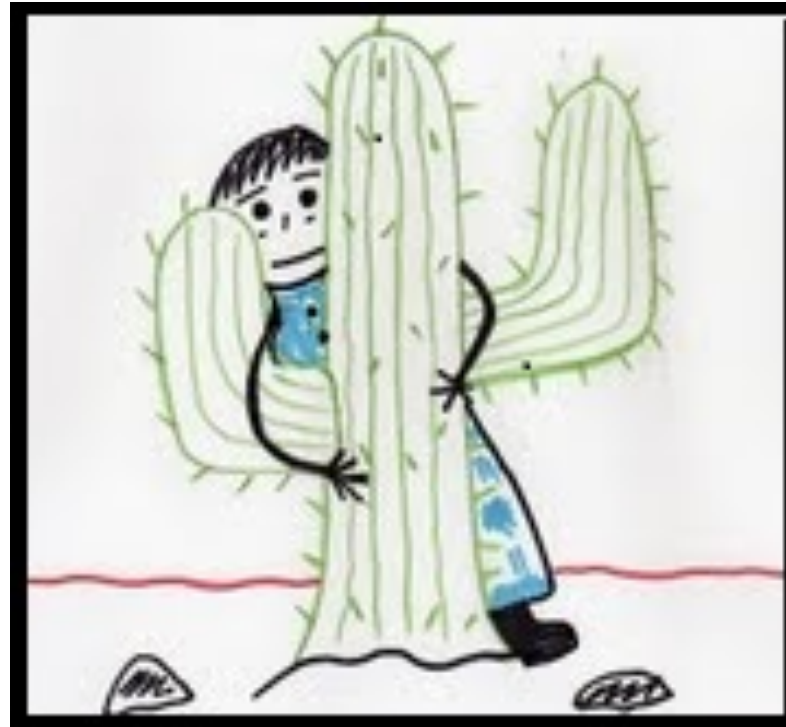
Who cares? Who would want to read this story?
Comment on the relevance to the target audience? (see Q1 on self-evaluation)

Does the story include all the necessary facts?
(who/what/when/where/why/how?)

Embracing the cactus

Where the cactus is the giving and receiving of feedback from peers, and the embrace is the active participation in the peer review process.

Summary: Embracing the cactus – perceived benefits before doing peer review

Fresh pair of eyes		Turning on the light		Wider vistas	
(Benefits to my writing from being reviewed)	(% of comments)	(Benefits to my writing from reviewing)	(% of comments)	(Other benefits)	(% of comments)
Error eradication	16.9	Critiquing	5.6	Ability to give/receive feedback	9.9
Fresh insights	33.8	Mimicking	4.2	Preparation for the newsroom	8.4
Joe Public	5.6	Teaching	1.4	Interaction with others	4.2
Impress peers	1.4	Collaboration	2.8		
		Comparison	4.2		
		Competition	1.4		
TOTAL	**57.7**		**19.7**		**22.5**

Fresh pair of eyes (BEFORE)

Benefits to my writing from being reviewed

- **Error eradication (17%):** "Peer editing gives you a chance to get feedback and correct mistakes before giving a copy to your tutor/editor. This saves the embarrassment of minor mistakes that your tired eyes have missed."   PASSIVE

- **Fresh insights (34%):** "By taking it to different people I find that I am constantly changing and improving my style due to different suggestions and ideas." ACTIVE

urning on the light (BEFORE)

Benefits to my writing from reviewing others

- **Critiquing (5.6%):** Picking up mistakes in other students' work and applying them to your own work.

"Quite often in the past I've read other people's writing and thought 'this makes no sense and it's too complicated.' Then I've gone back to read my own work and realised it's also a bit too wordy."

- **Mimicking (4.2%):** Seeing the good things about other people's writing and using them in your own writing.

"I am looking forward to reading my peer's stories; I feel doing so will aid me in taking styles from others to try myself… and also lead to giving me ideas for my own stories."

- **Teaching (1.4%):** Explaining things to another student would help reinforce that idea for your own stories.

- "Once I explain to that person the mistakes in their writing then it further drives it home for me just how important it is."

Turning on the light (cont)

Benefits to my writing from being reviewed

- **Collaboration (2.8%):** Working with other students.

"Shared learning is easier than learning alone, and in reviewing/ being reviewed I have found in the past that I become more aware of my own shortcomings."

- **Comparison (4.2%):** The chance to "see how others write their stories" and "compare standards of story ideas and quality of writing against one-another".

- **Competition (1.4%):** In a competitive industry such as journalism, it was good to be able to judge other people's stories against your own.

Wider vistas
(other benefits)

- **Ability to give and receive critical feedback (9.9%)**

- **Preparing for the newsroom (8%)**

- **Interacting with others (4%)**

Wider vistas (cont)
Other benefits

- **Preparing for the newsroom (8%)**
  - Chance to judge your work against that of your peers (and potential competitors in the industry)
  - Get used to and competent in the newsroom editing process
  - Receiving feedback from peers of different ethnicities, cultures, countries etc was a chance to explore the relationship journalists have with different audiences.

- **Interacting with others (4%)**
  - Get to know classmates
  - Learning to deal with other people

Results: After the peer review

Hardly anyone wanted to scrap it

Of all the student participants (21 questionnaires and 13 people at the collaborative meetings:

- One person wanted to scrap peer review – "It's the tutor's job."

- One person suggested an alternative – a weekly newsletter with all the stories in

- One person called it "a chore"

- One person said it was "a bit dreary"

Overall, it was a positive experience

Summary: Embracing the cactus – perceived benefits after doing peer review

Fresh pair of eyes
(Benefits to my writing from being reviewed)

Turning on the light
(Benefits to my writing from reviewing others)

Wider vistas
(Other benefits)

	(% of comments)		(% of comments)		(% of comments)
Error eradication	22.8	Critiquing	12.9	Ability to give/receive feedback	4.9
Fresh insights	15.8	Mimicking	18.8	Preparation for the newsroom	3
Joe Public	2	Teaching	3		
Reassurance/Confidence	3	Collaboration	4.9		
Alternative to tutor	2	Comparison	4		
		Confidence	2		
		Self-reflection	1		
TOTAL	**45.5**		**46.5**		**7.9**

A new pair of eyes (45.5%)

External viewpoint on your story

- Picking up mistakes (so tutor doesn't growl) – 22.8%. THIS IS NOW SEEN AS THE MOST IMPORTANT BENEFIT. PASSIVE

- Reassurance: making sure my work's OK. (They said this may happen informally anyway (mum, friend etc))
- Different perspectives/range of viewpoints on my work
- Feedback on my writing style and grammar
- Peers more available than the tutor
- Less work for the tutor

The light goes on (46.5%)

**Internal learning about my writing.
Active learning.**

- Learning from critiquing others (other people's mistakes) – 12.9%
- Learning from other people's good writing (mimicking others) – 18.8%
- Learning through collaboration and discussion – 5%
- Learning from teaching others – 3%
- Being able to compare myself with others
- Gave me confidence
- Self-reflection/analysis about my writing

Wider vistas – 7.9%

- **Ability to give/receive feedback - 4.9%**

- "I struggled with giving negative feedback… I didn't know how to do it… I definitely learnt; it got better. But still, I don't know. I didn't want to give too much."

- Student 1: "I think to an extent you learnt to take feedback and criticism, things like that, but

Student 2: "But we are very nice with our criticism… We were like: 'You should probably, maybe, change this.' Or 'I think, maybe'. No one was just like: 'Your intro doesn't make sense, you need to change it.' Which I would have preferred."

- **Preparation for the newsroom – 3%**

- Learning to edit and be edited

Embracing the cactus – benefits

Fresh pair of eyes (% of comments)	Expectations	Reality	Turning on the light	Expectations	Reality	Wider vistas	Expectations	Reality
Error eradication	16.9	22.8	Critiquing	5.6	12.9	Ability to give/receive feedback	9.9	4.9
Fresh insights	33.8	15.8	Mimicking	4.2	18.8	Preparation for the newsroom	8.4	3
Joe Public	5.6	2	Teaching	1.4	3	Interaction with others	4.2	-
Shame factor	1.4	-	Collaboration	2.8	4.9			
Reassurance/ Confidence	-	3	Comparison	4.2	4			
Alternative to tutor	-	2	Competition	1.4	-			
			Confidence	-	2			
			Self-reflection	-	1			
TOTAL	**57.7**	**45.5**		**19.7**	**46**		**22.5**	**7.9**

Total comments: 71 (before), 101 (after)

What about the challenges?

Perceived challenges (before)

- **Might hurt (me or them):** Potential blow to my confidence; embarrassing (because reviewing students are classmates/ friends); one student felt "flustered and nervous" about her work possibly not being "right in someone's eyes". Not want to upset classmates

- **Their comments might not be useful:** "We question whether the reviewer has the professional or academic credibility to provide constructive feedback."

- **My comments might not be useful:** "I'm most concerned about my ability to notice flaws, or places for improvements in my peers' work … I will probably doubt myself when trying to pick out errors etc."

AFTER: They thought it was a good idea, but some disillusionment with the process

- **"But":**
- "I did benefit, but so many people didn't do it right."
- "Peer editing is good, but often if felt like an unnecessary job because by the time I did them it was a bit too late."

- **"If"**
- "If you know how to peer edit, it will help you more."
- "If we can figure how to do it right, then it's a good thing."

- "Overall"
- "A useful process overall."

Summary: Embracing the cactus – perceived challenges after doing peer review

Concerns about being reviewed	(% of comments)	Concerns about reviewing others	(% of comments)	Concerns about the process	(% of comments)
It hurts	1.8	It hurt them	3.5	New truck (improve the process)	30.5
It's not worth it, of which:	25.2	Not worth it for them, of which:	8	Tour guide (put someone in charge)	23.5
Too nice	(2.2)			Recognition (assign marks)	2.7
Too slack	(17.7)	I was slack	(3.5)	Reflection (write a travel report)	0.9
Not valuable	(5.3)	My feedback not valuable	(4.4)		
Too late	-	Took a lot of time	1.3		
Didn't learn (just put in the changes)	(2.2)	Created conflict	0.4		
TOTAL	**29.2**		**13.3**		**57.5**

NOTE: TOTAL COMMENTS: 226 (36 before)
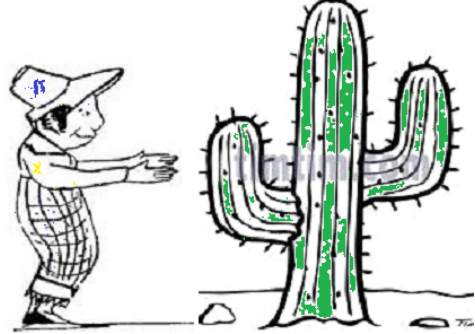
Embracing the cactus:
What gets in the way of achieving learning benefits?

"No spikes" embrace

Their/my
comments
were too nice

"Could try harder" embrace

- Slack - peer reviewer didn't care, didn't take it seriously/superficial

- Many students got lots of their stories peer reviewed in the final week – purely because it was a requirement for the portfolio - no learning benefit

- Students too busy to do it properly/hard to find someone to review my stories

- I just put in their corrections – I didn't learn from them

The "what's the point" embrace

Trust:
- How do I know my feedback is any good?
- How do I know my peer reviewer's feedback is any good?
- Peer feedback contradicts tutor feedback

"I didn't know how" embrace

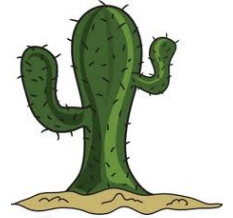

- Training
- Modelling
- Feedback on our feedback

The "it hurt" (a bit) embrace: it didn't make me stronger

It's (a bit) disheartening getting negative feedback

Didn't make it there (Problems with the process)

- Not enough time
- Clunky sheet/Not right questions
- Formatting problems with the blog and PDF sheet
- Doing it online gives no chance for discussion/collaboration
- Can't find different person to review my stories each week

Where's that tour guide?

Interestingly, when there are problems with the process, the default position for many students is to look for the person in a position of power (mostly the tutor, sometimes AUT) to do something:

- Give us training/do modelling
- Give us feedback about the feedback
- Make sure students do it properly
- Simplify the process
- Give marks for the feedback
- Do it in class

This is ironic…
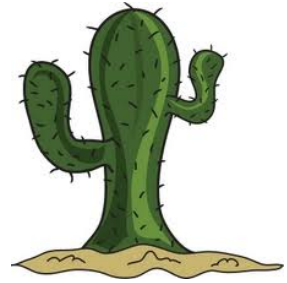
It's all about *peer* learning, but the students are asking for help, guidance, for the teacher to control the process.

Surely peer learning is all about encouraging active learning. And if the teacher takes over the process, isn't that just encouraging passivity in the students?

Discussion

- Role of the tutor in peer feedback
- What learning benefits should we be looking for?
- To mark or not to mark the peer reviews?
- Could it be that peer review actually makes students worse at spelling, grammar and punctuation?

# What is the role of the tutor in all this?
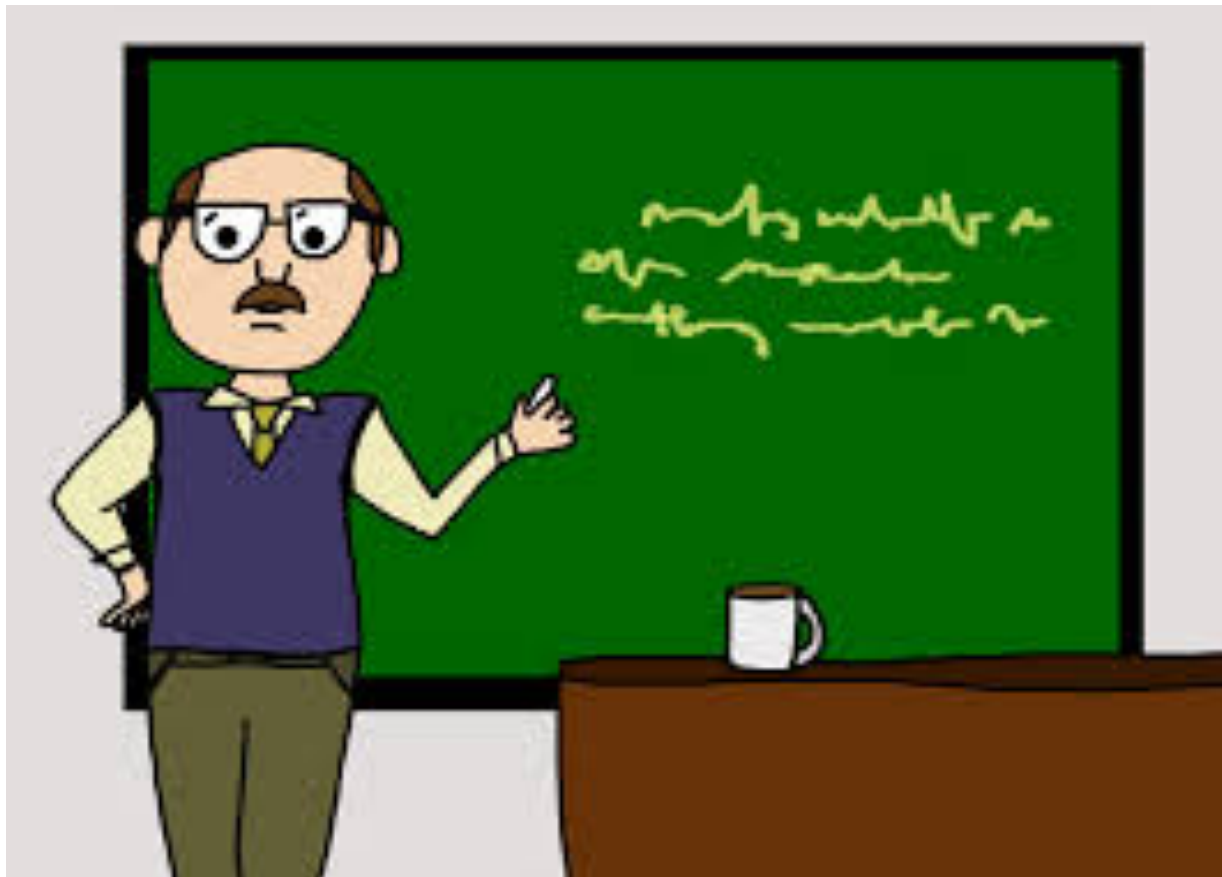
Scaffolding

Vygotsky (1978) talked about the role of teachers in scaffolding student learning.

Could it be that the teacher's role is about active management of the *process* leading to the learning, not active management of the learning, because that responsibility lies with the student?

What is the role of the tutor in the process?

- Training/modelling effective peer review?
- Talking about different types of feedback?
- Discussing expectations?
- Allowing students to set the rules for acceptable peer reviewing?
- Setting up a process for students to consider how it's all going?
- Setting up a process for students to resolve problems with other people's feedback and/or the process?
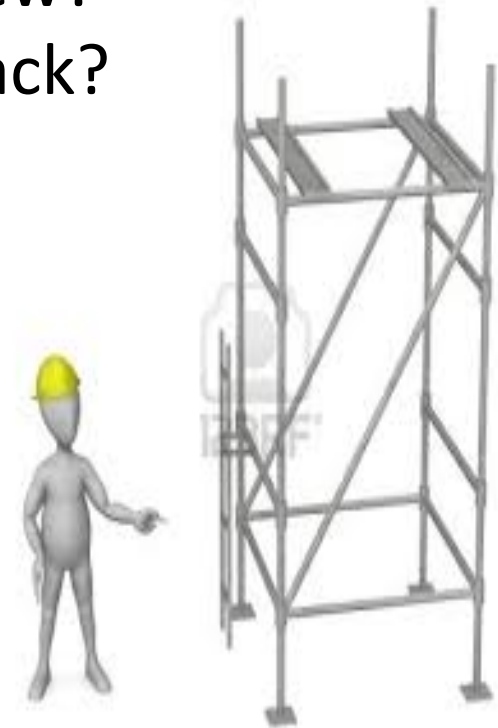
What sort of learning benefits are we looking for?

- Students learning how to write news?
- Students learning style/grammar?
- Course/paper outcomes?
- Wider institution graduate attributes? (collaboration, life-long learning etc etc)
- All of the above?
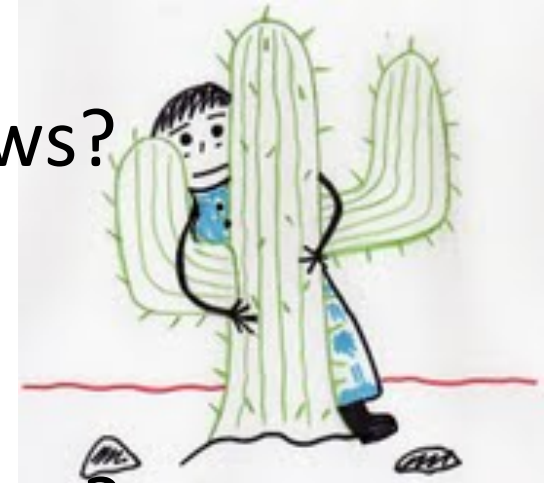
AUT Bachelor of Communication Studies Graduate Profile

Knowledge.   Graduates will:

- critique and analyse new information.

- **synthesise and create new models and paradigms through discussion and evaluation of new and existing knowledge.**

- plan projects effectively including information- gathering, analysis, devising conclusions and proposing recommendations while also setting priorities and implementing the agreed plan.

- be committed to their ongoing intellectual development as life-long learners who can adapt to change and develop portfolio careers.

Communication. Graduates will:

- incorporate appropriate structure and effective persuasive and creative techniques into professional work.

- communicate ethically and with integrity at all times.

Personal attributes. Graduates will

- work well in teams on collaborative projects.

- have strong theoretical and practical backgrounds which help them develop into leadership roles in their chosen field.

(Approved February 2012)

To mark or not to mark?

- "While several studies have established that students are reasonably reliable assessors (Falchikov & Goldfinch, 2000), a Hong Kong study (Liu & Carless, 2006) concludes both students and teachers are more resistant to peer learning activities when marks are involved, and that adding grades into the picture can obscure the benefits of peer feedback. Liu & Carless suggest - using Falchikov's research (Falchikov, 2001, 2005) to back up their own findings - that "peer feedback has greater potential for learning than peer assessment" (p. 280).

- Grades distract from engaging with feedback (Boud & Falchikov, 2006)

"Culd it be that peer review is actually detramental in term's of students' learning grammer and punctuation"?

- Students see picking up mistakes being the most important benefit in peer reviewing - mostly because it avoids their tutor growling!

- BUT... Style and grammar test results down. Interesting to find out if the fact they are letting their peers correct their grammar and punctuation means they aren't learning the fundamentals as well as they should?

- Pointing out errors seen as one of the least useful sorts of feedback (Hattie & Timperley ([2007](#)))

Not all feedback is equal
(in terms of its usefulness)

Hattie & Timperley ([2007](#)) describe four types of feedback – some effective, some ineffective in terms of helping learning.

1. **Feedback directed at the person/the "self" (FS).** For example: "You are a really good writer" (The worst type of feedback)

2. **Feedback about the task or product (FT).** For example, "You've got the apostrophe in the wrong place here." Or "It's *recognise*, not *recognize*, isn't it?"

   FT feedback mostly doesn't help the student not make the same mistake next time

3. **Feedback aimed at the process used to create a product or complete a task (FP).** For example "You probably need to have a look at the AUT Style Book and check the way you have to write dates (FP is great feedback)

4. **Feedback focused at the self-regulation level (FR) – ie aimed at increasing a student's confidence in their ability.** For example, "The way you structure your quotes in this part of the story shows you know how to do it. Could you do the same with this quote here?" (FR is **great feedback** too, but not that easy to give!)

THE END
What do you think?

I'd love to have your feedback on any of this