

Learning on the Job: Adventures in Program Review

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1. Abstract:

In this personal reflection the authors (staff in a program review office) comment on what they have learned about program review during their first two years on the job. They comment on learning through doing, and on the importance of placing learning and differences among people at the center of the program review process.

Key Words:

program review, on-the-job learning, evaluation.

2. Introduction to the program review process at Kwantlen Polytechnic University (British Columbia, Canada)

In these personal reflections, we hope to inform educators who are involved in program review about general principles we have learned on the job. In particular, during program reviews, educators should recognize differences among learners, teachers and programs, and place learning processes at the core of their practice.

Program review at Kwantlen Polytechnic University is a systematic process by which educational quality and excellence can be continually improved. It consists of: an internal self-study undertaken by program faculty; an external review of the self study followed by a site visit conducted by faculty members outside the program and the university; completion of a final report which includes findings and recommendations; an institutional response to the final report, including a process to implement the recommendations; and a post-review follow up. Three staff in the program review office support the process: the two facilitators (faculty members Cathy Bray and Colleen McGoff-Dean) who offer stimulus, information, support and direction, and a program review coordinator (Danielle Baxter) who provides administrative and research support. The review process takes about one year.

3. Personal Reflections on Learning Program review on the job

Cathy Bray

Since I began work with the program review team on May 1st 2007, I've learned about myself, about the resources needed for program review and about the fit between qualitative and quantitative methods as part of program review. In particular, because program review facilitation is so dependent on interpersonal relations, I have continued my decades-long effort to develop patience. This involves changing my expectations about how soon any particular task can be completed. My patience increases when I remind myself about resource limitations; program review staff and faculty members whose programs are undergoing review have long lists of tasks, and many of these tasks are more pressing than program review.

Often, because of resource limitations, our reviews tend to focus more on analyzing quantitative rather than qualitative data. Economies of scale can be achieved by using the same questionnaire template for many programs, and time-saving computer programs can be used to analyze the resultant quantitative data. However, self-study can interpret the numerical data broadly and qualitatively, speculating on meaning and causation, and enriching the final report.

Two on-the-job learning processes that I have used are a) participation in informal discussions and meetings, and b) receiving written or oral feedback from members of the faculty who are completing their self-study. Informal discussions among staff have provided opportunity for self-reflection, comparison of responses and results, and debriefing about the progress of reviews. The University Senate program review committee meets formally once a month and offers a chance to clarify and receive feedback on policy as we develop it, provides a cross-campus perspective on program review, and reminds me of the different interests which are being served through program review.

On the job learning through feedback from faculty is affected by faculty member's level of engagement with the review process. Some faculty members are professional, highly engaged, organized and resourceful. These folks tend to provide direct, helpful feedback about what they need and want. Others may be more limited in time and interest, offering feedback on a less regular basis, and merely meeting basic requirements. Some others are quite silent, which often speaks louder than words. Indeed, a few reviews have stalled, and lack of communication has played a significant role in the suspension of the process.

Danielle Baxter

Developing practice and policy for Program Review at Kwantlen Polytechnic University has been reminiscent of the traditional medical school paradigm of "see one, do one, teach one". We look at what others do, bring our best skills, experience and ideas to the task at hand, then sum it all up in the preparation of materials for use by future reviews.

Lest it sound like we are collectively flying by the seats of our tweeds, I hasten to emphasize that between us we bring a variety of skills developed and honed elsewhere, each complementary to each, and considerable relevant knowledge. But even with all these varied assets it feels at times like a voyage guided by a compass which only occasionally points north.

At first I expected this – it was a new environment, and I didn't expect familiarity. But later I began to wonder why I'd feel confident and capable one day and flummoxed the next. I think I'm beginning to understand.

I began with few assumptions about what we were to undertake, and embarked on a quest to discover "how Program Review is done". I discovered review policies and practices from across Canada and around the world that are variously, implicitly or explicitly, summative, formative, loosely structured, rigidly structured, student focused, faculty focused, and so on. I compared material from many universities and was struck by the range of their approaches, from "hopeful and optimistic" appreciative inquiry to

rigid, performance oriented letter-grade systems, with a D grade almost guaranteeing program termination. The variety intrigued me, but I thought these must all be attempts, more or less successful, to hit the bull's-eye of Program Review – the elusive but ultimately definable “here's how”.

It has only been recently, after almost two years, that I have realized what assumptions I did bring, and wherein lay their flaws. And so also have begun to wonder how all those other universities arrived where they are.

My first assumption, of course, was that there is such a thing as “how Program Review is done”. I had expected to find others using a fairly standardized exercise, following an established pattern, based on policy that reflects the priorities and values of the university and those to whom it is accountable. I imagined that my role would be to learn about others' approaches and then, using them as a model, to help create, support and document something similar for use at Kwantlen Polytechnic University – uniquely ours, and (we'd certainly like to think) just a little better than what the neighbours have.

It soon became apparent that it wouldn't be nearly so straight forward... and here I ran up against my second assumption: that the greatest variation in the reviews would be in the nature of the programs – that a basic approach would serve for all, with variation depending on whether the program was primarily academic or trade/vocational, large and loosely structured or small and cohort based, and so on.

Only lately have I begun to understand that the challenge of each review, the thing that makes each one uniquely challenging – and rewarding - isn't program structure or student demographic or anything even remotely institutional... it is people.

No matter how well prepared we are with insightfully crafted policy or carefully developed practice, sooner or later these become a mere backdrop to the real heart of the work. This is to understand what motivates the people who are the essence of the program, both in their teaching lives and in their willingness – or not - to fully engage, individually and severally, in scrutiny and assessment and nurturing of their program.

In the same way, it is inevitable that policy developed at each institution to shape and govern academic quality assurance is intimately entwined with these issues of personality. True success over the long term and the breadth of the university will hinge upon how well our policy anticipates and inspires varied personalities, rather than merely reflects and reacts to them.

4. Conclusion

What we have noticed, above all, is that we are continually learning through doing. Both of us have recognized that our own skills as individuals vary; that the needs and experience of doing program review evolve based on the differences among people involved in the review; and that patience, clear communication and recognition of group differences is fundamental to the process. And the more we learn, the more we understand that although our formal role within the university is to support a vital – and mandatory – component of institutional accountability, our contribution to future reviews will be as much to share our own learning process as to direct anyone else's.

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