Peer Support for Teaching Policy (2011)

1. Introduction
The University of York’s Learning and Teaching Strategy 2010-2015 aims to create a consistent culture of quality and it is the responsibility of everyone involved with the student learning experience to contribute towards achieving this. Quality can improve by teaching (and support) staff working together and sharing good practice through a collegial approach to learning and teaching. This was recognised by the university in 2001 when it introduced an institution-wide Peer Observation of Teaching (POT) policy. However, POT tends to focus solely on face-to-face teaching (Keig 2000); it can be very subjective (Cosh 1998) and participants can be reluctant to engage genuinely (Shortland 2004). As a result, there has been a move by several institutions towards schemes which are more flexible and more integrated with the needs of individuals and departments (e.g. Gosling 2009).

After significant consultation and discussion, this revised policy has been developed to replace York’s POT scheme. The new policy has quality improvement at its core and is based upon an understanding that:

1) all teachers have the capacity to improve their practice;
2) everyone involved in directly supporting student learning has a responsibility for the maintenance and improvement of teaching quality;
3) collegiality and openness are important to development (this policy therefore emphasises ‘peer support’ over ‘peer observation’);
4) departments have diverse cultures and practices;
5) teaching in higher education embraces a broad range of activity both inside and outside of the ‘classroom’;
6) quality improvement processes should reflect, rather than add, to individual and departmental priorities and responsibilities.

2. How Peer Support for Teaching (PST) Works
PST is based upon a structured model of group action and reflection that has been successfully employed in areas of business, industry and health to drive quality improvement at all levels1. It adopts a four stage process as shown in the figure below2:

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1 The process is adapted from the PDCA/PDSA cycle, otherwise known as the Deming or Shewhart Cycle and the concept of quality improvement circles (for a summary of the development of the PDSA cycle see Moen, R. and Norman, C. (2006) Evolution of the PDCA cycle. Available at: http://pkpinc.com/files/NA01MoenNormanFullpaper.pdf [Accessed 30th June 2010].

2 A prompt sheet for working through PST which can be used or adapted by departments is included as an appendix.
The PST Cycle

A: Plan
Groups of staff meet to discuss the following questions:

1. What area of practice do we want to improve / work on and why?
   This could be something small-scale (e.g. monitoring student understanding in a lecture, making a handout more ‘interactive’, encouraging participation in seminars), something applied to the level of a module (e.g. providing more effective feedback to a large cohort, introducing group assessment, developing a VLE site) or something relating to departmental or institutional strategic priorities (e.g. internationalising the curriculum, embedding employability in the curriculum).

2. How do we want learning and teaching to improve or benefit as a result? This may be usefully articulated as one or more outcomes.

3. How are we going to achieve this? What actions need to be taken to achieve the outcome(s) and over what timescale? Depending upon the scope of the work this could involve individuals/groups taking on particular tasks and engaging with ‘mini’ PST cycles.

4. How will we know if we have been successful? What information is needed to determine whether the actions have been beneficial? Will existing mechanisms (e.g. module evaluations) be sufficient, or will additional information and feedback have to be collected?

5. Will we need any support? Would the group benefit from input from other members of the department, individuals from other departments or expertise from relevant central services?

6. What are the timescales for the PST process? Although it is expected that most PST cycles will be completed within a single academic year, some may take less and some more time.

B: Do
The group implements what it agreed during the ‘Plan’ stage. This will include accessing relevant support and collecting any feedback required to assess impact. Depending upon the focus of the PST process, this stage may involve a peer observation to enable colleagues within the group (and from outside if appropriate) to review the actions being taken first hand.

C: Study
The group analyses the actions that have been taken, using any relevant information that has been collected, to decide whether there have been improvements in quality. It should also be an aim of this stage to try and identify whether there are particular conditions that enable/are required for success. For instance, it may be that certain actions are more suited to particular stages of a course, or particular subjects and disciplines, or it may be that student cohort size is a determinant in how beneficial a particular approach will be. In doing this, groups will be able to build an understanding of not just the fact a certain action has a certain result, but also why it has that result.

D: Act
The group decides on what happens next.

If the actions taken have been beneficial then the decision may be to implement them as routine practice in which case the group is encouraged to feedback its findings to the department. The department may then, through the annual programme review and other means, choose to feedback to the University.

If the actions taken have resulted in some benefits but not to the extent that was anticipated or if the benefits were different to those originally forecast, the group should consider whether it would be appropriate to re-initiate the cycle to try and achieve the original outcomes.

If the actions taken did not result in particular benefit to student learning or to teaching practice, the group may be encouraged to re-engage with the PST process from the ‘Plan’ stage, using what they have learned to inform a revised approach to the area of practice in question.
3. Implementation

Heads of Department have overall responsibility for managing the implementation of the PST policy, although they may delegate responsibility to a proxy with appropriate authority. The requirements of the policy have been deliberately kept to a minimum. This is so that departments have the flexibility to devise an approach that is locally relevant and recognises PST is a developmental scheme which will evolve over time. The requirements of PST are ‘boxed’ below with additional guidance and suggestions following.

All departments will implement the PST policy and all individuals who have a direct impact upon the student learning experience, for both award and non-award bearing programmes, should engage with the PST process on an ongoing basis.

Departments should establish how PST groups are created. Although allowing individuals to form their own groups will give them maximum control over who they work with, departmental allocation will, in the first instance at least, be more effective in introducing and embedding the policy. Possible approaches include creating groups based upon module, teaching team or common interest, teacher role (for instance in the case of postgraduates who teach), a cross-section of teaching staff in the department or upon random allocation. In determining groups, heads of department may wish to consider using PST as a mechanism to support a member of staff who, through student feedback and other means, has been identified as someone who would benefit from working with a colleague or colleagues to address particular aspects of their practice. Departments are further encouraged, where appropriate, to include relevant departmental and centrally located learning and teaching support staff in PST groups.

There is no constraint on group size: some groups may comprise just two or three individuals working on something quite specific and small-scale, others may be larger and involve the investigation of broader questions of practice. It is essential, however, that all members of a group are actively involved in the PST process.

Departments will need to consider whether groups identify their own areas of practice to work on or whether these will be decided departmentally. A flexible approach whereby some groups are created to look at specific areas as the need arises (for example, in response to student evaluation, NSS or PRES results and department and institutional initiatives) whilst other groups are able to choose which areas to investigate is likely to be most effective. PST encapsulates all learning and teaching activities, including but not confined to, face-to-face teaching. Issues of curriculum design, assessment and feedback, resource creation, evaluation, the use of learning technologies (including the VLE) and other areas of practice are equally valid areas for consideration.

It is emphasised that PST does not exclude traditional peer observation of teaching which can be a useful element within it.

Most PST cycles will probably be completed within a single academic year or even a term. In accordance with an ethos of continuous improvement of practice staff are therefore expected to undertake PST annually. Where a PST cycle necessarily extends over more than one academic year it is expected that the staff involved will be actively engaged in progressing the PST project until it reaches completion.
Centrally located learning and teaching support staff will be available to help facilitate the planning and implementation of department’s approaches to PST through workshops and consultation.

PST groups will feedback on their activities to the department on an annual basis.

PST is not just about encouraging small pockets of improvement, but about sharing experiences so that good and effective practice is disseminated as widely as possible. Consequently, departments should have a system by which groups feedback on their activities. When implementing this system, departments will need to balance the benefits of group confidentiality in promoting honesty and openness with a need to ensure that PST activity is being engaged with and is progressing. As a minimum, every year each PST group should return a brief report to the Head of Department (or proxy) detailing who is involved in the group and summarising the activity that has occurred. In certain circumstances, for example where the PST group is looking at an issue in direct response to poor student feedback or where they are working on an area of strategic importance, departments may require more detailed feedback.

Departments should also have a mechanism that allows good practice and improvements to practice to be disseminated internally. This may, for example, be done via a print or electronic newsletter, case study reports uploaded onto a departmental intranet or VLE site, departmental seminars, away days or standing items on Boards of Study or Teaching Committee agendas.

Departments will share their experiences of PST with the university through the annual programme review process and, as appropriate, other dissemination fora.

Departments are asked to feedback on relevant aspects of their engagement with PST via the Annual Programme Review (APR). This acknowledges that PST is an integral component of a department’s commitment to improving learning and teaching quality. It will also help UTC ensure that all departments are properly reviewing their educational provision. Departments should further make information on their PST activity available to periodic review panels and during other internal or external consideration of their learning and teaching activity.

Departments are asked and encouraged to make use of opportunities such as the Learning and Teaching Forum, the annual learning and teaching conference and the Forum magazine to disseminate the work of their PST groups at an institutional level for colleagues in other departments to learn from.

Further guidance and support for implementation of the PST policy is available from:

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5. References


Peer Support for Teaching (this prompt sheet is intended as an aid to PST groups and may be adapted as appropriate; it is not intended as a reporting form to Heads of Department)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PST Group Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What area of practice do we want to improve / work on and why?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are we going to do to achieve these improvements / benefits?</td>
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<td>What support / expertise do we need, if any?</td>
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| Comment on Impact / Success | Additional Comments / Observations |