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Enhancing the first-year student learning experience through quality improvement of courses

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The importance of the first-year experience has gained considerable attention in recent years in light of the growing evidence from studies in Australia and overseas showing a link between student engagement and retention. This research, combined with evidence of increasing student disengagement and a high level of attrition during the first-year, highlights the need for a planned and integrated approach to the design of the first-year curriculum. Such an approach provides for transition to university study, acknowledges the diversity of the first-year cohort and makes no assumptions about the 'digital literacy' of the students. Despite significant research in this area however, there remains a recognised need for an integrated approach to course development and strategies for improving the quality of courses designed to enhance the first-year learning experience. This paper describes an Australian Learning and Teaching Council funded project involving the development of an online tool that provides a comprehensive approach to peer review and supports academics in the development of first-year curriculum materials. The web-based peer review system harnesses the collective wisdom of academics through communal processes involving reflective practice and the sharing of resources and exemplars. In exposing their work to such scholarly appraisal academics can also have their work affirmed and use this as evidence when seeking promotion or teaching awards.

Keywords: student engagement, first-year experience, peer review

Introduction

The importance of student engagement has been the subject of significant research in recent years. This research has contributed to a growing body of evidence from both Australia (McInnis, 2001; Krause et al., 2005; Kift, 2008) and overseas (Kuh et al., 2006; Tinto, 2000, 2002; Yorke, 2008) of a critical link between student engagement and retention. Such evidence, combined with studies reporting concerns about increasing student disengagement (McInnis, 2001; Krause et al., 2005; Strahm & Danaher, 2005), highlights the need for an integrated and planned approach to enhancing the first-year experience (Krause et al., 2005; Kift, 2008).

Student engagement can be defined as the involvement of students in "activities and conditions that are likely to generate high quality learning" (ACER, 2008, vi). An essential component in facilitating first-year student engagement is the quality of the curriculum and the strategies employed to support students in transition to university (Kift, 2008). The design of the first-year curriculum needs to acknowledge student diversity and should also provide students with opportunities to explore their own learning styles and preferences.

This paper describes a collaborative project funded by an Australian Learning and Teaching Council Grant, which involves the design and development of an online peer review system and associated website to provide a scaffold for the development and evaluation of curriculum materials. The approach draws on the Boyer (1990) paradigm of scholarship, which is a framework in which the four scholarships identified by Boyer (discovery, teaching, integration and application) are considered integral to an environment that stimulates and engages learners. This framework has been applied to the design of a peer review instrument in which all four scholarships are considered essential for learning and teaching and this has been achieved through the design and development of a checklist of agreed good practice. The web-based peer review system harnesses the collective wisdom of academics through communal processes involving reflective practice (Schon, 1983) and the sharing of resources and exemplars. An important feature of the system is its flexibility enabling academics to create custom banks of criteria that focus on particular areas of concern, which in turn can be applied to the review of curriculum materials. This paper outlines one particular application of the peer review system in which the authors have developed a custom bank of criteria relevant to the first-year curriculum.

In the following sections of the paper the authors provide a brief review of the relevant literature relating to first-year engagement. Drawing on this research, the authors then describe some of the essential features characterising quality in the first-year curriculum. The next section of the paper describes the peer review system in further detail, focusing particularly on its flexibility and adaptability. Following on from this section, the authors discuss the design and development of custom criteria that can be used to guide academics in the development of quality first-year curriculum materials as well as review of the first-year curriculum. In the final section of the paper, the authors describe ways in which the system facilitates reflective practice and has the potential to foster quality improvement of the first-year curriculum.

First-year engagement

The challenge of providing a quality learning experience for first-year students has prompted many researchers to investigate the factors related to first-year engagement. However, as Krause et al. noted “...first year support efforts have been piecemeal in the main, developed and sustained by individuals or small groups who champion the cause of first year transition”(2005). Similarly, Tinto argued that despite the amount of research undertaken, we have yet to achieve substantial gains in student retention and much of the theory developed has not been incorporated into practice (Tinto, 2002).

Issues related to engagement of first-year students have been identified by many authors. One of these issues relates to the increased flexible learning opportunities that have arisen in recent years in response to increasing diversity of the student body and the emergence of new technologies. While innovations such as fully online courses, podcasting, and the use of Web 2.0 and mobile technologies cater to the needs of a more diverse student body, they have also led to a reduced need for students to engage in traditional on-campus social and learning activities. It is argued that, despite the benefits of increasing flexibility, these developments may have also contributed to increasing student disengagement from university life (Markein, 2005; McInnes, 2003). Since the demand for flexibility will increase as universities introduce technologies designed to harness the enthusiasms of the ‘net generation’ and endeavour to cater to the needs of working students (Krause et al., 2005), alternative approaches to engaging students need to be developed.

Kift (2008) advocates a ‘top-down, bottom-up’ approach to the first-year experience. Such an approach requires both institutional leadership as well as the commitment of academic staff in contributing to the development of criteria that can guide academics in the development and re-development of quality curriculum materials. As Krause et al. (2005) have argued, the approach to first-year engagement needs to be integrated and embedded in university policy and practice rather than reliant on the efforts of a few interested individuals. The university also needs to provide support for a culture that regards the first-year experience as ‘everybody’s business’, by providing adequate support, recognition and resources to support the approach. In addition, the specialist skills required for teaching first-year students, so often delegated to junior staff or research students, need to be recognised and celebrated.

While appreciating the importance of institution-wide approaches and flexibility of policies and procedures, support and resources for first-year (Krause, 2006), the first-year curriculum stands out as one way in which individual academics can enhance the first-year experience.

Quality in the first-year curriculum

Kift (2008) describes the need for a ‘transition pedagogy’ that tailors the curriculum for first-year students. Many elements of a quality first-year curriculum are common to all courses. However, as Kift (2008) has outlined, there are also particular elements that are pivotal to the quality first-year curriculum. These elements include the following:

1. **Being relevant to and informing vocational aspirations early in the course**
This may include activities or examples that relate directly from foundation courses to students’ professional area, workplace visits and placements or specialist sessions from professionals in practice. Students need to be provided with “good reasons to stay beyond the first year” (Krause, 2006), and curriculum links to their eventual profession are an effective means for making such reasons explicit to students.
2. **Assisting students’ transition from their previous experiences to studying at a tertiary level**
The increasing diversity of the student cohort means that many students have not followed the ‘traditional’ pathway to tertiary education by completing the final year of secondary school. This variety in previous learning experiences needs to be taken into account in first-year courses. To make best use of the learning opportunities provided, students need to be given the opportunity to explore their own learning style and preferences. Becker, Kehoe & Tennent (2007) found that the learning style of students (e.g. aural, kinesthetic), do not influence student’s preferences around flexible delivery. However, many students prefer courses to not be totally online (Mariani, 2001).

Financial pressures on universities have encouraged common courses and thus large classes, particularly in first-year courses. Students have reported feeling isolated from academic staff and other students in large classes (Herbert, Chalmers & Hannam, 2003), while academic staff find it difficult to give adequate time or resources to individual students. As a result, the cohort tends to be considered homogenous with respect to background knowledge, motivations and abilities. If large classes are to be used, then appropriate strategies, such as those described above, need to be used to allow for the diversity of background and learning needs in the student body.
3. **Providing students with formative feedback early in their courses.**
Yorke & Thomas (2003) demonstrated improved retention and completion in first-year courses that had an emphasis on formative assessment, social aspects and participation.

Falchikov (1996) reported several benefits experienced by students participating in a formative feedback approach that makes the criteria explicit to students, provides them with the opportunity to participate in a non-evaluative feedback session and enables them to reflect on their approach to the assignment. First-year students need to be provided with opportunities to receive formative feedback and to engage in formative peer review to help them establish the standards and quality of work expected while they still have time to address any issues requiring attention. Alternative assessment and formative peer review approaches also facilitate the development of students' collaborative problem-solving and communication skills, while strengthening social connection.

4. Facilitates quality and authentic learning experiences, encouraging students to take an active role in and responsibility for their own learning.

There is considerable interest in the potential benefits of introducing research in the undergraduate curriculum and engaging students in research activities designed to foster active learning and problem-solving, as well as the generation of new knowledge. Bath (2008) stresses the importance of research-based learning as it develops skills in critical thinking, communication and problem solving in addition to content delivery. While there are many challenges in integrating research in the undergraduate curriculum (Wood, 2009; Scutter, 2002), engaging students in active learning and research "in the company of mature scholars and practitioners" (Ramaley (2005, p. 33) enables students to define real world problems and facilitates collaboration in the process of addressing those problems.

The attributes of a quality first-year curriculum have been described above, what remains is a way in which to develop and evaluate the curriculum to determine whether the desired elements are incorporated. This need led to the development of the peer review instrument described below.

The peer review instrument

The Peer Review Instrument (PRI) was developed with funding support provided by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (formerly the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education). A prototype was trialled at the University of South Australia (Wood & George, 2003, George, Wood & Wache, 2004) and received positive feedback that lead to the development of the current tool. The following basic principles underpinned the development of the instrument:

- *Academic affirmation*: The criteria for the standards of development resulted from a comprehensive review of the literature, thus affirming the work of academics.
- *Academic responsibility*: academics can use the tool to guide development of their own courses through reflective processes.
- *Academic empowerment*: academics can develop their own evaluation checklists and are able to contribute to the database of criteria.
- *Academic development*: the instrument and website provide information about standards, techniques and exemplars on a 'just-in-time' basis.
- *Flexibility and adaptability*: the instrument can be easily modified to address new technologies or emerging priorities.

The instrument incorporates banks of standards-based criteria for use in peer review, explanations of the meaning of these criteria, exemplars and an underlying database that can record peer review results and make them available for promotion purposes. It has been developed as an open source platform, to enable it to be adapted by other institutions to suit their learning and teaching and technical contexts.

The instrument is constructed around four sets of considerations: instructional design, interface design, the use of multimedia to engage learners and the technical aspects of interactive educational multimedia. These areas have been developed through consideration of the literature. Several of these major sections are broken down into smaller subsections for ease of consideration:

- instructional design
 - human interaction
 - clarity of expectations
 - building student knowledge
 - learning activities
 - assessment
 - evaluation
- interface design
- use of media
 - interactive multimedia
 - writing style and accuracy of text
 - copyright
- technical aspects.

Users can create new criteria and customise the method for rating performance against each of the criteria. Supported response options in addition to the Likert scale metrics include yes/no, drop-down selections, multiple response, occurrence scales as well as the qualitative responses (Figure 1).

Peer Review of Online Teaching and Learning
The online home of resources supporting the Australian Learning and Teaching Council-funded Peer Review Project

Currently logged in as Peer Review Testing Account (Logout)

Home \ Administration \ Criteria \ Manage Criterion

Bank: Learning Activities

Filter Reset

Name	Type	Available?	Created	Modified	Options
Learning activities are appropriate	Likert Scale	Yes	2008-07-18 22:23:12	2008-07-18 22:23:12	Edit
Learning activities are varied.	Likert Scale	Yes	2008-07-18 22:24:21	2008-07-18 22:24:21	Edit
Learning activities reflect ideas.	Likert Scale	Yes	2008-07-18 22:24:54	2008-07-18 22:24:54	Edit
Purpose of each learning activity is stated.	Occurance Scale	Yes	2008-07-18 22:24:02	2008-07-18 22:24:02	Edit

5 queries executed in 0.0272 seconds | System v0.1 | Form v1.0

Peer Review of Online Teaching and Learning | An Australian Learning and Teaching Council Project | Accessibility | Disclaimer | Last updated Saturday 5th July, 2008

Figure 1: Selection of criteria and response type can be customised by the academic staff member

Educative aspects

The educative dimension is central to both the 'just-in-time' approach to professional development and approaches which involve more formal educational development. Each of

the items has a 'more information' button, which is a hyperlink to detailed information about the issue including explanations and references to the literature.

Inclusivity

Items addressing issues of inclusivity have been embedded across the four sections of the instrument. These relate to socio-cultural aspects including gender and culture, and have a particular focus on W3C Techniques for Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. The decision to embed these rather than to extract them into separate categories is based on the view that essentially the items reflect good teaching and ought to be seen in a more integrated way.

Flexibility

The instrument has been designed to be very detailed and also flexible so that it can be used in part or as a whole depending on the intended outcome. Potential outcomes may include:

- course development or improvement through personal reflection
- formative or summative evaluation of online materials by peers
- career advancement through providing evidence that supports applications for promotion, tenure or awards
- framework for professional development staff to use when working with academics.

An important feature of this flexibility is the capacity of the system to support customisation of banks of criteria for targeted peer reviews. Academics can maintain both generic and highly customised banks of criteria for their reviews. Each bank in the instrument can contain either one or more criteria, or one or more banks. This sequence enables banks to be nested within another 'grouping' bank to assist with the assimilation of banks and criteria as illustrated in Figs 2 and 3.

Peer Review of Online Teaching and Learning
The online home of resources supporting the Australian Learning and Teaching Council-funded Peer Review Project

Currently logged in as **Marty Friedel** (logout)

Banks: Manage

Home \ Administration \ Banks \ Manage Bank

A Bank is the parent container in the Peer Review tool, and is useful for grouping similarly-themed Criteria. You can also use a Bank to group similarly-themed Banks and Criteria, however each Bank can contain either other Banks or Criteria.

Name	Available?	Created	Modified	Options
Instructional Design	Yes	2008-09-29 17:51:43	2008-09-29 17:51:43	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Assessment	Yes	2008-09-29 16:59:53	2008-09-29 17:53:11	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Building student knowledge	Yes	2008-09-29 16:20:39	2008-09-29 17:52:37	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Clarity of expectations	Yes	2008-09-29 16:17:42	2008-09-29 17:52:21	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Evaluation	Yes	2008-09-29 17:00:07	2008-09-29 17:53:31	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ example	Yes	2008-12-15 14:25:02	2008-12-15 14:25:02	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ First year course	Yes	2009-01-12 16:22:01	2009-01-12 16:22:01	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Human interaction	Yes	2008-09-29 16:59:32	2008-09-29 17:53:45	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Learning activities	Yes	2008-09-29 16:56:27	2008-09-29 17:52:49	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Support	Yes	2008-09-29 17:00:19	2008-09-29 17:53:59	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Test	Yes	2008-11-14 11:29:01	2008-11-14 11:29:01	[icon] [icon] [icon]
Interface design	Yes	2008-09-29 16:59:14	2008-09-29 16:59:14	[icon] [icon] [icon]
Technical	Yes	2008-09-29 17:00:39	2008-09-29 17:00:39	[icon] [icon] [icon]
Use of media	Yes	2008-09-29 16:56:43	2008-09-29 16:56:43	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Interactive multimedia	Yes	2008-09-29 18:05:02	2008-09-29 18:05:02	[icon] [icon] [icon]
└ Writing Style and accuracy of text	Yes	2008-09-29 16:57:29	2008-09-29 17:54:21	[icon] [icon] [icon]

Figure 2: Bank containing nested banks containing criteria

Peer Review of Online Teaching and Learning
The online home of resources supporting the Australian Learning and Teaching Council-funded Peer Review Project

Currently logged in as **Marty Friedel** ([logout](#))

Home
My Reviews
Review Management
Administration
User
Help
Contact:

Add Existing Bank to Review

[Home](#) \ [Review](#) \ [Management](#) \ [Selected Review](#) \ [Create Bank for Review](#)

Currently selected Review: Peer review of Textbooks 101
Review Status: ● Closed, unavailable to Reviewers
Editable: ● Yes, this Review can be edited.

Add Existing Bank to Review

Source Bank: **Clarity of expectations**

Place in which Parent Bank

- Instructional Design
- Assessment
- Building student knowledge
- Clarity of expectations
- Evaluation
- example
- First year course
- Human interaction
- Learning activities
- Support
- Test
- interface design
- Technical
- Use of media
- Interactive multimedia
- Writing Style and accuracy of text
- Web 2.0
- Web 3C
- first year course

20 queries executed in 0.0507 seconds | System vRC-1.1-public | Form v1.0

Peer Review of Online Teaching and Learning | An Australian Learning and Teaching Council Project | [Accessibility](#) | [Disclaimer](#) | Last updated Monday 27th October, 2008

Figure 3: Duplicating a parent bank and a nested bank

The peer review instrument and the first-year curriculum

The peer review instrument is aimed at development and evaluation of the first-year curriculum. It acknowledges that students have diverse learning needs and a wide variety of previous learning experiences. It takes into account that students have different knowledge of current information technologies, and makes no assumptions about their understanding of the transition that needs to occur when moving to a university learning environment. It questions whether the background knowledge is clearly articulated and whether opportunities are provided for students to gain this knowledge if deficient. Additionally, exemplars of assignments are provided to ensure that students understand the assessment approaches and requirements at university. The inclusion of these ‘lowest common denominator’ standards ensures that all students will be able to successfully engage with and succeed in first-year. The ability to create custom banks of criteria enables academics to focus on particular areas of concern within a course review. The following example illustrates the development of a custom bank of criteria focusing on the first-year experience. Drawing on the elements underpinning a quality first-year curriculum defined by Kift (2008), the authors have developed a custom bank of criteria which incorporates Kift’s (2008) six criteria for assessing the first-year curriculum: transition, diversity, design, engagement, assessment, evaluation and monitoring. These criteria aim to assist all students to reach their learning potential in first-year. The criteria are based on research undertaken by a wide variety of authors, but apply the theory into practice. Along with the examples, tips and checklists in the PRI, Kift’s criteria guide academic development as well as being benchmarks against which to evaluate curriculum.

Table 1 provides a framework which maps Kift's (2008) first-year curriculum guidelines against example criteria (column 2) embedded within the PRI first-year experience bank. Column three maps these guidelines and first-year experience criteria against existing PRI banks that are generic to the review of all courses. This example demonstrates the flexibility of the system to provide customised banks relating to particular areas of focus, in this case the first-year experience, as well as the potential for embedding criteria relating to the first-year experience in more generic peer reviews.

Table 1: First-year curriculum items can be included in a separate bank under the criteria of transition, diversity and others or included in existing PRI banks

First-year curriculum guidelines (Kift, 2008)	Example items	Existing PRI banks
Transition Good first-year curriculum aids transition from previous educational experience to the nature of learning in higher education.	Are students asked to self- assess their knowledge, skills and attitudes against discipline expectations? Are modules included that allow the student to investigate what it means to be a professional in their discipline? Are opportunities for independent learning included and identified?	Instructional design Clarity of expectations Building student knowledge Learning activities Assessment Evaluation Human interaction Interface Design Consistency in interface Easy navigation Keyboard accessible Use of media Interactive multimedia Writing style and Accuracy of text Copyright Technical Aspects Active hyperlinks System requirements specified
Diversity Student diversity may exacerbate transition issues.	Are assumed knowledge and skills clearly stated and resources available to address deficiencies? Are opportunities identified for different learning styles? Is a diversity of learning, teaching and assessment approaches used to cater for different learning styles?	
Design First-year curriculum should be student focussed, explicit and relevant.	Is the curriculum relevant and student-focussed? Are the objectives clearly expressed in terms relevant to the first-year student? Are there linkages between this course and other courses? Are there linkages between the course and the profession?	
Engagement Does the curriculum involve and engage students?	Are team-based learning approaches used? Is there a dedicated physical or virtual space for first-year students?	
Assessment Assessment aids transition to higher education assessment and provide early feedback to students and staff.	Do students receive feedback early in the course? Are annotated exemplars provided?	
Evaluation and Monitoring Curriculum is evidence-based and evaluated. Interventions for students at risk.	Is the curriculum evidence-based? Is there a mechanism for monitoring student engagement?	

Figure 4 shows two items as they appear in the instrument. In the second question (Are modules included that allow the student to investigate what it means to be a professional in their area?) the respondent has sought further clarification of the criterion by clicking on the information (i) icon. As a result of this interaction an example and reference related to this criterion appear in a new window.

first year course	
Aspect	Response
Are students given an opportunity to understand and explore their learning styles?	☐ Strongly Disagree ☐ Disagree ☐ Neutral ☐ Agree ☐ Strongly Agree i
Are modules included that allow the student to investigate what it means to be a professional in their discipline?	☐ Option 1 ☐ Option 2 ☐ Option 3 i
This could include visits to professional placements, with subsequent reflection and discussion, discussions about professional expectations and ethics. See for example Schubert S, Ortwein H, Dumitsch A, Schwantes J, Wilhelm O, Klossing C (2008) A situational judgement test of professional behaviour: development and validation Medical Teacher 30: 5, 528-533. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/041215906001952994	

Figure 4: An example of the instrument as it would appear to a course reviewer

In this example, the custom bank applies to the custom design of a bank of criteria specific to the first-year experience. However, the flexibility of the PRI enables academics to select criteria from any number of custom designed banks to construct a peer review. For example, a custom bank focusing on criteria relating to the teaching and research nexus might draw on the typology of teaching and research links identified by Griffiths (2004). Thus a reviewer might consider the extent to which teaching is research-led, research-oriented, research-based or research-informed within courses, as well as whether the emphasis is on research content or research processes, students are treated as the audience or participants or teaching is teacher or student focused (Healey, 2005). An academic focusing on the first-year experience might choose the custom developed first-year experience bank of criteria as well as criteria from a custom developed bank addressing the teaching and research nexus and integrate those two banks into a custom design peer review. There are many other examples of custom banks addressing particular areas of teaching and learning concern that an author might choose to develop. Such concerns might include: internationalisation of the curriculum; peer assessment; community engagement; career planning or experiential learning. Once these banks are established, authors can choose to extend the criteria based on current literature, adapt the criteria to suit their own institutional context or integrate the criteria into more generic peer reviews of courses or programs.

Once an author has constructed and validated a peer review template they can invite their peers to complete the review. This process generates a personalised invitation, which is in turn emailed to the proposed reviewer. When a reviewer logs into the instrument they are presented with a module called 'My Reviews', which lists all of the reviews that the particular user has been invited to complete. This list identifies all upcoming reviews, including the dates the reviews are available. Links to reviews that are outside of the start and end date range of the review are inactive. As soon as a reviewer has completed or partially completed a review, the results can be viewed via the review management module. The results of a review are automatically made available to all authorised authors of the review. Results are presented on-screen including the number and percentage of responses received and any additional comments made by reviewers as shown in Figure 5.

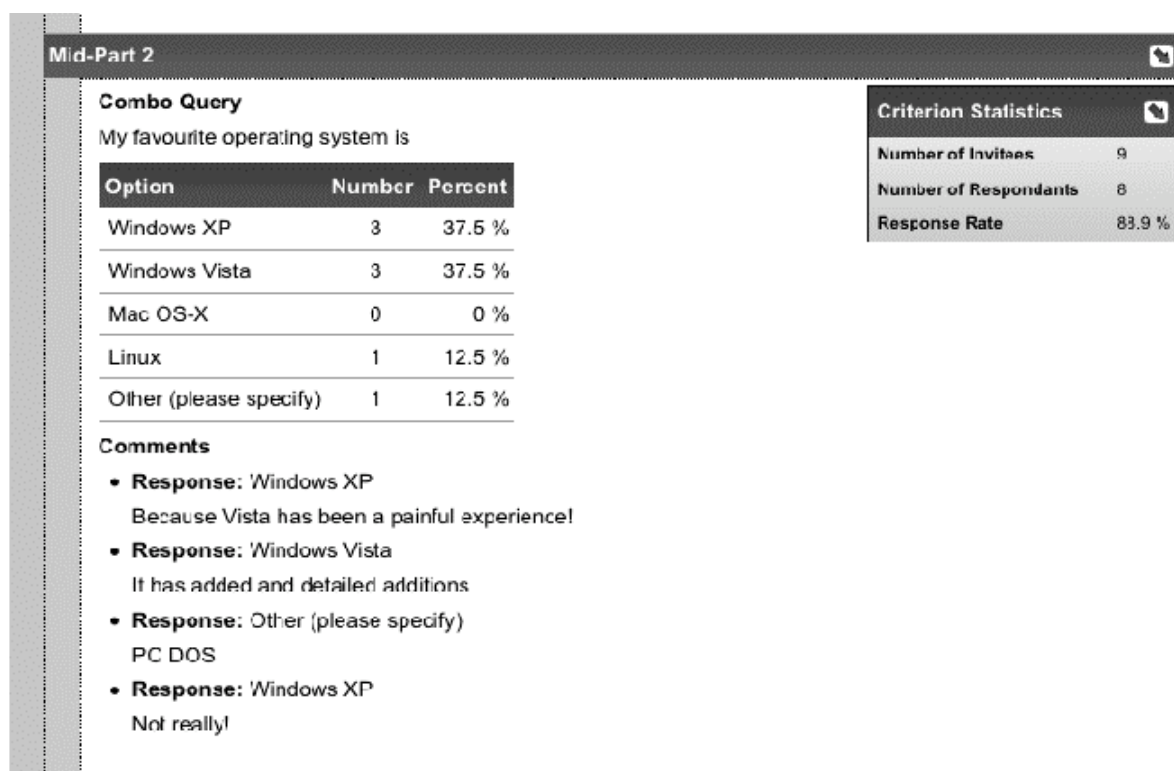


Figure 5: On-screen results from a completed peer review

The author at this point can export the entire review or the responses within an individual bank to an Excel compatible spreadsheet. Once the review data is exported the author and any other authorised users can manipulate, analyse and graph the results to suit their specific requirements. This data can be used to guide the academic on redevelopment of the course to enhance the first-year learning experience, or as evidence submitted in support of an application for promotion or award.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined a project that follows a scholarly approach to quality assurance in online learning and teaching. The project described in this paper involves the development of an open source, web-based peer review instrument and an associated website that supports academic staff with the development of their course materials and provides a structured approach to peer review. The extensible nature of the approach ensures that the system is flexible and adaptable to enable academics to focus on particular areas of concern. The

example presented in this paper focuses on the custom design of banks of criteria specific to the review of the first-year curriculum. The criteria within these banks of criteria have been informed by the considerable research already undertaken in the area of first-year engagement. The interactive peer view system provides highly focused just-in-time information to enhance the knowledge and expertise of academic staff in the development and re-development of quality first-year curriculum materials. This approach is consistent with a scholarly approach to learning and teaching because it supports staff in reflective practice and provides a structured and informed approach to peer review. Beyond this, the system provides a means by which they can have their work publicly affirmed and to use this as evidence to support them in their applications for promotion and awards.

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