Peer Observation & Review of Teaching Program

Participant Manual

ACU Learning & Teaching Centre
July 2015

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Australian Catholic University

1. Overview of the ACU PORT

Peer observation & review of teaching (PORT) is a mechanism whereby our peers can observe and constructively comment on some functional or qualitative aspect of the teaching we undertake and the learning we promote for the benefit of student learning. PORT is about the promotion of collegial working practices, the dissemination of excellent teaching practices, the development of the individual, quality enhancement, and improving the quality of student learning. All staff should be committed to maintaining and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching. PORT provides a structured framework for the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning practices through peer collaboration, discussion and the dissemination of ideas and good practice. In this sense, observation is a very valuable tool for both the observed and the observer as it involves the sharing of excellence and promotes a greater sense of collegiality and good practice. The process operates in the spirit of impartiality, professionalism, and peer support with the aim of enhancing practice for both the observed and the observer and therefore the learning experience of students.

The ACU PORT program should support staff to:

- develop self-awareness;
- reflect on their teaching practices;
- enhance their awareness of the student learning experience;
- recognise and identify good practice in others;
- identify further professional development needs;
- identify and promote good practice and innovation in learning and teaching;
- deepen the understanding of the work of colleagues in and across PORT teams;
- provide evidence of quality teaching practice for promotion applications, professional development recognition and the like.

ACU's PORT program is prima facie not a review or an appraisal process unless the observed wants it to be. It is an observation model that can be adapted to a review model. In this respect it is about viewing our teaching practices as a continual process of improvement which might be thought of as being informed by ourselves, our peers, our students, and the literature. PORT is conducted with mutual trust and respect and any detailed documents should remain the property of the observed unless the observed colleague gives their explicit agreement that such documents may be shared.

The main purpose of this document is to set out a method for peer observation (adaptable for review) and, to provide the prompts, criteria and recording sheets that may be of use in the peer observation and review process.

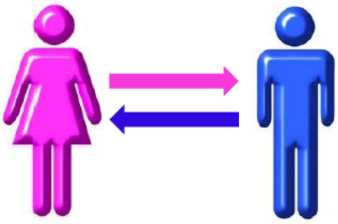
2. Why is ACU doing PORT?

- To improve the quality of our teaching practices.
- To improve the quality of student learning
- To increase the sense of collaboration and enhanced trust through allowing colleagues to observe and comment upon each other's teaching.
- To increase awareness of what is being taught and learned and how it is being taught and learned.

- To get good ideas from the practice of others.
- To affirm and/or challenge our own teaching practices.
- To encourage discussion and dissemination of good practice.
- To address practical issues such as suitability of facilities.
- To maintain and enhance a quality learning experience.

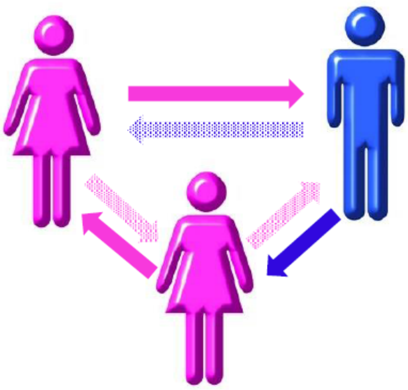
3. Organising PORT

Observation can be made in a number of different ways. A popular form is a 'buddy system' where two colleagues agree to act as observed and observer. The observation takes place followed by a reversal of the roles at a subsequent date. Each colleague is observed only once as indicated by the diagram on the right.



Buddy System

Another system is the 'three ringed circus' where colleague A observes colleague B, colleague B observes C, and so on around the team until all have been observed. A recommended approach is observation organised within teams of three as in the diagram on the right. Each colleague is observed twice (perhaps reversing the cycle).



Three Ringed Circus System

A derivation of this approach involves two colleagues attending each observation. Again, it is up to the observed as to whether there is one or two peers conducting the observation. Exceptionally, colleagues may wish to utilise the services of an external observer or team of observers. Any other system of peer observation may be designed and adopted by faculties or individual teams (in consultation with their respective Associate Dean Learning & Teaching), so long as it meets the basic requirements set out in this document and the Guidelines (both documents available on the Learning and Teaching webpages).

4. What should be observed and how often?

Anything that can be described as teaching can be observed. A range of activities is recommended such as: lectures; tutorials; seminars; practical classes; assessment; curriculum design; subject learning guides; materials; and, so on. These can be at any level of provision, both undergraduate and postgraduate. At least one round of observing and observation should take place every two years but you are encouraged to increase this if desired. Peer observation and review should take place in the context of the program, subject or session learning outcomes.

Most peer observation and review will use general criteria across a range of aspects, such as organisation, teaching and learning strategies etc. However, there may be times where a more specific focus is required (such as when the observed wishes to use the observation for promotion, application for teaching awards, or something similar). The University of Melbourne has published a guide for peer review of teaching based on the criteria for the Australian Learning & Teaching Council teaching awards (http://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/teaching/peer-review – accessed 9 May 2016). While the general checklist pro forma can be found in Appendix 1, if you are interested in a more specific aspect of your teaching, you will find an item bank of possible criteria for targeted peer observation and review in Appendix 2. Use this to develop your observation pro forma.

It may assist you to ask yourself the following questions:

- What did I want to know about my teaching and student learning that caused me to participate in the PORT program? In particular:-
- What do I want to know about my teaching?
    - Structure
    - Content
    - Student engagement
    - Student learning outcomes
    - Assessment
- Are there any particular aspects I would like my observer to note?

5. Who is your peer?

The answer to this question may well depend on the type of observation undertaken. A subject specialist will need to act as an observer if you wish to have the substance of your teaching peer observed. If you are having your assessment regime peer observed for alignment with intended learning outcomes then someone outside of your discipline, say for example from ACU's Learning & Teaching Centre, may be appropriate. You are best placed to ascertain an appropriate observer. However, you may wish to consider the following issues in coming to a decision about who you would like to observe your teaching:

- It is generally unwise to have your supervisor as your observer as this may move the process from observation to review without the necessary intention of either party;
- It is of little value having a professional colleague who is also a friend conduct your observation. In going to the effort of conducting PORT it is of little value if your friend will merely say nice things about you. The aim is to get objective feedback and suggestions on areas for improvement in your chosen area of observation and sometimes friendships can compromise achieving this aim;
- Consider the junior or senior status of an observer. Some people feel self-conscious about a senior colleague observing their teaching particularly if that colleague is involved in the management of the Department, School or Faculty. While the process is confidential, you do not want to feel too uncomfortable during the observation as this will not assist the process. Conversely, a junior colleague may not have the experience and understanding of best practice teaching to assist you in seeking objective feedback on your teaching;
- Depending on the type of observation (ie not as to the substance of the subject you are teaching), do not be concerned about whether the observer has disciplinary expertise. Research shows that a peer outside your discipline is not detrimental to the PORT process and can often provide refreshing insights. Go for expertise in the area of teaching and learning you wish to have observed;
- Select someone you are comfortable with and who has good knowledge of teaching and learning in or outside of your discipline field (depending on the type of observation you require) and whose opinion you respect.
- Your ADL&T or ACU's Learning and Teaching Centre can help advise you on the selection of an appropriate observer.

6. The PORT process (a process of observation not review)

The observed and the observer agree a session, time and place for the observation, ensuring sufficient time is allocated before and after for the briefing and for the post-observation meeting. The peer observation session therefore has four face-to-face stages being: the briefing session; the observation session; the post-observation meeting; and, the debrief session, all spread across an overall six stage process.

6.1 The briefing session

This phase involves a discussion between the observed and the observer. Here the colleague to be observed will set out the context of the session, and draw the observer's attention to anything that they particularly want observed. The kind of things that might therefore be discussed are: the intended learning outcomes; assessment; learning and teaching activities; particular issues for consideration or where feedback would be valuable; and, any "ground rules" or mutually agreed approaches to the observation session.

6.2 The observation

This phase involves the observer positioning themselves in an appropriate part of the teaching and learning space, observing and making notes about the various interactions between the tutor and the students with a focus on those things identified for observation in the briefing. A pro forma for recording observations is provided in Appendix 1. Teams may wish to modify this form for their own purposes particularly ensuring the pro forma addresses the substance of the observation as advised by the observed. Positioning the observer in an appropriate part of the teaching and learning space is not always a physical activity and may involve a desk top style observation of, for example; unit learning guides; stated intended learning outcomes; assessment tasks; criteria referenced assessment rubrics; materials to support learning and teaching activities; and, so on.

6.3 The post-observation discussion

This phase involves a short informal discussion between the observed and the observer, reflecting on the observation. This meeting is therefore a collaborative reflection and will involve the observed's constructive feedback of the session and the observer's observations about good practice seen during the session or the desk top style analysis. At some point the observer may wish to make comments about areas of practice that may benefit from future development. Post-observation is usually the most difficult part of the peer observation process and demands professional tact and sensitivity by both parties.

Points to remember when you are having your post-observation discussion (tips for the observers)

As professional teachers we are used to giving and receiving feedback with our students on a regular basis and our experience in this is most useful when dealing with our peers. Nevertheless, it is worth reminding ourselves of some good advice in this area.

- Focus on behaviour rather than the person
- Be specific, ie give examples
- Give feedback as soon as possible after the event
- It must be known what use is to be made of the outcomes of the event
- Feedback must be confidential
- Be aware of the balance between positive and negative feedback
- What is important is how and when you give feedback not just a matter of what you say
- Allow those being debriefed to say something about their session first before you give feedback, ie "How do you think the session went?"

- Allow them to highlight problems and possible solutions first
- Effective feedback should be focused on the amount of information that the receiver can make use of
- Always be polite and respectful of each other

When you are discussing the observation (tips for the observed)

- Check for understanding
- Assume that the information is for your benefit
- If you have sought feedback make it clear what kind of feedback you are seeking
- Notice your own reactions

After the discussion session ask yourself the following (tips for the observed)

- What aspects of your teaching do you feel you ought to improve?
- What aspects do you feel you would like to work on to improve?
- What do you need to do in order to improve in this area?
- Who might be able to help you?
- Who or what might stop you and what can you do about it?
- How will you know when you have improved?
- Or, perhaps simply ask yourself, "Next time I give this session I will ……"

6.4 Debrief session - reflection

The Observed should reflect on the observation. Having the information from the PORT program is one thing, but how we act on the information gleaned in a reflective way is where the real value in PORT lies. The following questions might help in the process of reflection:

- What was the teaching context?
- What happened?
- What went well?
- Why did it go well? (Participants, particular examples, style of activity, preparation?)
- What can I take from this and apply again?
- What wasn't I happy with?
- Why didn't it go well? (Participants, particular examples, style of activity, preparation?)
- What would I do differently next time?
- What differences would these changes make?

The Observer might also find it helpful to reflect on the experience of being an observer and what they have got out of or have otherwise found useful from the observation.

6.5 Debrief session – future action

Having the information from the PORT program is one thing, but how do I act on the information gleaned in a practical way? In particular:-

- What practical change(s) might I make in my teaching?
- Why make this change?
- What would I do?

- What resources will I need to make this change?
- How will I know the change is successful?

6.6 Review

Having the information gleaned from PORT and acting upon it are proven ways to improve teaching practice. However, it is very important to evaluate what you have done in terms of your reflective teaching practice through PORT. In other words, it is now time to assess whether the changes you have made have been effective. This may involve another peer observation, comparison of student evaluations before and after the changes made, a reflective practice exercise, or a combination of these:

- What have I changed?
- Why have I made this change?
- Am I generally happy with what happened?
- In what ways was the change successful?
- In what ways could I further improve on this?

I hope you and your colleagues get something positive out of the PORT program. Your positive engagement with the process should guarantee you get something of value from it by way of critical observation, review and reflection of your teaching. Good luck and have fun!

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July 2015.

Important note: Thank you to Associate Professor Dr Ian Solomonides, Director of the Learning & Teaching Centre, Macquarie University for his permission to use material that appears in this manual.

Observation of Teaching Pro Forma (example only) Appendix 1

Observed:		**Observer:**	
Observation Date:		**Timing:**	
Activity Type:		**Unit:**	

Category and substantive observation	Observed?	Brief Observation
Planning/Organisation/Content		
Are there clear aims and objectives for the session?		
Is it clear how this session relates to previous sessions, or the unit as a whole?		
Are the aims and objectives appropriate to the needs, experience and abilities of students?		
Does the introduction set the scene and give an overview of expected outcomes?		
Does the conclusion summarise the main ideas in the session		
Does the conclusion look forward to the next session?		
Is content appropriate for the level, abilities, needs and interests of students?		
Is content well researched and up-to-date?		
Teaching Strategies/Resources		
What modes of delivery are used? Is more than one mode used?		
Are methods appropriate with regard to students' age, abilities, needs and needs of unit/content?		
Are effective strategies used to gain attention and ensure attention is maintained?		
Are resources used effectively and complement content, methods and purposes?		
Presentation, Management etc		
Is the communication of ideas relevant, clear and coherent?		
Do students appear to be motivated?		
Is class management effective and appropriate?		
Do equal opportunities exist for all students to learn and participate?		
Assessment/Monitoring		
Are there opportunities for students to think, question and feedback?		
Are suitable methods used to identify and monitor student progress?		

Does the tutor encourage student contributions and participation in a positive atmosphere?		
Does the tutor provide constructive feedback?		

General Comments and Suggestions for Future Development:

Note: When completed, this form stays with the Observed for their records.

Peer Observation Criteria for Specific Purposes

(From Harris, K., Farrell, K., Bell, M., Devlin, M., and James, R. (2008). *Peer review of teaching in Australian higher education* (2008). Melbourne: CSHE, University of Melbourne and CEDIR, University of Wollongong. pp. 64-65.)

Teaching *(Approaches to teaching that influence, motivate and inspire students to learn)* **Criteria**	**Appropriate for:**				
	Small Group	**Large Group**	**Online**	**Curriculum**	**Assessment**
Effectively encouraging student participation	√	√	√		
Generating student interest in the subject	√	√	√		
Use of examples relevant to students' interests and experiences	√	√	√		
Incorporating current and relevant 'real-world' examples	√	√	√		
Modelling of critical thinking and problem-solving		√	√		
Use of activities that require students to take a critical approach to the task	√	√	√		
Demonstrating enthusiasm for learning in the discipline	√	√			
Effective communication skills	√	√	√		√
High-level interpersonal skills	√	√			
Rapport and engagement with students	√	√	√		
Skilful presentation of ideas and information (including effective use of audio-visual materials)	√	√	√		
Structure of the learning activity				√	
Developing students' scholarly values	√	√	√	√	√
Encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning	√		√	√	
Helping students become reflective learners	√		√	√	√
Management of the audience	√	√			
Effectiveness of questioning techniques					
Facilitating links between practice and theory (for practical and clinical classes)	√		√	√	√

Curriculum and Resources *(Development of curricula and resources that reflect a command of the field)* **Criteria**	**Appropriate for:**				
	Small Group	**Large Group**	**Online**	**Curriculum**	**Assessment**
Effective use of teaching and learning resources	√	√	√		
Current research is integrated within the teaching	√	√	√	√	
Demonstrated command of the subject material	√	√			
Evidence of sound planning and learning opportunities for students	√	√	√	√	
Content is relevant, accurate and current				√	
Appropriate use is made of online learning opportunities			√	√	
The learning encouraged supports the development of the desired graduate attributes	√		√	√	
Expectations are clearly communicated to students					
Clear communication of learning task and assessment objectives				√	√
Effective use of interactive technologies in the design of learning			√	√	
Engagement of community expertise and experience in the design of curricula and resources				√	
Learning activities and resources accommodate the skills, knowledge and experience of commencing students	√			√	

Assessment *(Approaches to assessment and feedback that foster independent learning)* **Criteria**	**Appropriate for**				
	Small Group	**Large Group**	**Online**	**Curriculum**	**Assessment**
Assessment tasks align with the stated learning outcomes for the subject				√	
Students have opportunities to practise the skills to be assessed	√			√	
Students have opportunities to self-assess in preparation for major assessment tasks	√			√	√
Timely and constructive feedback is provided					√
The tasks allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills				√	√
Appropriate involvement of external expertise in student assessment				√	
Suitable methods are used to identify and monitor student progress				√	√
The teaching encourages reflective practice and self-assessment	√	√	√		
Students are encouraged to take responsibility for monitoring their own learning	√		√	√	√
Assessment encourages and rewards creativity				√	√

Student Support *(Respect and support for the development of students as individuals)* **Criteria**	**Appropriate for**				
	Small Group	**Large Group**	**Online**	**Curriculum**	**Assessment**
Effective strategies for monitoring students' progress	√		√	√	
Involving students in the development of the curriculum and/or teaching activities				√	
There are opportunities for students to seek advice and assistance from the teacher	√	√	√		
Consideration is given to the diverse learning needs of students	√	√	√	√	√
An inclusive and supportive learning environment is fostered	√	√	√		
Students are afforded respect, and thereby encouraged to respect peers and staff	√	√	√		
Consideration of students' aspirations and priorities	√	√	√	√	
Equal opportunities exist for all students	√	√	√	√	√

Journal of Further and Higher Education
Vol. 28, No. 2, May 2004

[219]

Peer Observation: a tool for staff development or compliance?

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ABSTRACT: *Peer observation has become a feature of university practice over the last decade, the primary impetus for its introduction being the political drive to raise teaching quality via the development and sharing of 'good practice'. Peer observation within higher education (HE) involves observing colleagues in the classroom and has the further aim of supporting continuing professional development (CPD) through peer learning. This article is based upon a research study of a typical observation scheme as introduced within a new university prior to a quality review. It is underpinned by the deconstruction of the university's observation documentation and focuses upon the experience of a teaching observation trio taking part in this formal peer observation process over a 2-year period, before and after a Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) subject review. The deconstruction of the university's documentation, combined with the actual experience of the observation trio studied, reveals issues of politics, power and pragmatics. A managerial discourse emerges with emphasis on compliance by lecturing staff and with an economic underpinning not actually supported by resources. Pre-QAA, the observation trio complied with the management's requirements for record keeping but the process of peer observation opened up learning and development opportunities for them as individuals. Post-QAA the trio members became focused primarily on their own objectives. Although management had sought control, the individuals involved developed and pursued their own, shared agenda of professional development.*

The Role of Peer Observation Within Quality Assurance Processes in University Teaching

Teaching has been described 'as a complex, cognitive ability that is not innate but can be both learned and improved upon' (Saroyan & Amundsen, 2001, p. 344). Although short-term training measures (such as training to use classroom equipment) can help improve teaching practice, teaching should not be considered simply as a bundle of skills that can be learnt in this way. Longer term development initiatives promote deeper learning through reflective practice and, thereby, the [220] acquisition and development of teaching competencies. Such learning may be enhanced through exposure to a variety of other individuals, with collective learning providing a greater variety of sources of information (Smylie, 1995).

Therefore, initiatives to promote such development might include observation, with learning taking place from the 'double' perspective of being the observer and the observed, with observing comprising watching, listening and inferring (Brown, G., 1993). Indeed, the value of observation within learning and development is recognized by NATFHE (2001), with the process being of benefit to both the observer and the observed. It provides 'a rare opportunity for an observer to see and analyse what students are actually doing' (Fullerton, 1999, p. 221), as well as the actions of the staff member.

Politics, Power and Pragmatics: the impact of the quality debate on observation

The New Labour government has placed great emphasis on the relevance of learning for economic growth, espousing lifelong learning and a culture of self-improvement in this context (Kenny *et al.*, 2000). The political drive has been to raise university student numbers, even though there is no clear link between the number of graduates and economic growth (Wolf, 2002), and the spotlight has fallen firmly upon the issue of teaching quality in higher education (HE).

Peer observation is a relatively new field, becoming a feature of university practice during the last decade. It is generally thought to involve peers observing each other's teaching to enhance teaching quality through reflective practice, thereby aiding professional development. It has been given impetus by government initiatives to improve the quality of educational provision in the UK and, as such, it became integral to quality reviews. The evaluation of quality involves complex procedures and judgements and makes heavy demands on both course teams and institutions (O'Neil & Pennington, 1992). Teachers are individuals and the political agendas of governments and institutions cannot always dictate individual action. As Knights and McCabe (2000, p. 421) note: 'Bureaucratic regimes often stimulate resistance and the search on the part of employees for ways of escaping management's control'. The introduction of managerially owned, capability or quality assurance driven observation schemes can therefore result in suspicion, mistrust and resistance. The Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) subject review, in particular, has fuelled staff resistance and defensiveness (Gosling, 2000).

Nevertheless, Fullerton (1999) argues that its introduction has resulted in staff accepting direct observation as integral to their own development and in the breaking down of no-go areas associated with observing each other's teaching. Review panels can bring out the benefits of collegiality (O'Neil & Pennington, 1992) and the monitoring of performance can result in lifelong learning and help to improve practice (Hinett & Weeden, 2000).

Peer observation has become part of development programmes for both new lecturers and established staff, being used for continuing professional development (CPD) purposes. Indeed, Nicholls (2000) argues that CPD cannot occur without [221] learning and understanding. NATFHE (2001) comments that the debate over membership of the Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT) has sharpened interest in the use of observation for CPD purposes. However, professional development is not something that is done to teachers, rather there must be a climate that supports and encourages individuals to invest in their own personal growth (Loughran & Gunstone, 1997). It must be recognized that a self-diagnosed need for learning provides greater motivation to learn than an externally diagnosed requirement (Wade & Hammick, 1999). And if CPD is to be widely practised, it needs to be embedded within the institutions' own processes (Gosling, 2000).

Union acceptance of peer observation has hinged upon its use for staff development (including development within an agreed capability procedure). NATFHE makes clear the distinction between voluntary peer observation for development purposes (which it supports, albeit with reservations and conditions attached) and observation imposed from above that is managerially owned (to which it is opposed). Even while recognizing the developmental value attached to observation schemes, the potential inherent threat is implicitly recognizable. NATFHE notes that the feedback from voluntary observations should primarily be owned by the person observed and that the first guiding principle of observation should be that it is developmental rather than judgmental.

Working with, and learning from, others raises the issue of power. Observation is more useful and acceptable when it is used formatively rather than summatively (Fullerton, 1999), yet the use of observation for formative purposes raises issues of the power balance between the observer and the observed, even within a voluntary peer relationship. As peer observation of teaching has become more prevalent across the HE sector, a common practice has emerged. Colleagues choose others to work with to observe each other's teaching once or twice a year. Yet despite the voluntary nature of such arrangements, staff may still feel concerned about being observed, as the observer may be viewed as being in the more powerful role. MacKinnon (2001) warns of the detrimental effects of evaluative observations and the use of expert power. The staff member to be observed should have a choice of observer (NATFHE, 2001), as informal collegial relationships are often the most fruitful (Rowland, 2000). Trust is critical for a successful reflective experience and time is needed to build this (Farrell, 2001). As the practice becomes more established, the less self-conscious staff will feel about being observed and therefore the more benefit should be achieved by the parties involved in terms of dialogue, reflection and enhanced practice (Fullerton, 1999).

Issues of pragmatism can affect the potential benefits of peer observation. As Smylie (1995) contends, if we wish teachers to learn we need to identify the workplace conditions that promote or constrain learning. Observation generally consists of a four-stage process (initial discussion, the observation itself, a follow-up discussion meeting and production of a written record). Such activities add hours to the working day. However, as NATFHE comments, without resources to expedite the process (e.g. training observers, making time available for preparation and feedback) and to support any identified development needs, the process becomes meaningless. [222]

Peer Observation in Practice: a case study

This research study concerns the introduction and operation of a peer observation scheme in a new university, conducted during the period immediately before and after a QAA subject review. It comprises the deconstruction of the observation scheme of the University of X (UOX) [1] and the impact of this scheme upon one trio of participants who shared their experiences with the researcher.

Deconstruction as developed by Jacques Derrida (Learmonth, 1999) implies the notion of a central truth, but this centre comprises a hierarchy of privileged and marginalized binary opposites (such as reason and emotion). In Western societies the philosophy is based on the dominant or privileged term (in this case reason), but it relies for its meaning on the marginalized concept (emotion). In other words, reason is objective or neutral while emotion is related to the minds of those affected. Deconstruction indicates that these are not discrete terms but that an objective text draws attention to emotion. By deconstructing a discourse, the asserted rationality may be undermined (Culler, 1982) and devices of concealment revealed (Parker, 1997). Yet, as Learmonth (1999) notes, deconstruction does not produce findings that are capable of reproduction in a positivist manner. Hence, this research study presents the deconstruction of UOX documentation to reveal the emotion within the hidden meanings from the author's perspective.

Observation goes beyond collecting data (Foster, 1996). This research therefore examines the sense and meaning given to it by the trio of participants, in relation to their own learning and professional development.

Deconstruction of Scheme Documentation

UOX introduced 'classroom observation' one year before a series of QAA reviews. Although UOX uses the word classroom in the title, the terms peer and classroom are used interchangeably within its associated paperwork. Perhaps the term classroom observation is used to reduce the perception of managerialism and control? The emphasis is on watching the 'class' or the 'room' and not the 'person' teaching?

Classroom observation is generally considered to involve systematic studies, carried out in primary and secondary education, of the interaction between teachers and their pupils. It may be defined as: 'non-judgmental description of classroom events that can be analyzed and given interpretation' (Gebhard, 1999, p. 35). One of the most developed forms of quantitative observational research is systematic observation in classrooms, using frameworks for recording different types of interaction (Croll, 1986).

Peer observation is defined as 'a process whereby a third party observes, and provides feedback on, teaching and learning support taking place in a university or college' (NATFHE, 2001). Universities' peer observation schemes usually make use of checklists; stated issues to guide the observer in what to look for when carrying out the observation. As such, both peer and classroom observation usually involve pre-structuring of the issues. The main difference between the two forms of observation is, however, the greater use of systematic and quantitative techniques [223] within classroom observation and the greater reliance upon descriptive processes within peer observation.

The definitions of these terms would indicate that the UOX approach to observation fits more closely with that of peer observation. This is supported by a checklist style content that calls for the more descriptive approach to observation that is frequently part of the peer review process. The use of the term classroom rather than peer observation in the documentation title suggests that there might be hidden agendas within the documentation itself. Hence, to understand its content and intent, it must be deconstructed.

The master document describes the purpose of peer support through observation of teaching as being 'to improve teaching practice and thereby improve the learning experience of students'. This aim fits with the notion of the use of observation as part of quality improvement. The documentation stresses that the scheme does not concern formal performance assessment. This reflects NATFHE's first guiding principle that observation should be developmental rather than judgmental. It is also in accord with Jones (1993), who comments on the need for observation and feedback to be non-judgmental and confidential if the process is to benefit both staff and institution. However, to improve teaching practice, evaluation must be carried out to provide some kind of base from which the improvement can occur. Evaluation requires judgement and, therefore, the scheme must, by its very nature, operate judgementally.

The documentation addresses the resourcing implications by stating: 'Peer observation of teaching and learning should take place annually for a minimum of one hour of each staff member's teaching'. It mentions the use of coordinating groups 'to hold the records of the process of observation activity', 'organising training' and 'an appropriate pump-priming resource in support of this aspect of professional development'.

The documentation describes the formation of trios of teaching/observing staff ('A observes B observes C observes A') which may operate across or within subjects/schools with the allocation process coordinated by the subject leader. The use of the word *may* implies a voluntary nature to the cluster formation process. This fits with NATFHE's view that the person observed should have a choice of observer. The use of trios might indicate that an action learning framework is intended rather than a co-mentoring approach that may result from teaching staff observing each other in pairs.

The documentation recognizes the power issues inherent within observation. It notes: 'the person being observed needs to feel in charge of the process and own the outcome' and that 'feedback between [sic] members of a trio is confidential'. Reinforcing the developmental objectives of the scheme, the documentation suggests those observed 'consider whether there are particular aspects of their work on which they seek feedback …' and notes that 'individual reflections and learning will be very helpful in setting personal objectives'. This reflects NATFHE's view that feedback should be owned by the person observed, that the observed should be able to decide how to use it.

Additional documentation (published as University Guidelines) paints a different [224] picture. The managerial discourse becomes more evident. The illusion of voluntarism is shattered with the use of words such as *will* rather than may or should. Examples include teaching staff 'will form… clusters of three staff' and 'this observation process will take place at least once per academic session'.

After a briefing session based around the completion of a pre-observation form by the staff member to be observed, the observation takes places using another form comprising the following.

1. Planning. Were there clear aims and objectives? Did the session link to the overall programme? Are the resources available.
2. Introduction. Were the objectives clarified? Did the students know how this session related to the rest of the programme?
3. Delivery. Communication, coherence, questioning of students/lecturer, explanations of subject, linking session to previous and future sessions, student progression, resources used.

4. Good practice. Visual aids, student–lecturer relationship, checking on understanding and progress, clarification of questions.
5. Ideas for improvement.
6. Comments on special areas identified by colleague.
7. Concluding comments by the observer.
8. Comments by the observed.

Deconstructing these points reveals that they are highly judgmental. For example, is it possible for an observer to evaluate how well the observed session links to others in the programme when only one session is typically observed? Can (more to the point should) the observer judge the explanation of the subject if they are observing a session in an unfamiliar discipline? Will ideas for improvement simply reflect the observer's own practice, and what is 'good practice' anyway? Resourcing issues are critical. As Rawnsley (1993) notes, the dilemma is that the pedagogic framework may not be in harmony with the resources available; rising class sizes, teaching accommodation, audio-visual aids and access to good reprographic facilities.

Post-observation, the observed staff member completes a teacher's action plan. Its use is intended to reinforce the active learning element of the scheme. However, it may not be possible to improve if the resources do not permit it.

Upon completion of all the teaching observations within the trio, the members meet to discuss and record their comments on a group feedback form. Although the individual observation records are confidential, available only to the parties involved, the group feedback form is a public document where examples of good practice as well as generic staff development issues are fed back to management in order to be shared across the university. Although, ostensibly, the purpose of this feedback is to identify development needs and share good practice, it can also be used as a management tool to check that staff have participated.

The form includes:

1. comments on the observation process and problems or issues about the process;
2. examples of good practice observed; [225]
3. staff development issues arising out of the observations and your discussion of them;
4. other issues arising out of your discussion.

Once again, deconstruction reveals the judgmental nature of the points. Commenting on the process might have some value if management responded with feedback. What is 'good practice'? Staff development is interpreted as short-term training solutions (e.g. how to use equipment better, how to use web-based teaching) rather than true, longer term developmental approaches. It implies that improvement can result from simply learning a new set of skills.

The Reality of Observation

When the QAA subject review was due to take place, management was adamant that teaching observation records had to be in place for the previous semester. Trusting relationships between the observer and the observed are essential (Fullerton, 1993; Martin & Double, 1998). However, with the impending arrival of the QAA subject reviews, teaching staff found themselves allocated to trios within subject disciplines with no opportunity to choose partners, being notified by Email.

Jarzabkowski and Bone (1998) comment on the autonomy of the academic profession and thus how peer review can arouse fear and resistance. The issue of managerial power became evident, with reference being made to the consequences for staff employment generally of a poor QAA outcome. By attempting to tighten control, management stimulated staff resistance, with some staff refusing to participate in the observation process. The members of the Email-allocated trio who were the subjects of this research did agree to cooperate in the observation scheme even though they did not normally work closely together nor know each other particularly well.

Although the Guidance Notes promised resourcing in terms of training, this did not materialize. Nevertheless, the trio members conducted their observations in line with the UOX procedures, undertaking feedback with each other on a confidential, individual basis and, finally, as a cluster on completion of the first 'round' of teaching observations. This final discussion was recorded on the group feedback form. Pre-QAA, the trio members agreed that they had found the process useful and informative, it being helpful to the learning process and encouraging of reflection on one's own teaching. Examples of good practice were identified. However, it was felt that 'feedback may appear to be critical even when it is not intended to be so; it may be simply highlighting differences in approach'. The trio agreed that it would be beneficial to receive feedback from other clusters and that in future other members might be incorporated into the clusters. The content of this form was fed back to the Chair of Quality, but no feedback was received from other trios formally via the Chair. Informal discussion among members of staff did take place, revealing issues of timetabling difficulties in arranging observations and training requirements.

The second 'round' of teaching observations took place post-QAA. After all the observations had been completed, the trio agreed in their second group feedback [226] discussion that the members had each offered up a more problematic teaching session for observation within this second round. The difficulties related to problems of class size and attendance, disruption and poor environment/resources. Members agreed that they felt more confident in being observed and wanted feedback from their peers on these difficult areas and how they managed them. Peer learning was identified as valuable and it was agreed that observations were leading to professional development. The trio had gained an identity with the members developing their own mechanism for self-development.

Despite Cosh's assertion that 'there seems to be no real evidence that people develop and improve through the judgements or comments of others' (Cosh, 1998, p. 172), the feedback drew out that trio members had taken on board many of the comments from previous observed sessions. Good practice discussed after the first round of observations had been incorporated into teaching.

On the second group feedback form, trio members again commented on good practice. Staff development issues focused on training in new technology. Other issues raised concerned the fact that management should give more attention to the environments in which teaching takes place, the audio-visual facilities and the room allocations to ensure teaching is facilitated. At the time of the QAA panel visit, management had paid significant attention to classroom resources, with teaching aids such as overhead projectors being checked and white boards sparkling. Post-QAA, resources have largely been ignored and thus the trio was pessimistic about there being any improvement. As no feedback from management had been received formally after the first round of teaching observations, the trio did not expect any this time. Indeed, there was none, and the formal reporting system appears to remain a one-way upward communication channel. However, at internal research seminars on learning and teaching in HE, discussion of observation experiences has taken place, with teaching staffs' experiences being shared and discussed to the benefit of the seminar participants. Such discussions also revealed some staff members completing observation documentation simply to comply with the managerial requirement to do so, having not actually undertaken the observation process. A mechanism by teaching staff to highlight their perceived needs whilst minimizing their workload or an opportunity for resistance whilst not misbehaving (Knights & McCabe, 2000)?

Discussion

The UOX observation documentation revealed two key issues: resourcing (economics) and compliance. Despite containing many references to economic input, promised resources did not materialize over the 3 years that the scheme has operated. If observation is considered as a tool that ultimately improves quality and if there is a link between quality and economics, surely resourcing is the key? If no resourcing is available, this opens the way to speculation that quality is just a smokescreen for some other agenda.

The purpose of the observation scheme is highlighted as being developmental. Professional development implies long-term progress towards a higher level of [227] professionalism (Paechter, 1996). Although training needs could be identified and individuals could pursue these with their line managers, longer term development initiatives played no part in the scheme. Even the short-term training solutions hinged upon available resources under management's control. The purpose of the public group feedback form concerned dissemination of good practice, although no such feedback was received from management. Good practice was not shared formally outside the trios themselves.

So if the purpose of the UOX scheme does not truly have development at its heart and its link with quality is debatable, what is its underlying rationale? There appears to be a dichotomy between policy in principle and policy in practice.

Preliminary deconstruction of the documentation may facilitate a re-reading that reveals the emphasis on compliance and managerial control. It indicates a managerial drive to complete forms and records, to provide evidence of participation. The drive to participate in the observation scheme seemed to be a knee-jerk response to the threat of QAA. Indeed, post-QAA, the pressure to participate in peer observation has lessened and the earlier potential threats have gone.

From the trio's perspective, pre-QAA the focus was clear, management was driving the series of observations. Post-QAA this impetus diminished, and yet the trio members continued with their teaching observations. Although management had attempted to control the process, and at first the trio members had complied, post-QAA the trio members had, to quote Knights and McCabe (2000, p. 431), secured 'a sense of their own significance and self-worth through acting in accordance with their own definitions of a situation'. They had recognized the professional development ramifications and had used the management's process for their own purposes, (whilst continuing to meet management's requests for form-filling). In line with Brown, S. (1993), they recognized that observation offers tremendous potential to promote self-knowledge and personal development, particularly when it is part of a continuing process. For the trio, a new, shared agenda of professional development had emerged.

Notes

[1] Observation schemes are underpinned by confidentiality. This research respects this. Neither the institution nor lecturing staff involved are identified.

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Studies in higher Education
Vol. 29, No. 4, August 2004

[489]

Evaluating our peers: is peer observation a meaningful process?

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Peer observation of teaching can be seen as a means by which the quality of the teaching and learning process in higher education establishments is both accounted for and improved. The majority of the literature to date has focused on the mechanisms for implementing peer observation systems and its links to enhanced professional practice. However, little attention has been given to the complexities involved in delivering the peer observation process, and how it may be managed and integrated in order to maximize benefits for teaching and learning. This article reports on an evaluation of two systems of the peer observation within one `post 1992' university. It utilizes data from semi-structured interviews with lecturers, and identities the need for a clear focus and goals. It also illustrates the necessity to see both the breadth and depth of the process.

Context

Peer observation of teaching (PoT), is now commonplace in the British higher education sector as a means of enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Wankat & Oreovicz, 1993; Fullerton, 1999). Martin and Double (1998) list six aims for PoT:

1. to improve and develop an understanding of personal approaches to curriculum delivery;
2. to enhance and extend teaching techniques and styles of presentation through collaboration;
3. to engage in and re®ne interpersonal skills through the exchange of insights relating to the review of a speci®c teaching performance;
4. to expand personal skills of evaluation and self-appraisal;
5. to develop and re®ne curriculum planning skills in collaboration with a colleague; and
6. to identify areas of subject understanding and teaching activity which have a particular merit or are in need of further development. [490]

Therefore it could be argued that peer observation is about, firstly, accountability and is seen as mandatory in some universities (Allen, 2002); secondly, that peer observation acts to enhance teaching and learning through personal reflection (Brown & Jones, 1993; Cosh, 1998); and, thirdly, that peer observation can improve teaching and learning by fostering discussion and dissemination of best practice (Gosling, 2000).

According to Gosling (2000), in 1999 the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA – a government-funded body contracted to ensure the quality of education within higher education establishments) made it clear that where a department is operating a good peer observation process, this will reduce the need to carry out a comprehensive observation of teaching during the review. It is difficult to assess the role of quality assurance in promoting PoT. Observations of teaching made as a result of the QAA drive did not arouse the same resistance as government initiatives to impose performance pay culture on the sector (Allen, 2002). Moreover, observation was on the Subject Review - a QAA system to establish whether institutional practices are operating within subject areas - methodology checklist, which may have proved a strong incentive for higher education institutions to develop such a process. Interestingly, direct observation by the QAA was intended to provide the assessors with a clear picture of the relationship between the academic staff and their students by considering: (1) effectiveness of communication, (2) provision of stimuli for further independent study, and (3) adequate information on the classes they (the students) attend (Milton, 2001). However, the current QAA Handbook for Academic Review (this involves higher education institutions looking at their own quality processes, peer observation being one of the processes that is growing in significance) suggests that academic reviewers need not make direct observations where there is evidence of good-quality delivery through a system of peer observation (QAA, 2000, para. 70). Nevertheless, the value of PoT to institutional learning and teaching practice is far greater than to remove this need (Allen, 2002).

This article focuses on the role of PoT in the context of the processes, the expected outcomes and the realities of two alternative models used in different schools in one university. Thus, this article reports on an evaluation of PoT in practice, using qualitative data from tutors; identifies how systems can stagnate if the process is not managed with a clear focus and goals; and illustrates the need to see both the breadth (such as Martin and Double's six aims) and depth (as part of staff development and teaching and learning strategies) of the process of peer observation.

Implementing peer observation

The majority of the literature published on peer observation concentrates on the mechanisms for its implementation. Most follow a design which involves a pre-observation meeting, the actual observation and a post-observation session. This process encompasses exchange and feedback between the observer and the observee (Fullerton, 1993; Orsmond, 1993). Guidance has been offered on how PoT can be implemented, with a particular stress on the post-observation feedback meeting. [491]

Feedback meetings need to be held as soon as possible after the observation so that the nuances of the session observed are fresh in the mind (Martin & Double, 1998). In addition, if practitioners have the skills which allow for the constructive criticism of practice and are able to accept the worth of such judgements the process will encourage professional development (Hogston, 1995). Therefore, it is not only the skills of the observer that are important, but also the willingness of the observee to be reflective about their own teaching practice.

A number of studies have linked PoT to enhancing professional practice (Beaty, 1998; Race, 2001). Allen (2002) commented on how PoT was embedded and supported within three post-1992 universities and a university college. Allen considered the perspectives of staff, union officers and academic and institutional managers. Staff commented that they valued the feedback from colleagues for developing their practice. In addition, Bell (2002) found that the effects of PoT were significant in the educational development of academic staff in Australian universities. In school education, Manning (1986) has advocated rotating cycles of staff as trained peer observers. The result of this is an increased probability for a school-wide focus on improving teaching skills. This may also be worthy of consideration within a higher education setting, where the process of scholarly dialogue can be expanded from teams into whole departments, and key issues can be discussed as part of the normal committee system. As a consequence, information from a peer review programme can provide an open forum for teaching and learning issues across faculty groups and levels, thereby providing opportunities to disseminate knowledge on various teaching topics and preventing `pedagogical solitude' (Martsolf et al., 1999). The adoption of whole departmental engagement would help identify the key development needs of staff (Gilpin, 2000). This would enable the creation of Departmental Action Plans that target staff development concerns (Gosling, 2000). Such plans are a way of integrating PoT with other elements, like teaching seminars and away days, (Blackwell & McLean, 1996).

Gosling (2002) suggests that there are three differing models of PoT currently employed. The first is an evaluation model, where senior staff observe other staff and make judgements which feed into the observee's subsequent promotion prospects. The second is a developmental model, where educational developers or expert teachers observe others, the findings from which lead to recommendations for improvement and inform an action plan. The third is a peer review model, where teachers observe each other, discuss and mutually reflect in a non-judgemental environment. Here the value of the observation is stressed for both parties involved.

Methodology

This study is based on the peer observation practices of two academic schools within one `post-1992' university that were piloting alternative systems for adoption by the other academic departments. Guidance and information documents relating to the operation of the peer observation process were gathered from both schools. Following this, semi-structured interviews were conducted with lecturing staff immediately [492] following the completion of the peer observation process over one academic year. Five observers and four observees were interviewed from each school, giving a total of 18 interviews and providing a reasonable balance of views and experiences. Observers and observees were asked to volunteer and were then selected on the basis of providing a range of age and experience. In addition, deans and associate deans were interviewed to gather their thoughts about how the PoT system was intended to work and how it currently worked in practice.

Two models of peer observation

Data were gathered on the peer observation process from the School of Law and the School of Sciences within one `post-1992' university in the UK. The School of Law had adopted a model of peer observation that involved staff in developing paperwork, training observers and linking developmental outcomes to staff appraisal. The School of Sciences included four separate departments and had adopted a system of trios whereby each person was observed by the other two within their group.

School of Law

Law operated a system of peer observation that was under the auspices of the associate dean, and was adopted and developed by the school's lecturing staff. Initially, the more senior lecturers were asked to volunteer as peer observers. They were then trained in the process of peer observation by an external advisor, and began developing peer observation materials as a team. Staff ownership of these materials was considered as very important by the deans. However, the quality of the training was in some doubt, and as a consequence the peer observers met together as a group and agreed between themselves the purpose of their role, continuing the development of the paperwork to accompany and support this:

> that wasn't the most successful, the actual training wasn't … so since then as new observers come on board we've asked them to shadow the trained observers. (Associate Dean, Law)

The Dean also explained that the list of issues peer observers took into account reflected QAA practices: `the checklist that they've got is not a million miles away from the old QAA list'.

Asked how peer observers were selected, the Associate Dean explained they were chosen from those staff who volunteered for the role:

> the member of staff had to be an experienced teacher, they also had to be somebody who had credibility with their peers and they would also have to be people who were not confrontational. (Associate Dean, Law)

One member of staff was selected to coordinate the peer observation process, acting to bring peer observers together on a regular basis to discuss issues and talk about strategies they might use in observing: [493]

> a focus group was set up of all the peer observers … and they talked about the problems they were facing and the things that needed to be changed. (Associate Dean, Law)

The coordinator's role also involved distributing the paperwork at appropriate times, collecting observers' feedback on the general issues they were meeting during observations and writing a report to present to the Associate Dean in order to identify staff development needs. This model of peer observation most closely aligns with Gosling's `developmental' model. Thus, more experienced staff observe and advise other staff and make general recommendations for staff development that best meet the needs across the department. Initially, however, the stage involving reporting training needs proved a little complex as it became apparent that the training needed might be specific to the individual observed. This raised particularly difficult issues, as the Associate Dean highlighted:

> One of the issues that we have is in putting that staff development provision in place. Are you then able to target the individuals that need it most … am I able to go back and say to `X' we're putting this on for you, you know everyone is welcome but you have to be there, that is a really contentious issue. (Associate Dean, Law)

Given the strictly confidential nature of the process, the deans decided to close this loop by linking the process to appraisal. This involved asking the peer observers and observees to agree some developmental outcomes that could go forward to their appraisal session. Appraisers would see the developmental outcomes only and not any other information.

The process of observation is initiated each year when the coordinator supplies the trained observers with a list of observees and the appropriate paperwork. Observees should not be part of the same lecturing team as their observer. This is intended to help avoid any conflict of interests. The paperwork includes a form to explain the PoT process to the observee, and to give them an opportunity to identify particular issues they would like the observer to consider. There is also a sheet to record observations and a further form to be completed by the observer and observee, making any necessary recommendations, which both sign as an accurate record. The intention is that each observer observes the same person for three years. The observers make informal contact with their observees. Observees may at this point reject their observer, and request someone different, providing they have good reason. Once contact has been made, dates are agreed for a pre-observation meeting and the observation itself. Observers then talk to observees in a pre-observation session about what the observation will concentrate on and any issues the observee wishes to raise about the process. The observee informs the observer about the context of the session and provides them with copies of information they will be using. With experienced colleagues, the common format was that this session seemed to be slotted in just prior to the observation itself. Once the observation has taken place initial feedback is given immediately or as soon as possible afterwards. The idea is that this quick feedback should concentrate on the positive. Then a more leisurely post-observation feedback session is arranged where any issues arising are discussed and agreed and from which [494] the observer can fill in feedback paperwork with the observee. The Dean commented that he felt the process to be helpful:

> I think it's helped a lot of staff prepare their portfolios for the learning and teaching people (Dean, Law).

School of Sciences

The School of Sciences has adopted a system of trios, with all lecturers taking on the roles of `observer' and `observed'. Here each member of the trio observes and is observed and consequently has the opportunity to engage in an ongoing evaluation of the benefits of PoT. This process allows staff to develop their teaching via the support of other trio members. This contrasts with the School of Law, where only trained staff could peer observe. In the sciences the focus is on the sharing and encouragement of good practice in the support of student learning:

> The model is meant to be developmental and reflective. All staff are observees and observers rather than an audit model with trained observers. ¼[This] shows a collective awareness for the improving practice, it shows that teaching and learning is important. (Associate Dean, Sciences)

Each department appoints a coordinator to manage and to implement the peer observation process. One member of the trio acts as the facilitator. Each department then makes their selection of trios on the basis of one of the following models: the coordinator assigns people to groups; the coordinator picks names randomly to select groups; or the groups are self-selecting. Each member of the trio observes and is observed twice during the year.

> It's devolved to the fields the actual operation within certain parameters … to work in Trios … involving staff who work together during the year … they're all supportive of what they do and there is that sort of atmosphere that people don't feel threatened. (Associate Dean, Sciences)

In addition, the Associate Dean emphasized that peer observation should, as an ideal, involve a variety of teaching and learning contexts:

> all the group as a whole should aim for different learning contexts and not just lectures although I believe it's mainly lectures that people observe. (Associate Dean, Sciences)

This system of peer observation is similar to Gosling's `peer review' model, where the process can be beneficial for all through the development of joint reflection and discussion. The systems of pre-observation, observation and feedback are similar to Law. There are four forms that are intended to help focus the process, including an evaluation sheet which should be filled in by the trio. It is here that the trios can identify where the PoT has been beneficial and can identify where staff development could be useful:

> each trio should fill in the form at the end of a year which should summarize the main issues that have arisen … and secondly any implications for training and development. (Associate Dean, Sciences) [495]

The forms are a way of ensuring that PoT is taking place, and that individual feedback and associated action points are fed back into the overall process of enhancing the quality of learning and teaching at department/division level. At the end of semester two, the facilitators should make a summary of the main issues arising from the feedback sessions and record this evidence. This is forwarded to the coordinator, who will make a summary of points from each trio, highlighting good practice and areas for staff development. Once a year PoT coordinators will meet with the associate dean responsible for learning and teaching to review how the process of PoT has operated across the school.

The similarities and differences between the two schools can be summarized as follows:

- Both schools emphasize confidentiality.
- Both schools have similar documentation requirements, namely observation advice and report back forms. However, the School of Sciences has a self-evaluation form in addition to the other documents.

- In both schools observers report back to the coordinator, who in turn makes a written summary report at the end of the observation period to the Associate Dean.
- Both schools have the intention of linking the peer observation process to staff development.
- The School of Law links peer observation to the appraisal process through recommendations for professional development.
- The School of Law has trained observers, all of whom are promoted beyond the lecturer grade.
- The School of Law prefers observers to conduct observations with lecturers on teams other than their own.
- The School of Sciences involves all the lecturing staff in both observing and being observed.
- The School of Sciences sees advantages in observing those you work with and are comfortable with.

Perceptions of peer observation

Lecturers interviewed in both schools were generally supportive of the formality of the peer observation procedures. Reasons given for this were that the formality ensured that peer observation happened and that it happened in a structured manner. Lecturers interviewed considered that this encouraged a more standardized experience across each school, and a shared understanding of what was expected of both the observer and observee. However, interviews in the School of Law indicated that staff here were particularly supportive of a formalized structure. In addition, over half of the lecturers interviewed were of the opinion that having an experienced member of staff to act as observer made the exercise more meaningful, not only because such an observer has a wealth of experience that may add value to the reflective process, but [496] also because this may help to avert a system whereby the process of observation becomes too cosy:

> I think that the only people who should be observing are recognized experienced lecturers. I don't think there's any benefit in having your best mate who's also down the corridor. (Law Observee)

Although the School of Sciences was not operating peer observation in this way, a Sciences observee commented that: `I know people in our department who are more experienced in teaching and I treat them as a resource'. This would indicate that experience is viewed as a resource in both schools and may also highlight dangers within the Sciences that valuable developmental opportunities could be lost if experienced lecturers are not represented within each of the trios.

Responses from the School of Sciences were more mixed on the issue of formality. Some of the Sciences lecturers believed that formalizing the process had created a more stressful environment, and imposed structures that curtailed previous freedoms. These lecturers believed that change and self-reflective development happened more readily through informal support networks, and that formalization of the structures of peer observation (e.g. through written reports) inhibited this process. Nevertheless, some scientists did support greater structuring:

> I'm not one for appraisals that say whether you get a pay rise or you don't … but I think [we need] a much better structured appraisal type system, reviews for people you know more often than annually … and build in all these type of things like peer observation and staff development and all of that. (Sciences Observee)

It was certainly the case that after initial suspicion of the links between appraisal and peer observation in Law, this was accepted as an important developmental element of the process. In addition, one of the Law observees made the point that highly structured pre- and post-observation sessions, in the sense of having a particular procedure to go through, were not necessarily the most formal. In this case having a clear-cut agenda allowed for a meaningful and relaxed discussion around pertinent issues:

> The most recent one was the most … informal and very structured so that well ahead of the event in plenty of notice … we picked the optimum time which was a sort of lecture session … it was most meticulous at every stage … we had a pre-meeting … at the end we had a brief feedback session and then we've done all the follow-up work … the personal development plan and stuff … So I found the most recent one the best. (Law Observee)

Another issue perceived as a potential problem by a number of those interviewed was one of receiving criticism:

> I can imagine if you had a person who's reviewed you very negatively it could damage your confidence quite badly … well it would me anyway … it would make me very self aware. (Sciences Observee)

Nevertheless, the general message was that such threats lessened with experience of the process:

> People are less anxious about the process now than they were when we first began (Law Observer). [497]

Concerns were also voiced about the circumstances in which observations take place alongside the potential for the observer being present to influence the session observed:

> I did observe, as a TQA [teaching quality assessment] specialist, tutorials and felt quite uncomfortable … being in a group of five … you can't just hide, it's quite hard to do in small group situations and not to … influence what's happening … it's a more complex environment to do observation. (Associate Dean, Sciences)

Lecturers did attempt to be as sensitive to the situation in which they were making their observations as possible. It was considered by both schools that the process should be viewed positively and as a negotiation between peers:

> it's a two-way process: the observers should not be seen as the school police people and I don't think they are (Dean, Law).

In addition, a number of observers pointed out that they benefited from the observation process:

> I get more out of it as an observer than I do being observed. (Law Observer)

> I get more out of it as an observer … because you set your own agenda … you actually look for things that you know you are not very good at … maybe you don't end sessions well, or you're bad at generating questions, things you wouldn't admit to anybody else. When you are sitting there as an observer you have two agendas, the official and there's the more personal one, such as `I think I'm weak at X, let's see how X is handled by other people'. (Sciences Observer)

This poses an interesting dilemma, as it seems that both providing learning and teaching expertise in making observations and being able to play the role of observee and observer make a valued contribution to the peer observation process, each element being provided by a different model. It is only within the Sciences that everyone is able to gain experience of observing as well as being observed, and this raises questions about whether or not the Law observees are missing out on a valuable learning experience. Yet, it is also only in Law that you can be observed by someone who can offer the benefits and insights that experience brings.

Differences in perceptions

Whilst both Schools had arrangements for pre- and post-observation sessions, it appeared that the arrangements in the Sciences were less formal than in Law: [we have] an informal chat before, just saying where I'm going to be and how long the lecture is for'. And, after the observation was completed:

> I'll just go and have a chat with the person who sat in my lecture (Sciences Observee).

This indicates that, in order for the pre- and post-observation element of peer observation to be carried out effectively, there is a need for a clear follow-up to check that each of the trios is benefiting from this valuable part of the process. For example, one Sciences observee seemed unaware that a pre-observation session existed, and expressed a need for one so that the observer could be informed about the session they [498] would be observing. Another observee hoped to add structure to the observation and direct the observer's attention to particular aspects of the teaching and learning observed:

> its quite an informal process. I've actually made it more formal by … producing a teaching observation form to use when they're watching me. (Sciences Observee)

Pre-observation sessions were an intended part of the process, as was a discussion about issues that the observee would like the observer to take account of or pay particular attention to. This indicates a certain unevenness related to the implementation of the peer observation process across the Sciences departments. As a consequence, the meaningfulness of the pre- and post-observation discussions is brought into question. In some cases the pre-observation meeting seemed to involve little more than arranging a time for the observation.

There was a difference in response between schools on the issue of observer training, which seemed related to their differing experiences. The observers in the School of Law felt their training to be important, but also that they needed to take time, reflect and discuss issues as observers and revisit their training needs:

> One thing I did find helpful in the beginning and again I'm sure it's just time and everything … we're supposed to meet on a regular basis the people doing peer observation … although maybe there wouldn't be a lot to talk about … I suspect it would be useful if we met once or twice a year just to update ourselves, let's face it, it's over four years now since we had the training. (Law Observer)

There was considerable praise for the high standards and quality of observation in general, but there did appear to be some inconsistencies. Given the lack of time allocated for Law observers to reflect and discuss as a group, it seemed unlikely that these inconsistencies would be picked up.

Attitudes in the Sciences were somewhat contrasting. In some cases training was regarded as an inhibitor to insightfulness.

> it's a situation where you become overtrained and if you've been trained to look for specific things you're then going to perhaps miss something that could be vitally important … whereas sometimes I think it's very good to go in with a very open mind and to come out and say `well what did I gain from that session and what personally did I gain from that session, let me compare that with what you think the students gained from that session'. (Sciences Observee)

The danger of this system is that the process becomes `woolly' and inconsistent, no one being sure about the issues to think about and feed back on. Another Sciences observee argued that it was unnecessary to train specific observers, but that there might be advantages if one or two people were trained to act as advisors on the process:

> I don't think it's necessary to be trained because I think that … it might be more difficult to arrange observations … it could put people off to be honest … but it may be useful to have … two people around who are specifically trained … then you could ask them. (Sciences Observee)

It would seem from the interviews that, in the School of Law, training and experience [499] form an important part of the process. In general they believed it had a positive impact, tightened through the link to appraisal where they take forward particular developmental issues. However, the system is reliant on being coordinated effectively, so that everyone is aware of their role and responsibilities. The Sciences lecturers saw advantages in having more freedom in their choice of focus for observation. This then allowed for more reflective and developmental discussion. However, this approach ran the risk of becoming unfocused and therefore of limited developmental advantage. Such attitudes may reflect the particular experiences within the Schools and an acceptance of the approach of the school. There seemed to be advantages in training observers, because firstly it helps nurture a critical culture, and secondly it fosters an ability to reflect in a more structured and careful manner.

Reflections of experience

In both schools observers and observees were unclear about the net results of peer observation sessions. In the School of Law one obvious outcome was that any development targets were taken forward to staff appraisal sessions. In this way the peer observation loop was closed in terms of individual development. However, observers and observees were unsure about how this process informed the development needs and issues around learning and teaching across the school:

> as a general comment no training initiatives have come out … of the programme (Law Observer).

Therefore, whilst individual developmental needs were being met through appraisal, the process was not seen as contributing to wider school developmental initiatives, and this was a point of criticism from staff. It would seem that the meaningfulness of peer observation is increased when all can see an obvious school wide developmental outcome. In the case of the Sciences trios, the whole process was even more difficult to follow up, given the wide-ranging nature of the school. Some departments adhered more strictly to the process than others, and again there was a lack of clarity about what happened to the information once gathered. Therefore, in both cases it seemed important that final reports should be shared with the staff and development issues raised across the board:

> I think the process would be more useful if there was some way in which we could feed back the general findings so that at the end of the year we might have … someone who is in charge of the peer observation process who just pulls out the key things and says these things have been observed as good practice across the board and these things have been identified as bad practice or as problems for us to watch out for. (Sciences Observer)

Thus, the role of the coordinator is very important and should be used to draw out and publicize needs and for a shared developmental process.

Perceptions and purposes

Both schools had perceptions about the purposes of PoT which related to [500] implementation. For example, some interviewees alluded to issues around the quality of learning and teaching:

> I suppose from the Law School's point of view there is a kind of audit element that ensures the quality of teaching is across the broad range acceptable according to certain standards. (Law Observee)

This development in the quality of learning and teaching was considered to be especially important for new staff:

> I think it might be very valuable … particularly to someone who is relatively new to teaching providing that you get the full de-brief and that you don't feel that you're simply being criticized. (Law Observee)

In terms of dissemination, this lecturer takes the stance that PoT is also about conducting evaluations rather than clearly identifying ways in which teaching can be improved. Peer observation was also argued to be most useful when the process is first introduced, with these effects reduced over time.

> It's useful in the early stages … there is a problem doing the same thing year in year out … there becomes a threshold which having been reached needs to be pushed or changed in format. (Sciences Observee)

In this case there were indications that there might be benefits if cross-school observations were conducted. Some lecturers had previous experience of observing in other departments or schools. As a consequence, these staff saw advantages in discovering how different disciplines approached the craft of teaching. Consequently, when asked whether observation should happen across school boundaries, most thought it might be beneficial:

> actually sitting in classes taught by people in a different school was quite interesting just to see how they handled classes of different sizes and how they taught different types of subject material and different methods that they used. (Sciences Observee)

In addition, lecturers pointed out that an observation across schools was likely to focus on different things. For example, if the observer understands the materials being taught during an observation, they may well concentrate on the subject and its delivery. However, if they are observing an unfamiliar subject area, their focus will be much more on the student experience, such as whether the subject was clearly explained and the main teaching points delivered. Nevertheless, there was some concern about going into an area where the subject and the teaching styles were totally alien. In this case, the interviewees thought that they would not be able to make an informed decision or judgement of the session, although they did not go so far as to suggest it was detrimental:

> It couldn't do any harm I suppose so long as we're not expected to criticize people for something we perhaps don't understand. (Sciences Observer)

Again, this demonstrates the perception of peer observation as an evaluation process.

In order for good quality dissemination of practice to happen it is important for the purpose of PoT to be clear. Other issues such as the social context of PoT were also seen as important: [501]

> Essentially it's a confidence-building exercise … that's the purpose for an experienced lecturer like me … it gives you chance to sit down with someone who's experienced … and if you have someone who's acting as friend rather than being judgemental it's probably the only mechanism we have got. (Law Observee)

> [I]t helps considerably to draw people together, I've got to know all members of staff in social work over the years. (Law Observer)

Peer observation is seen as a way of monitoring learning and teaching which is viewed as beneficial for and supportive of the professional development of lecturers. It is also a way of encouraging and developing new staff. Such gains could be made both within or across school boundaries. However, there were dangers identified if the process became stale.

Conclusion

This article identifies various complexities involved in delivering PoT and raises concerns over how the process can be managed and integrated. There are three main considerations: first, the management of the process; second, the links between PoT and staff development; and third, the impact peer observation can have on learning and teaching. PoT is a developmental process, and decisions about this practice need to take this into consideration. The way in which schemes have been implemented has been well documented, but how the PoT scheme develops and grows has not been so well researched.

One interesting question raised by this evidence is around the nature of `peers'. In the Law School it is interesting to note that it is more senior and experienced staff who observe. They also value training as important. This relates to Hogston's (1995) point that practitioners need the skills to be able to criticize practice constructively in order to encourage professional development. Manning (1986) also argued that involving all staff in observing (when trained to do so) improves teaching on a school-wide basis. This indicates that there may be benefits for all staff in being trained as observers, with opportunities made available to them to conduct observations. In both schools, there was an acceptance that observation was a useful learning tool. Thus, it is possible that if less experienced staff acted as observers of more experienced staff they would gain considerably from seeing good practice in operation.

It was apparent that there was general agreement that observees received the judgements of the observer. Even in the case of the Sciences, where trios were operating, staff were concerned about negative feedback and criticism. If, as Brown and Jones (1993) pointed out, reflection enhances learning and teaching, it is vital to engage in high-quality feedback processes. It is clear that interpersonal relationships and the process of reflection are of key importance to the quality of the peer observation experience (and these are issues which will be considered in detail in a second article). Not only is discussion important but, as Gosling (2000) argues, so is dissemination. Both schools professed systems which linked to wider staff development, but this process was not evident as far as the lecturers were concerned. This seems an opportunity lost and, as Gilpin (2000) argued, departmental engagement [502] can help identify key developmental needs. In addition, lecturers were keen to receive some form of general feedback at the school level about where they were as a school and what issues they needed to tackle. Law was the only school with any formally identifiable links to individual staff development and this was through the appraisal system.

It is important, when developing systems of peer observation, that schools have a commonality of purpose and perceptions about it. It is also a system that needs regularly refreshing in order for it to feel relevant to all lecturers regardless of their teaching expertise or experience of the system. It is important that PoT does not stagnate by becoming repetitive. If the observer and observee cover the same issues regarding personal approaches to curriculum, teaching styles and subject understanding, then little development will be forthcoming. For this reason it is vital that PoT be integrated into not only school but departmental learning and teaching strategies. PoT should be seen as an opportunity for scholarly discussion and also provide an opportunity to develop particular teaching and learning themes, which may give focus to the PoT process.

In addition, this article has shown that it is possible to tailor individual staff development needs by linking these issues to the appraisal system in a manner which lecturers find acceptable. This means making explicit the aspects of learning and teaching that need to be given consideration, and moving lecturers beyond a position where they feel the process is simply about the content and mechanics of the lesson being taught. If it is the reflective process where the greatest inroads into the quality of learning and teaching are seen, then reflection needs to be emphasized for both individual lecturers and school-wide. This process can be supported through a clear structure, with emphasis placed on pre- and post-observation sessions where appropriate time and thought is allocated. This can be reinforced at a school level through the feedback of issues pertinent to the school at school-wide meetings. Here, issues can be opened to debate in a depersonalized format and general agreements relating to the quality of learning and teaching made.

At present, peer observation of teaching is seen to provide support for academics in a time of change. Given the change in emphasis from the QAA, this process will become increasingly important. In addition, the Higher Education White Paper (Department for Education and Skills, 2003) is advocating rewards for excellent teaching and the development of a Teaching Quality Agency. Thus, processes of peer observation may come under further scrutiny though there would undoubtedly be resistance to linking PoT with performance criteria. Consequently, PoT needs to be more than a mutually supportive club if it is to deliver the expressed outcomes neatly summarized by Martin and Double (1998).

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THE AUSTRALIAN WEDNESDAY SEPTEMBER 19 2007

HIGHER EDUCATION 29

Take a long talk from a sure peer

Teachers must look to each other for honest evaluation, writes **Kelly Farrell**

THE value of student evaluations of teaching has been debated in the *HES* over the past few weeks. John McDonald and Alice Mills questioned SET as a valid reflection of the effectiveness of teaching (Flaws in the SET system, *HES* August 8), while Martin Davies and his University of Melbourne colleagues argued that students were a valuable source in evaluating teaching but it was necessary to understand the influences on SET and to use the data in an appropriate context (Let's evaluate the possibilities, *HES* September 12).

While SET provides important feedback about teaching, it is not the only method of evaluating teaching effectiveness. Peer review of teaching is another method for getting feedback and one that is underused in Australian universities.

I do not want to argue that peer review should replace SET, but rather that its potential as a complementary method for the evaluation and, moreover, the enhancement of teaching in Australian universities has been, with some notable exceptions, overlooked.

One reason may be limited conceptions of what peer review of teaching actually entails. It is sometimes assumed that it must be a purely evaluative, "top-down" process where a senior member of the department sits in on a class and constructs a summation of suitability as a university teacher based on this single visit. The data gleaned is solely for the purpose of reporting, and the results may be represented on a numerical scale or on a pass/fail basis.

This is certainly one model of peer review, and it's sometimes used in Australian universities, but it is just one in a range of possible approaches.

At the other end of the spectrum is the reciprocal model of peer review of teaching. In this approach, two or sometimes more colleagues, regardless of position or status, team up to review each other's teaching, each in turn acting as reviewer and reviewee and, at various stages, engaging in conversation about teaching. Written reports are usually exchanged at the end of the process, following these oral exchanges.

The beauty of this approach is that the focus of review does not have to be confined to classroom observation. The gamut of teaching activities can be reviewed, from curriculum design to choice of assessment; use of technology to the research-teaching nexus, or whatever teaching activities are relevant to the particular material, subject or course being taught.

This is particularly good news for teachers who may not be the most flamboyant in the classroom but who show excellence in other aspects of their teaching practice.

University teachers who undertake this process are often surprised that, while they benefited from being reviewed, it was the opportunity to observe, discuss and reflect on their colleagues' teaching that really allowed them to critically reflect on their own teaching and consequently resulted in valuable insights and ideas for their practice.

Opportunity is the operative word here and leads me to another reason why peer review of teaching is not as common in Australian universities as it might be, and this rests on the unfortunate dichotomy of research and teaching. While the notion that research will be peer reviewed is universally accepted — academic careers are, after all, built on it — teaching in Australian universities remains very much a private domain.

One young international academic who came to Australia to take up a position once told me that his inquiries to senior colleagues about sitting in on their classes were met with near hostility: "It's not something we do here," was the response.

> One young academic told me that his inquiries to senior colleagues about sitting in on classes were met with near hostility

There is a curious tension here: staff frequently (and, to some extent, understandably) lament the status given to student evaluations because of students' sometimes narrow conceptions of what is involved in good teaching, yet there is also reluctance to have those who do know — colleagues — provide feedback and suggestions for improvement.

As a result, a wealth of opportunity for conversations and collaborations to enhance teaching fall by the wayside.

When reciprocal peer review is used alongside SET, the teacher is provided with more rounded feedback from two valuable sources, useful not only for individuals looking at ways to enhance their teaching, but also where supplying evidence for their promotion and confirmation processes is concerned.

Another spin-off of the peer review process is that it can aid in increasing collegiality and local support of teachers by giving colleagues the chance to start a conversation about what they do in the classroom and why they do it.

But questions are yet to be answered about how peer review can bridge the managerial-collegial divide, and this is where progress needs to be made if peer review of teaching is to become a more accepted activity in Australian universities.

Embedding peer review in an institution's policies and procedures and ensuring alignment between this and other frameworks (such as SET and promotion, for example) is also crucial.

Ensuring the quality of teaching should not be regarded as a solely managerial concern; all members of an academic department and, indeed, an institution have responsibility for evaluating and improving teaching.

Seeing evaluation methods such as SET or peer review of teaching as simply satisfying managerial demands places the responsibility for the improvement of teaching outside the department, when it is really a shared concern at all levels of an institution.

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