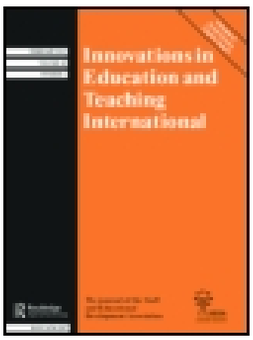

Innovations in Education and Training International

ISSN: 1355-8005 (Print) 1469-8420 (Online) Journal homepage: http://srhe.tandfonline.com/loi/riie19

Peer Observation in Higher Education -- A Reflective Approach

Jill Cosh

To cite this article: Jill Cosh (1998) Peer Observation in Higher Education -- A Reflective Approach, Innovations in Education and Training International, 35:2, 171-176, DOI: 10.1080/1355800980350211

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1355800980350211

Peer Observation in Higher Education – A Reflective Approach

Jill Cosh *Anglia Polytechnic University*

SUMMARY

Peer observation of teaching is currently receiving widespread interest, and is being implemented in numerous institutions in all sectors of education. There appears to be, however, some uncertainty or controversy over the rationale for this and the role of the observer. In the light of this, we should be very clear about exactly what our objectives are for the implementation of peer observation, and the best way to achieve these, before espousing a potentially divisive and detrimental procedure. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to examine some popular models of peer observation and their potential drawbacks, and to put the case for the implementation of a more active and reflective model, where the focus is less on the observed and more on the active self-development of the observer.

INTRODUCTION

Recently there has been widespread interest in peer observation of teachers and teaching. This is partly in response to the demands of HEFCE assessment, and partly a reflection of a current awareness of the need to foster teacher development and professional growth, and to adapt to the changing demands of the higher education system. There is, however, some confusion or uncertainty over whether the purpose of this is development or accountability, and consequently over the role of the observer. The majority of teachers in all sectors have only observed or been observed during inspections or in the course of their initial training, when they either observed those more experienced than themselves in order to learn, or were in their turn observed by trainers for the purpose of advice or assessment. They have very rarely, if ever, observed their peers. They are, therefore, unsure over whether the purpose of peer observation is to learn or to assess. In higher education many teachers have not even had this experience of observation. This confusion became evident during our recent School of Languages meeting over the implementation of peer observation, where there was much heated discussion, and where many staff clearly felt threatened by an approach which appeared to involve some judgement of their teaching by their peers, however supportive or constructive this might or might not be. Many of the papers written on this subject (Brown *et al.*, 1993) appear to reinforce this approach, with an emphasis on the evaluation of the observed and the nature of the feedback, 'The aim of the observation is to help improve the skills of the observed, therefore quality feedback is essential' (Fullerton, 1993, p 82)

SOME MODELS OF PEER OBSERVATION

Appraisal models

From interviews with teachers that I carried out prior to the implementation of our own scheme, it would appear that there is in practice a wide range of models of peer observation of teaching, from those explicitly for accountability and assessment to those aimed at staff development. Some of them are clearly for the purpose of appraisal: in certain schools in Florida there has been a system of observation of the teaching of colleagues linked to merit pay awards, with feedback given to teachers and submitted to management: this appears to have been discontinued due to staff and

union opposition. Other schemes, as for example at Richmond College, are imposed from above and linked to staff appraisal; each member of staff having to observe a colleague and give written feedback, which is then discussed at staff appraisal interviews. The general response to this seems to be a lack of commitment, since this is viewed and carried out by the participants as yet another administrative procedure over which they have no control. It is at its worst divisive; however, the majority of staff are supportive of their colleagues and write only positive comments, and the process becomes, therefore, a form of mutual back-patting, meaningless for genuine staff development.

Other models

Other models attempt to address these problems, are for the purpose of development rather than appraisal, and are more constructive. There is often discussion between those involved about the protocol of the observation and the nature of the feedback. As Jones (1993, p 31) puts it: 'Both must then agree on what is to be observed, when, and what methods will be used for observing.'

Some models are based on pair observation or trios (Orsmond, 1997) – potentially less threatening, but very limited in scope. Others involve larger groups (Brown, 1993), with the observer either being selected by the observed or by some administrative procedure. Yet others are based on the videoing of teaching, which then becomes the subject for discussion (Claydon and McDowell, 1993). In most of these cases there is an emphasis on the constructive nature of the feedback, the sensitivity of the observer, and the recognition of good practice rather than the locating of bad practice. However, the aim of the feedback is generally the same: to evaluate and comment on the teaching of the observed, often according to a list of pre-agreed criteria.

RELEVANCE TO STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The emphasis in all of the above models is on teachers and teaching being developed through the comments and judgements of others. The contention of this paper is that this is in essence a passive approach, which, for a number of reasons, would not seem conducive to genuine professional growth and development.

Importance of self-development

First, there seems to be no real evidence that people develop and improve through the judgements or comments of others. These may be of value at an initial teacher training stage, although even then the development of self-awareness is equally, if not more, crucial. In the case of experienced teachers, a natural reaction to explicit or even implied criticism is to become defensive and inimical to suggestions of change. Even if a teacher is receptive to suggestions, there is still an emphasis on being developed by others, rather than on the self-awareness and active self-development of a reflective professional. Consider Wajnryb (1992, p 10).

> teachers themselves are the primary initiators of their own development. The spirit of enquiry, the wish to reflect on one's own teaching, perhaps to explore other paths, comes from within the practitioner; it cannot be imposed from outside and then measured by some objective assessment tool.

What is good teaching?

Second, it is questionable whether the observer is qualified to make valid judgements or suggestions. Given the subjective nature of teaching, the ill-defined and constantly shifting nature of notions of good teaching, different learner preferences, and the lack of any proof of how students learn most successfully (for an account of this with relation to second language learning see Ellis, 1994), it seems that none of us are qualified to make judgements on the teaching of our peers, and that our judgements are, therefore, of questionable value to anyone other than ourselves. Good teaching is an art not a science, and is more than merely the summation of good practice: it is an interaction of often intangible elements, impossible to define in a list of criteria. Moreover, it could be argued that a good teacher should not only be self-aware and open-minded, but have confidence, enthusiasm, a sense of professional worth, and a willingness to experiment. None of these would seem to be encouraged or reinforced by some form of assessment, however benign, by our peers. Another danger is that there is a focus on the technicalities of teaching, such as the use of the whiteboard, because these are easy to highlight and quantify; and although these are not unimportant, they are surely not the essence of good teaching. There is also the possibility that those being observed will attempt to give a model lesson, which is of little value to the dissemination of more general good teaching practice.

Team building

Third, another recent concern is that of team building. It is important for the well-being of any unit that there is a feeling of trust and support between the members. This can only be undermined by setting colleagues up in judgement of each other. Those of us who are teacher trainers know that giving constructive feedback is an extremely demanding skill, for which we ourselves are, or should be, trained. In the hands of those without training it can be particularly dangerous, causing bad feeling and defensiveness among colleagues. On the other hand, many teachers will find the challenge of trying to make criticisms in a constructive manner too risky, and will confine themselves instead merely to positive comments – good for team building perhaps, but of questionable value to staff development. There are of course times when a teacher is believed to be ineffective and observation for assessment is felt to be necessary; this, however, should not normally be carried out by peers, and should not be confused or equated with observation for staff development purposes.

A REFLECTIVE APPROACH

We should not, however, abandon the notion of peer observation. Observation is an invaluable form of staff development: it demands little in the way of extra resources, and can play a crucial role in preventing teachers from becoming isolated and routinized. Research also shows (Lortie, 1975) that the greatest influence on the way we teach is neither theories of education nor our training, but is instead our notion of good teaching derived from our own experience of being taught. In the light of this, it seems essential that we should extend our exposure to different teaching styles and approaches once we are ourselves teachers and have the experience to gain a greater benefit from these insights.

The concept of reflection

Our role as observer, however, in this case is radically different: We are observing in order to reflect upon our own teaching and for active self-development, rather than to make judgements upon others. There has been much discussion recently about the reflective practitioner (Schön, 1983), where learning is seen as the construction of personal meaning from knowledge and experience; a concept which has been extended by others (Calderhead and Gates, 1993) to include not only reflection in action but also reflection on action, both before and after teaching, and creative reflection – on theories and procedures. It is this third notion of reflection which is addressed through peer observation; the rationale of the observation here being to make us aware of different approaches, to encourage an open-mind and questioning attitude, and to provide an environment in which we can reassess our own teaching in the light of the teaching of others. In this way reflection is extended to its full concept, not merely as thought and consideration, but as a mirror: 'But as I look at you with my lens, I consider you a mirror. I hope to see myself in you . . . Seeing you allows me to see myself differently and to explore the variables we both use' (Faneslow, 1990, p 184).

This is active self-development: an intra-personal process, which encourages awareness, experiment, and the sharing and dissemination of good practice.

IMPLEMENTATION

The next consideration is how such a reflective model can be implemented. It is essential that the procedure should be formalized in some way to ensure that it does not die through inertia and the pressures of workload. We also need to be aware that although the emphasis has shifted to self-development, many teachers will still feel uncomfortable about being observed and implicit judgements being made about their teaching. The participants should, therefore, be reassured and consulted, and decide jointly on such factors as who should be observed, how often, what protocol should be followed, what the focus should be, and what form feedback should take; thus hopefully they will feel an element of control and ownership of the process.

The practice of observation

In our particular case, in order to be realistic over the time available, it was decided that we should each carry out two observations per year, in the first instance of a teacher in a similar area, and in the second of a different area if preferred. It was also decided that the initial observation would have no specific focus, although a list of possible areas of interest has been provided, eg, timing, resources, student/student interaction, to be added to by participants after observation, if required. It is, however, expected that once teachers become used to observation, areas of interest and possible focus, such as student involvement in lectures, will arise. The observation arrangements are to be agreed with the observed, who should specify any

Department of Languages

Peer Observation of Teaching and Learning Observation Feedback Form (DOLOFFI)

Type of teaching and learning observed:

Name of Observer Date:

Please complete Part A and, if relevant, Parts B and C

Part A

Please give brief details of what you have learned from this observation

Part B

Please indicate any further action you intend to take e.g. reading, staff development, further observation, experimenting with your own teaching

Continue overleaf if necessary

Part C

Please suggest topics of interest for e.g. staff seminars, staff awaydays, action research

Continue overleaf if necessary

Figure 1 *Observation feedback form*

desired protocol such as seating arrangements or participation, and it was also agreed that observees should have the right to decline to be observed more than twice a semester.

Feedback

It is essential that there should be some form of feedback, both for institutional monitoring of the system and for full 'reflective' value to be gained from the observation. There needs, therefore, to be either some dialogue or written response in order for insights to be clarified and for good practice to be shared and disseminated. This could take the form of seminars, workshops, discussions, feedback forms, and pre- and post-discussion with the teacher observed, as along as the emphasis is always on what the observer has learnt or decided to think about. Hopefully, this will lead to further staff development such as action research, enquiry into theory or attendance at courses and conferences; and will also encourage an atmosphere of enthusiasm and enquiry about the processes of teaching and learning.

In our context, a feedback form was felt to be necessary both for administrative purposes and for the immediate clarifying and articulation of insights. The form devised for this purpose (see Figure 1), aims to put the emphasis firmly on the self-development of the observer, and, therefore, the observed remains anonymous, unless agreeing to give a workshop or share some aspect of good teaching practice observed. The purpose of parts B and C is to encourage further self-development and to provide suggestions for the sharing and dissemination of good practice through discussions, workshops or seminars, and, in addition, to suggest possible areas of specific focus for future observation.

Evaluation

Another essential ingredient of any such scheme is evaluation. In our particular case, this is to take the form of a meeting after the first round of observations. The purpose of the meeting is to provide a forum for the participants to discuss their feelings about both observing and being observed, and to make any necessary alterations or refinements. In general, the response to this proposed model of observation has been very positive, and most teachers are enthusiastic about it. However, there are still some concerns either about the value to the observed, implicit judgements being made, or the effect on students or the dynamic of teaching of having observers in the room. These will all need to be addressed during evaluation.

It should be noted that this scheme does not preclude those who would like to be observed and have feedback on particular problems from supportive colleagues. We also need to be aware that in observing individual lessons we are seeing only the tip of the iceberg, and that other areas such as assessment and course design should not be ignored.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, therefore, the experienced teacher should be viewed as a professional with responsibility for and control over their own development. Development, thus, becomes an active process with the objective of self-awareness and self-evaluation. There is much to be learnt from both the good and bad in other lessons; and an openness to and experience of other styles and approaches will encourage experiment and reduce routinization. Confidence, enthusiasm and a sense of professional worth are enhanced through the sharing of insights and mutual support and enquiry, as well as through an emphasis on the highlighting and dissemination of good practice rather than the locating and correcting of bad practice. In this context, peer observation is implemented as a vehicle not for the evaluation or development of others on the basis of our assumptions, but instead a reassessment of those assumptions on the basis of their teaching. If, as sometimes happens, a teacher is totally unself-aware and unself-uncritical, then there seems to be little likelihood that they will ever become a good teacher, whatever approach is employed.

REFERENCES

Brown, S (1993) Observing Teaching in Higher Education. In Brown, S, Jones, G and Rawnsley, S (eds), *Observing Teaching*, SEDA Publications.

Brown, S, Jones, G and Rawnsley, S (eds), (1993) *Observing Teaching*, SEDA Publications.

Calderhead, J and Gates, P (eds), (1993) *Conceptualizing Reflection in Teacher Development*, London, Falmer Press.

Claydon, T and McDowell, L (1993) Watching Yourself Teach and Learning From it. In Brown, S, Jones, G, and Rawnsley, S (eds), *Observing Teaching*, SEDA Publications.

Ellis, R (1994) *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Faneslow, J F (1990) 'Let's See': Contrasting Conversations About Teaching. In Richards, J C and Nunan, D (eds), *Second Language Teacher Education*, New York, Cambridge University Press.

Fullerton, H (1993) Observation of Teaching: Guidelines

for Observers. In Brown, S, Jones, G and Rawnsley, S (eds), *Observing Teaching*, SEDA Publications.
Goodson, I F and Hargreaves, A (eds), (1996) *Teachers' Professional Lives*, London, Falmer Press.
Jones, G (1993) What to Do Before the Session: Some Guidance on Observation of Teaching in Higher Education. In Brown, S, Jones, G and Rawnsley, S (eds), *Observing Teaching*, SEDA Publications.
Lortie, D C (1975) *School-Teacher*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press.
Orsmond, P (1993) Peer Observation of Teaching, *The New Academic* **6**, 2 10–13.
Schön, D A (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*, New York, Basic Books.
Wajnryb, R (1992) *Classroom Observation Tasks*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Jill Cosh holds the RSA DipTEFLA, and MA in TESOL from the Institute of Education, London University. She is a senior lecturer in English as a Foreign Language and English Language Studies at Anglia Polytechnic University, where she has a particular interest in teacher training.

Address for correspondence: Mrs. Jill Cosh, ELS, Anglia Polytechnic University, East Road, Cambridge CB1 1PT.