



## **Models of Peer Observation of Teaching**

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## Introduction

When someone observes another teaching there are many factors which influence the success of the activity. In order to understand the complexities which affect the situation and to identify three models of peer observation, I shall begin by examining the meanings of the three key terms. What do we understand by 'peers', what is involved in 'observation' and what is our conception of 'teaching'?

## Peer

The term 'peer' can include a variety of relationships within an organisational setting. For example the QAA's Subject Review process was, in one sense, a 'peer review' model, but the power relationship between reviewer and the teacher being observed was far from equal. Peers can be colleagues from the same department, either of a similar status or there can be differentials of status, or the colleagues can be from another department or from a central educational development unit.

If the purpose of the observation is merely to make a judgement about the person observed then the differences in power and status are only relevant in so far as they may bias the judgement. But if the purpose of observing teaching is to promote learning about teaching then we must remember that 'Learning' cannot be abstracted from the social relations within which it occurs' (Webb, 1996:94). If POT is used to determine performance related pay (see Liz Allen's article on this web-site), or as part of an appraisal mechanism, or to determine promotion, or to investigate 'under-performance' then the opportunity to learn will be reduced. In these circumstances the discourse of management, and the social relationship of power and authority will clearly impact on the interaction.

POT is also often used as part of a training course for new lecturers or as part of a development process for individual lecturers or the whole department. Sometimes this is by mutual agreement and sometimes it is imposed. Here, the observer occupies the role of the expert - although still a peer. When the teacher being observed accepts, or even welcomes, the comments of the observer, it can be a powerful learning experience (Gosling, 2000), but it can also prevent full engagement by subject staff if the 'expert' is not fully trusted.

The way in which the peer observation is organised within a department impacts on the extent to which there is shared understanding and mutual willingness to use the observation process to learn about teaching. If observers are senior in a hierarchy to those observed then issues of inequality and lack of mutuality can undermine the process. Particularly when professional autonomy may seem to be under attack from other quarters there can be considerable suspicion of the process and sensitivities that need to be recognised and addressed. (Keig and Waggoner, 1995). It is important for a fully successful peer review model that staff are regarded as genuine peers, in which there is real mutuality and respect for each of the participants as equal, whatever their status in the department.

As peers what knowledge do we bring to the process of observing others teach? There is a view that 'none of us are qualified to make judgements on the teaching of our peers, and that our judgements' (Cosh, 98). Many subject lecturers focus their discussions on course content, not on learning processes, because that is where they feel best qualified to comment. Evidence from American research in 1970's suggested 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 (Lorte, 1975 - quoted by Cosh 98:173). This calls into question the value of colleague's judgements.

If, however if the participants are 'orientated towards reaching understanding.' (Habermas, 1984) rather than making judgements then these objections lose much of their force. An important precondition for achieving an 'orientation towards understanding' is to ensure that confidentiality is guaranteed. Any information that can be used outside the context of the observer and observed should be aggregated and anonymised before it is discussed - for example in departmental seminars. Secondly, staff can be given some training in how to give constructive feedback to maximise the benefits of POT, since this is a demanding skill (Cosh, 98: 173).

Thirdly, the emphasis should be on both parties learning from the observation to get away from the one-way model, when the observer comments on the observed. In this way both parties benefit from the process - 'I found it useful to watch someone else teach: it gave me ideas for my own teaching'. (Martin and Double, 1998)

Fourthly, the locus of responsibility should not be regarded as solely with the individual teacher. By encouraging staff to think about a collective responsibility for teaching within a department the isolation of lecturers can be removed. Historically there have been a lack of 'safe' places where discussion about teaching can take place. POT can play a large role in creating an environment in which such discussions can occur.

## Observation

Let us now consider the second, apparently innocuous word in POT - 'observation'. By emphasising watching teaching, the focus becomes that which is observable? It is by definition that which is visible. In so far as POT is making teaching observable, it is part of a trend towards make teaching more public and less of a private activity. This is a desirable trend, but there is a limitation of this model. We need to ask what is, and what is not, observable? POT tends to focus on the 'performance' element in teaching and learning and in doing so miss out what is less observable.

A second point about observing teaching concerns what is seen and what is noticed. Observers do not simply 'see' teaching behaviours, they interpret what they see as 'a lecture', 'an innovation', 'traditional method' and so on. The experience and level of expertise of the observer influences what is seen and what is missed and what is thought to be important.

It has been argued that to avoid the subjective/anecdotal nature of much observation it is advisable to use more systematic means of collecting data, for example using observation schedules, check lists, time-line analysis, data on interactions, type of question asked and so on. All of these methods can have a value, but for the purposes of POT which is used for development purposes (rather than research into classroom behaviour) informal recording of what happens is probably best. However, it is important for the observer to try to observe and record what happens and not rely on memory and interpretation without any evidence. To assist in this process some have argued strongly for using video recording to help validate feedback, documenting and preserving the strengths of teachers, identifying weaknesses, and comparing teaching at different points in teachers' careers' (Keig and Waggoner, 1995)

However the observer, or the presence of a video camera, can influence what is observed, especially when the class is small. This can distort the value of the observations. Martin and Double, 1998 quote comments which support this, 'It was clear that my presence may him nervous' but also those who felt that although they were aware of the observation taking place it did not influence their teaching - 'Gareth was unobtrusive in the class but I was conscious of his presence: this did not alter my style in any way,'

In conclusion, observing is not a neutral process, it is influenced by circumstances, the method of observation as well as what the observer brings to the event.

## Teaching

How do conceptions of teaching influence the POT process? Sometimes staff make presumptions about what is worth observing.- which tends to favour lectures and seminars where the tutor is clearly 'performing'. There is much of what is teaching, which is less easy to observe, such as tutorials, supervision, studio work or in computer labs when a tutor is having individual conversation with students that are much harder to observe in the normal sense.

How important is it that the teaching occurs in authentic settings? An alternative is micro-teaching which is very useful as a training tool. This is when a tutor is videoed 'teaching' for just a few minutes focusing on a particular skill – such as explaining, introducing a topic, concluding a session.

Concentrating on teaching as an activity can also lead to neglect of what teaching is for – namely to promote student learning. It is important to broaden our conception of what is to be seen and what is the evidence being collected? We need to ask how the performance of teaching relates to other kinds of evidence, such as student feedback, assessment processes, student learning outcomes, learning materials and so on.

We need a wider understanding of what the peer review process will include to go beyond observing teaching to consideration of all aspects of curriculum design, learning support and assessment.

Subject staff need to be able to engage critically with conceptions of teaching (Ho IJAD 2000) through dialogue with peers. Teaching must become a discussible topic to challenge what is taken for granted. Through collective peer review teaching can become a matter of collective responsibility and not individual blame or praise. But staff are less familiar with discussing teaching than research methods. To tackle this problem we need to consider ways of making teaching important and to find ways of valuing reflection? Teaching staff need to develop a language to discuss teaching and adopt a more scholarly approach to discussion of it through a peer review model.

From this discussion we can distinguish three distinct models of POT – a ‘management model’, a ‘development model’ and a ‘peer review model’.

## Models of Peer Observation of Teaching

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>evaluation model</b>	<b>development model</b>	<b>peer review model</b>
Who does it & to whom?	Senior staff observe other staff	Educational developers observe practitioners; or expert teachers observe others in department	teachers observe each other
Purpose	Identify under-performance, confirm probation, appraisal, promotion, quality assurance, assessment	Demonstrate competency/improve teaching competencies; assessment	engagement in discussion about teaching; self and mutual reflection
Outcome	Report/judgement	report/action plan; pass/fail PGCert	Analysis, discussion, wider experience of teaching methods
Status of evidence	authority	expert diagnosis	peer shared perception
Relationship of observer to observed	power	expertise	equality/mutuality
Confidentiality	Between manager, observer and staff observed	Between observer and the observed, examiner	Between observer and the observed - shared within learning set
Inclusion	Selected staff	Selected/ sample	all
Judgement	Pass/fail, score, quality assessment, worthy/unworthy	How to improve; pass/fail	Non-judgemental, constructive feedback
What is observed?	Teaching performance	Teaching performance, class, learning materials,	Teaching performance, class, learning materials,
Who benefits?	Institution	The observed	Mutual between peers
Conditions for success	Embedded management processes	Effective central unit	Teaching is valued, discussed
Risks	Alienation, lack of co-operation, opposition	No shared ownership, lack of impact	Complacency, conservatism, unfocused

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