

Peer observation of teaching as a form of strategic academic development

Bovill, C. and Cairns, A.M

University of Glasgow, Scotland, UK.

Abstract

This paper reports the findings from an evaluation study to investigate participants' experiences and views of three different forms of peer observation within a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice – observations from 1) an academic developer from the Academic Development Unit, 2) a class peer, and 3) a colleague from their own Subject or School. We explore how peer observation can be used strategically for developing and enhancing teaching at individual and institutional levels.

Introduction

Peer observation of Teaching (POT) is a reciprocal process involving one peer observing another's teaching and providing supportive and constructive feedback. POT schemes have been shown to lead to a range of benefits including: more public discussion and sharing of good practice in teaching (Blackwell & McClean, 1996; Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004); opportunities for positive feedback as well as dealing with problems within teaching practice (Blackwell & McClean, 1996); enhanced awareness of the content and processes of others' teaching and areas where further professional development support are needed (Cairns et al, 2013); and stimulation for the development of critical reflection on teaching practice (Bell 2001; Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005). There are also claims that POT can enhance the value of teaching (Gosling, 2005) and can enhance the quality of teaching across higher education institutions (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). Several models using POT in more strategic ways have been described (Gosling 2005), but one of the most common forms that we see is the extensive use of POT within early career academic development programmes including Postgraduate Certificates in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.

Gosling (2009) claims that many staff need further training or preparation to be able to effectively evaluate and provide feedback on others' teaching. This may need to be considered carefully by those running development programmes with relatively inexperienced staff. A method previously used to counteract this lack of training or experience has been to employ a hybrid model as suggested by Atkinson and Bolt (2010) where different types of peer are involved in multiple observations in order to engender an overall culture of reflection on teaching practice.

At the University of Glasgow, the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) has been a compulsory requirement for approximately ten years for new academic staff who have limited teaching experience. A POT approach that draws on Gosling's developmental and reciprocal models has been incorporated into the programme, and this includes the requirement for participants to complete three teaching observations during the two years of the programme: an observation by a PGCAP tutor/academic developer from the Academic

Development Unit (developmental model), an observation by a PGCAP class peer from a different discipline (reciprocal model); and an observation by a colleague from the participants' own subject area/department (developmental model). This paper reports the findings from an evaluation study to investigate participants' experiences and views of these different teaching observations within the PGCAP. Our current study also aims to look at the participants' perceptions of where the most valued observations come from and address the question of who they consider to be a "peer".

Method

We designed a questionnaire containing 24 question items including closed questions (yes/no and likert scales) and open ended questions. We used the computer software 'Survey Monkey' and piloted the questionnaire with a participant from a similar online Postgraduate Certificate programme at the University of Glasgow. We then emailed the survey link to all participants who had completed the PGCAP since 2008 and who were still located at the University (n=107). We received responses from 42 participants representing a 39% response rate from our online survey. We collated the responses using Survey Monkey and excel programmes, and then analysed the data using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis of the qualitative responses.

Findings

The majority of respondents (96% n=40) considered the feedback they received from their PGCAP tutor as either useful or very useful. The feedback they received from their class peer and departmental peer was rated as 85% and 82% respectively. A higher proportion considered the feedback from their PGCAP tutor as "very useful" and indicated that this was due to a perception that these observers were "more professional" or "expert". Respondents agreed that the most important factor, regardless of which peer was observing, was the quality of feedback they received and again the PGCAP tutor scored most highly in terms of the quality of feedback given, followed by the departmental peer then the class peer.

The lowest ratings were given to observations where no suggestions for improvement were given. The observations had been introduced to participants as "Peer Observations of Teaching", so we asked them whether they considered each of the observers to be a peer. Most respondents considered their PGCAP class observer to be a peer (91%) and their departmental colleague observer to be a peer (86%), whilst many were less sure they regarded their PGCAP tutor as a peer (43%). The following quote from a respondent helps illustrate that the PGCAP tutors tended to be perceived as more expert in relation to learning and teaching:

"I felt that my class colleague and my discipline colleague were amateurs like myself - whereas I perceived my...tutor to be a seasoned professional."

The nature of the observation had an effect on participants' pre-observation reflection and preparation, with many reporting anxieties about being observed by someone more senior than themselves. Some respondents reported undergoing deeper reflection on what they were teaching, not just how they were teaching, due to the fact that they were being observed by a subject specialist within their department. Overall 94% of respondents were satisfied with the usefulness of the teaching observations within the programme, rating them as either useful or very useful. This was reinforced by five respondents who argued that the POT experiences were the most useful part of the PGCAP, as the following quote illustrates

“This was probably the single most useful thing in the course.”

Some of the key themes that arose from the open ended questions were consistent with previous research on POT, such as the value that participants placed not just on being observed but also from being an observer (Cairns et al, 2013; Gusic et al, 2013) as this respondent explains:

“Having to observe as well as being observed is useful it makes you think more about how you teach and observing others lets you see how other people teach in comparison to yourself.”

Others started to identify the more strategic value of the POT process as part of universities’ commitment to maintaining standards in teaching:

“I would like this kind of thing to happen more often if I'm honest (as part of normal practice) to make sure the quality of teaching sessions remains high.”

...and in ensuring the ongoing development of teachers:

“It is one of the core elements to developing teaching practice and to maintaining a dialogic relationship between colleagues on good teaching practice.”

Discussion

It has been postulated by Yiend et al (2012) that peer observation of teaching sessions carried out without any prior development in the delivery of critical feedback can lead to an inability to provide critical feedback to the observed and they acknowledge that “the potential for using peer observation to foster reflection on teaching practice is inherently limited if the process fails to generate critical comments” (2012: 11). In our study this failure to criticise and provide suggestions for development was the leading cause of dissatisfaction in any of the observations. Our results suggest that expertise in learning and teaching is valued in the POT process and that this expertise is predominantly considered to be found with the PGCAP tutors/academic development staff. Although our respondents didn’t necessarily consider PGCAP tutors to be their peers, they indicate that the more expert and professional learning and teaching feedback offered by an academic developer is highly valued.

So should we interpret our findings to suggest that all staff across the University should have a teaching observation carried out by an academic developer? In many cases this is just not feasible where the size of academic development units would be too small to offer POT to all the academic staff within an institution. Also POT is only a tiny part (although we and our respondents consider it an essential part) of the work of academic developers and they might be left with little time for anything else. Where it is not feasible for academic developers to carry out POT for all academic staff, the high level of POT within PGCAP type programmes appears to be one way that institutions have prioritised POT as a highly valuable approach to support the development of new academic staff. Another advantage seen in the integration of POT into early teachers’ development programmes is that POT is often a requirement of the programme and therefore there are less issues of non-compliance or lack of motivation to complete observations. Another alternative suggested by our study is that we could make greater use of senior academics and expert teachers from the disciplines within POT schemes.

They were considered by some of our respondents as expert teachers whose opinions and feedback was valued.

In the University of Glasgow several subject areas have engaged in running their own POT schemes, including the recent significant implementation of POT in the Dental School clinical settings, which has so far been viewed positively by many teachers involved (Cairns, et al, 2013). However, in many disciplines, Yiend et al (2013) and Gosling (2005) raise concerns that peers tend to focus on reproducing traditional teaching practices and focus on feeding back on practical and observable elements of teaching. They contrast this with the potential of the expert observer to be able to raise higher level elements of learning and teaching related to assumptions and values underpinning pedagogy. Another disadvantage to the disciplinary level POT scheme is that local politics can interfere with the pairings of observers and those being observed, something which can sometimes be avoided if academic developers or 'outsiders' are carrying out observations. It seems that the nature of the peer or tutor undertaking the observation and how they are perceived is a crucial element in the success or otherwise of POT.

Practical implications for academic developers

Observing others' teaching, even where no formal feedback mechanism is in place, seems to be valuable to many of the participants, and perhaps encouraging our colleagues to observe other people teaching in their own and other disciplines on a regular basis can be a strategic way of exposing people to different approaches to teaching, even in settings where setting up a POT scheme appears to be difficult for a variety of reasons. However, observation without a discussion of the feedback, misses a key opportunity for discussing learning and teaching. Roxå & Mårtensson, (2009) emphasise the importance of developing a culture that promotes conversations about learning and teaching in order to enhance educational outcomes at departmental level. So, missing out the feedback discussions from POT may weaken the strategic impact that POT can have.

Currently there are many academics (including academic developers) who are not taking part in POT schemes. The outcomes of our study and other studies suggest a range of benefits to teachers and universities in terms of developing and enhancing teaching practice. We suggest that not only are PGCAP style programmes a good opportunity to maximise the opportunities for POT but that as academic developers we should be considering how we can support wider opportunities for POT across our institutions.

References

- Atkinson,D., & Bolt.S. (2010). Using teaching observations to reflect upon and improve teaching practice in higher education. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 10(3) 1–19.
- Bell,M. (2001). Supported reflective practice. A programme of peer observation and feedback for academic teaching development. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 6(1) 29–39.
- Blackwell,R. & McLean,M. (1996). Peer observation of teaching and staff development. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 50(2) 156-171.
- Bovill,C. (2011). *Peer observation of teaching guidelines*. University of Glasgow Academic Development Unit. Retrieved from:

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/services/learningteaching/goodpracticeresources/peerobservationofteaching/>

Cairns,A., Bissell,V. & Bovill,C. (2013). Evaluation of a pilot peer observation of teaching scheme for chair-side tutors at Glasgow University Dental School. *British Dental Journal*, 214(11) 573-576.

Gosling,D. (2005). *Peer observation of teaching. Implementing a peer observation of teaching scheme with five case studies*. Staff and Educational Development Association Paper 118. London: SEDA.

Gosling,D. (2009). A new approach to peer review of teaching. In D. Gosling & K. Mason O'Connor (Eds) *Beyond the Peer Observation of Teaching*, 7–15. SEDA Paper 124. London: Staff and Educational Development Association Ltd.

Gusic,M., Hagerman,H. & Zenni,E. (2013). Peer review: a tool to enhance clinical teaching. *The Clinical Teacher*, 10(5) 287-290.

Hammersley-Fletcher,L. & Orsmond,P. (2004). Evaluating our peers: is peer observation a meaningful process? *Studies in Higher Education*, 29 (4) 213-224.

Hammersley-Fletcher,L., & Orsmond,P. (2005). Reflecting on reflective practices within peer observation. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(2) 213–24.

Lubin,J. (2002). *A guide to peer review of teaching*. University of Tasmania. Retrieved from: <http://www.teaching-learning.utas.edu.au/professional-development/self-peer-assessment>

Peel,D. (2005). Peer observation as a transformatory tool? *Teaching in Higher Education*, 10(4) 489-504.

Roxå, T. & Mårtensson, K. (2009). Significant conversations and significant networks – exploring the backstage of the teaching arena. *Studies in Higher Education* 34(5): 547-559

Whitlock,W. & Rumpus,A. (2004) *Peer observation: collaborative teaching quality enhancement*. Educational Initiative Centre, University of Westminster. Retrieved from: <http://www.wmin.ac.uk/pdf/Peer%20Ob%20collaborative%20QE.pdf>

Yiend,J., Weller,S. & Kitchin,I (2012). Peer observation of teaching: the interaction between peer review and developmental models of practice. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, Retrieved online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0309877X.2012.726967#.U0VEKJhOVMs>