



Designing a system for observation of teaching

Observation of
teaching

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243

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review the literature on observation of teaching in a Higher Education (HE) context with a view to proposing some guidelines for the design and practice of institutional systems to observe teaching.

Design/methodology/approach – A literature review and a proposed model for a system of observation of teaching with practical suggestions for managing the process and the information that results from implementation.

Findings – Practice in this area across the HE sector remains patchy and frequently cursory, despite the benefits that may follow from implementation of such systems, namely improved teaching and thus student learning.

Originality/value – This article synthesises best practice guidelines and proposes a three-stage process to be adopted to help ensure that lecturers (and their students) gain the maximum benefit from being observed.

Keywords Teaching, Quality, Higher education

Paper type General review

Introduction

Across the university sector, the practice of lecturers observing and giving feedback on each other's teaching is patchy. Lecturers often do not like being observed while teaching and find the process threatening, time-consuming and often see it as a paper exercise simply carried out for Quality review purposes. Yet if handled sensitively, the time invested in the process of observing teaching and being observed can help improve the students experience; share best practice; build academic links and foster innovation. These benefits apply both to new and experienced academics. The feedback given is confidential, but can potentially be used by the participant for promotion purposes or to build a professional portfolio for recognition of lecturing skills. This paper reviews the literature and outlines the issues around observation of teaching in higher education, and proposes a model of good practice which can be used and adapted across the sector.

Why do observation of teaching?

Most lecturers can remember good (and bad) teaching they themselves had as students, without being necessarily able to recall precisely what made one experience more enjoyable or educationally worthwhile than another. Teachers in other sectors usually have been observed or have observed other teachers as part of their initial teacher training. In fact, evaluation of teacher training courses frequently rate feedback from



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teaching observations as the most valuable aspect (Fullerton, 1999). However, in the university sector, because of a system which generally appoints and promotes staff on the basis of their research rather than on their ability to teach, teaching is sometimes felt to have less status. In some cases, university lecturers, therefore, might never have had the opportunity to have been observed or to have observed others teaching. (Cosh, 1998)

Thus university lecturers' teaching skills have frequently evolved as coping mechanisms. For example, some lecturers may be reluctant to seek advice from colleagues when they are faced with disruptive students in lectures. (Washer, 2003) How they deal with such challenging situations may be a matter of trial and error. Another common pitfall is that academics immersed in their subject (particularly those new to teaching) often equate good teaching with good content. Another common misconception is for lecturers to see their role as "knowledge transmitters" (Martin and Double, 1998). No matter how experienced a lecturer is, there will always be the potential to learn valuable lessons from both observing others' practice (good and bad) and from getting feedback from being observed.

Despite the potential of direct observation of teaching as a method of evaluating effectiveness of lecturers, adoption of systems to introduce and maintain it are patchy across departments, institutions and the whole higher education sector. Arguably, students' evaluations of teaching have been prioritised over other methods of evaluation by extra institutional quality assurance agencies such as the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK (Bingham and Ottewill, 2001). But students may not have the necessary overview of a course or the necessary skills to evaluate the teaching they receive. Some commentators argue that students are not an appropriate or effective source of teacher evaluation because for many reasons students are simply not in a position to evaluate their teachers' performance. For example, student motivation or expected grades may influence their evaluations, as may stereotypical associations associated with a lecturer's age or physical appearance (Moore and Kuol, 2005). On the other hand, some may argue that as an evaluative approach, direct observation lacks methodological rigour, given that it has no sampling procedure, that there would be over-generous comments from colleagues, that there would be an observer effect and so on.

However, having acknowledged those concerns, the advantage of obtaining fellow academics' professional judgements and views of teaching practice is that it can provide a useful counterpoint or contrast to the students' evaluations, with all the potential problems or deficiencies that the student's feedback may have, as outlined above. Whilst observing what goes on in a lecture theatre, a seminar room or a laboratory may only provide a snapshot, it can be a useful means to triangulate other quality measures of a particular course or department such as student evaluative questionnaires, assessment results and external examiner reports etc. (Observing individual lessons only addresses issues of specific lessons or specific individuals. Other wider quality issues such as course design, assessment etc. will have to be addressed by other means.)

Academics often feel uncertain as to the purpose of peer observation and may feel threatened by the judgement this implies. This is ironic as the same academics would feel comfortable with peer review of their research, yet still feel threatened by having a peer in the classroom (Martin and Double, 1998; Jarzabkowski and Bone, 1998). Some may feel it an infringement of their autonomy or professionalism. (Hodgkinson, 1994) Even if academics do not feel threatened by being observed, they may just feel that this

is one more thing to have to do when they are busy enough already. Implementing such a system properly will, of course, involve devoting time to the process and that in itself has cost implications. But the time invested in observation of teaching is small in respect of the returns to be gained in terms of sharing of ideas and best practice, or of leading to greater openness, promoting innovation, fostering team-building and building academic links (Martin and Double, 1998). If handled sensitively, a system of regular observation of teaching and feedback could build the self-confidence of new lecturers and improve the skills of their more experienced colleagues.

What will be done with the information?

The fundamental purpose of implementing a system of observation of teaching is to enhance the quality of teaching practice and thereby improve students' learning. Therefore the process, discussion and documentation would usually remain confidential between the observer and the lecturer involved. Some departments simply keep a record that the process has been undertaken; others also keep a record of the feedback given.

At most universities in the United Kingdom, attendance and successful completion on a (usually in-house) teaching qualification is a requirement for many new staff as part of their probationary period, although exceptions are usually made for lecturers who already have a teaching qualification or those who can evidence substantial teaching experience. Usual practice is for new lecturers (probationers) to be given mentors and they must produce evidence of being observed and observing others as part of the assessment for these courses, often in the form of teaching portfolios. Outside the framework of a teaching qualification, individual academics could use their written record of peer observation data (both as observers and observed) as part of a teaching portfolio which may be used for a variety of purposes, including applications for promotion.

In some institutions and in some departments a system for observation of teaching feeds into management appraisal and monitoring systems, although use of direct observation of teaching by management for appraisal or promotion purposes can lead to hostility and resistance (Lam, 2001). However, if the academic owns their (written) feedback from the observation, they may want to use it (if it was praiseworthy) as evidence in their staff appraisal of their abilities in the classroom or for their professional portfolio or for the purposes of promotion.

Of course, apart from professional and internal institutional and management imperatives to implement systems such as observation of teaching, there are also external pressures for accountability, namely from extra-institutional bodies such as the United Kingdom's Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which requires a system of observation of teaching to be in place in an institution as part of the institutions quality monitoring system. Quality monitoring in Higher Education has (in the UK) over the past few years seen a change towards a so-called "lighter touch". Whatever changes the future holds (and there will surely be more change,) institutions and subject areas in all universities will continue to need to demonstrate a commitment to evaluation of the quality of teaching and learning.

Good practice in observation of teaching

Once the decision to start a process of observation of teaching has been made, then the practicalities of how to go about it need to be addressed. The most important decision

is who to choose as an observation partner. In the case of new lecturers, this choice would be made for them as their mentor will be observing them, and the relationship between mentor and probationer would rightly not be that of peers. In general however, a free choice of partner/peer will lead to more co-operation with the scheme, particularly when such a scheme is new or where perhaps its introduction is being met with some resistance. However, set against this, such freedom may militate against academic rigour in the long term.

Where there is a free choice of a partner/peer, it is best for lecturers to choose someone who they trust and respect. If new, or relatively new to teaching, then someone with a (greater) interest or expertise in learning and teaching may be a suitable choice. If more experienced, then a partner with the same level of experience, a true “peer”, may be appropriate. It may be useful to choose an observation partner with knowledge of the particular subject area. However, partners need not necessarily even be from the same discipline, as someone from a different discipline may give a different perspective and will not present a problem so long as they have an interest in learning and teaching. Alternatively the most appropriate partner may be someone who can give feedback on the content of the session, as well as on the process of learning and teaching.

Observers may require some training to maximise the learning potential of the process (Brown and Colling, 1993). They need to remember that observing someone else teaching is a more difficult business than it seems (one common pitfall is to get caught up in the content and forget to observe the teaching). The observer needs to be looking at teaching mode (lecture, workshop etc), session management, leadership skills, questioning techniques and quality of feedback, group work skills or any combination of these (Jones, 1993).

The process

It is suggested (Martin and Double, 1998; Fullerton, 1999) that the collaboration process is structured using a three-phase model.

Pre-observation meeting

The lecturer should ideally be able to choose which session(s) they want to be observed, (although some departments may have a system of unannounced as well as planned observations). There may be the opportunity for more than one observation of teaching, where a range of teaching situations can be observed. More usually, a choice has to be made between being observed in a format the observed lecturer is comfortable with (e.g. supervising group work) or one they feel the need to develop (e.g. large lectures).

The pre-observation meeting is an opportunity for the lecturer to give background information on the session: where it fits into the course, what level and what previous knowledge the students have, what the learning objectives are and what the teaching plan involves. Ideally this background information should be in the form of a written statement (Jarzabkowski, and Bone, 1998). This is an opportunity to choose or highlight areas for the observer to focus on, for example, presentation skills or the use of audio-visual materials, or the use of questions to prompt the students. Or alternatively the observer can be left to draw what conclusions they may, to see if the observer picks up on the same areas that are of concern to the lecturer. Finally the

lecturer and observer can discuss how notes are to be taken by the observer, whether as a narrative or at time intervals. (Video or audio taping is also a possibility, although note taking would be the norm.)

Proformas of what elements to look out for are useful as an aide memoire. There are many examples of proformas devised and used for different purposes and different institutions. Often proformas have long “tick lists” which are difficult to complete whilst observing teaching. This type of “ticking boxes” approach to “quality” is unpopular and frequently criticised by academics. Based on the QAA handbook for subject reviewers (QAA, 2001), the following general headings provide a useful starting point when designing a proforma:

- Are the learning objectives clear?
- Is the session well planned and organised?
- Are the teaching and learning methods appropriate?
- Are the delivery and the pace appropriate?
- Is the content current, accurate, suitable and illustrated with examples?
- Are the students encouraged to learn actively and participate?
- Is best use made of accommodation and learning resources?

Perhaps more importantly than headings or boxes to tick, any pro-forma should have spaces for qualitative comments which may be more valuable to the lecturer being observed in terms of suggestions for improving practice or praising good practice. Any pro-forma should be adaptable for use with different types of situations, so, for example, there are different things to be observed in a lecture or for a practical demonstration type session. Beyond that, the main criterion for a proforma is that it should be general enough to be useful in any discipline and for any level of experience of the teacher. Good teaching practice has common attributes across disciplines.

The observed session

The lecturer should briefly introduce the observer and make it clear that s/he is there to observe the lecturer and not the students. The observer needs to understand the two-way interaction between the lecturer and group, even in a teacher-dominated lecture. Therefore the observer needs to be positioned in the room so as to be able to observe both, whilst at the same time be as unobtrusive as possible. (It is often insightful for the observer to arrive early. The students may rearrange the furniture in a teaching room before the lecturer arrives, usually to militate against their interaction.)

The possibility of an observer effect has been mentioned above. The concern may be that as a result of the observer’s presence either the students will misbehave or be too well behaved or that the lecturer being observed will give a better or worse than usual performance. No matter how experienced or inexperienced, every lecturer is likely to feel nervous about having their teaching practice observed by a peer, when usually they are only observed by students. Having acknowledged the inevitable observer effect, the lecturer’s nervousness could just as well improve their performance as distract them.

The observer should try to get a broad overview of the session, as well as any areas already highlighted as particular concerns. It is a temptation to focus on details such as

use of audio-visual aids and by doing so to miss the essence of the learning and teaching that may or may not be going on. The observer needs to take account of the interaction between both the lecturer and the students, hence the necessity to be in a position to observe the students as well as the lecturer.

Feedback/de-briefing meeting

Following the observed session, both parties need to set aside time to meet and discuss how it went. Convenience may dictate a meeting straight away after the session, or it may be beneficial to take a day to reflect and allow time for (both observer and lecturer) to write up notes. If more than 24 hours elapses between the session and the feedback meeting, then the memories of both parties may begin to fade and valuable insights may be lost. The feedback meeting should ideally take place on neutral territory and where there will be no distractions.

Giving feedback is a skill. There is a difficult balance to be struck between mutual back-slapping and criticism which is destructive and demoralising. It is also important that feedback does not seem patronising. So the observer needs to think in advance about how critical they can be. They should start their feedback by asking the lecturer to reflect on how they thought the session went. Then start (and end) the feedback on a positive point.

The observer should use questions to guide the discussion and get the lecturer to reflect on practice. E.g. "How did you feel your timing and pacing of the session went?" The lecturer will probably be aware and raise themselves those things that did not go well. Any aspects the observer felt did not go well could be posed as problems to solve, e.g. "How well did you think you handled the problem with mobile phones ringing?"

Receiving feedback is never easy. For the lecturer being observed it is worth thinking through in advance how receiving the feedback will affect them. In the pre-session meeting the lecturer could outline to the observer what type of feedback would be helpful to them. No one likes to be criticised, but some people respond to criticism better than others. The lecturer could discuss what type of person they are in this respect to their observer as part of the pre-session discussion.

What happens afterwards?

"Closing the loop" – ideally the lecturer who has been observed should write a written reflection on the experience. They might identify staff training or development needs which could then be taken to heads of departments. Otherwise, as stated above, the discussion and the any written evidence produced should remain confidential to the two people involved. If the purpose is self-development of the observer then any written feedback could maintain the anonymity of the observed lecturer and could simply focus on what the observer has learned from the experience (Cosh, 1998).

The whole process should be seen as an on-going dialogue a rather than a one off event. Ideally each lecturer should be observed and/or observe another lecturer not less than once a semester.

Implementation

The first hurdle to clear in implementation of an institution wide system for observation of teaching is to write a "Handbook for Observation of Teaching", which needs to be sanctioned by the relevant University level committee with a remit for

quality and/or learning and teaching issues. From an institutional point of view, successful implementation depends on a strong strategic steer from a very senior level in the institution. The handbook needs to be written in a scholarly but accessible style, suitable for academics who perhaps are resistant to the language of Quality. It should be succinct and describe best practice on the model outlined above, give practical guidelines, and most importantly it should include a clear rationale for the process. Another important point to think through at an institutional level is training for observers. This may need to be woven into the staff development programme of the institution, perhaps with a half day training workshop made available. Once the handbook and guidelines have been accepted as University policy, then it needs to be “sold” at a departmental level. Certainly, without strong support from a Head of Department, success in implementation on a departmental level is likely to be limited. Rounds of meetings will need to be organised between whoever is responsible at institutional level for introducing the system and with individuals and staff groups in different departments. These meetings can be used to explain the process and its rationale and to address staff concerns.

In the author’s experience, the experience of trying to implement a system to observe teaching in higher education institutions is mixed, as one might expect. Some departments are overtly committed to (undergraduate) student learning, while others feel, perhaps with some justification, that their excellent performance in other areas, particularly in research, and are less focused on learning and teaching. Having said that, even research-focused academic departments may find themselves pleasantly surprised that participation in systems of observation of teaching as part of their quality monitoring process focuses their energies and fosters team building. (Harrison, 2002) Similarly, some individual academics welcome the idea of being observed while teaching; others accept it with varying shades of enthusiasm or reluctance. For example, some academics seem happy with the idea of being observed once every academic year, although balk at the work involved in repeating the process more than once. Once a scheme has been set up and is off the ground, then it needs to be monitored through continual curricula review. Finally, any staff development needs identified through the process need to be taken seriously by the Head of Department and acted upon.

Conclusion

Given the above guidelines, it should be possible to design a system for observation of teaching in a higher education context which is both constructive and non-threatening. At its best, the process can foster and disseminate best practice and lead to closer academic links and more general team-building within and without academic departments. The key perhaps is to emphasise that the main driver in designing and implementing such a system is ultimately to improve student learning.

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Further reading

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