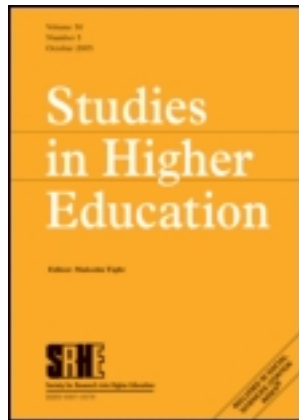


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Evaluating our peers: is peer observation a meaningful process?

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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 identifies 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 refine interpersonal skills through the exchange of insights relating to the review of a specific teaching performance;
4. to expand personal skills of evaluation and self-appraisal;
5. to develop and refine 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.

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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.

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

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:

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

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. ... [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)

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

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).

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

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

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

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:

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

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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