Peer observation: a reflective model

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The purpose of this paper is to examine attitudes to peer observation, and to put the case for a more reflective approach. Peer observation is frequently carried out for purposes of appraisal or judgement of the observed, and this can be detrimental both to teacher confidence, and to a supportive teaching environment. Furthermore, this approach seems to have little value for active teacher development, since the focus is on being developed, rather than on self-awareness and self-development. Peer observation, therefore, should not be a vehicle for the evaluation of others on the basis of our assumptions, but a reassessment of those assumptions on the basis of their teaching. To this end, I propose two active self-development models of peer observation, with suggestions for their possible implementation.

Introduction

Two of the buzz words for the 1990s are ‘appraisal’ and ‘peer observation’. Both of these management techniques have strong educational justification behind them, and, used well, they can have a very positive effect on job satisfaction and staff development. On the other hand, many staff see them as threatening, potentially arbitrary, and judgemental. It is, therefore, extremely important for the assessor/observer and the assessee/observed to be aware of the rationale behind these procedures, and the spirit in which they should be carried out. The recent interest at all levels of education in the accountability of the teacher, and teacher development, has led to the widespread implementation of various models of observation. However, many of these have either foundered or been reduced to the level of a routine administrative procedure. I intend, therefore, to examine various models and their objectives, weaknesses, and disadvantages, before proposing alternative models based on the concept of the ‘reflective practitioner’ (Schön 1983).

Appraisal through peer observation

The use of peer observation can be seen in two different models.

Model 1: Merit assessment in the USA, for example in certain districts in Florida, where teacher accountability through peer observation of teaching was linked to pay. The scheme collapsed because of teacher and union opposition.

Model 2: Similar peer observation models in the UK, although linked to appraisal rather than pay. The most common reaction of teachers seems to be that this is a procedure imposed from above, and over which they have no control. For this reason, it is carried out with a minimum of
commitment and reflection.

Such models have many weaknesses, and have been widely criticised, notably for their judgemental and threatening nature (Wajnryb 1992, Richards and Nunan 1990, and Rawnsley 1993). Unless they are accepted by the staff, the only relevance of these schemes is likely to be to accountability, rather than to genuine teacher development. There are, furthermore, many strong educational arguments against these models, and the role of the observer.

During the course of their training, many teachers have observed lessons, and have in their turn been observed. Their roles in these two activities are radically different. When observing, their role is to learn from others, and when being observed they are, in effect, being assessed. Some of them go on to become teacher trainers, and to observe others, this time in the role of 'knower', facilitator, or assessor. Most teachers, however, have seldom if ever observed, or been observed by their peers, and so are uncertain whether their role is to assess and to judge, however constructively, or to learn.

This uncertainty became manifestly clear to me in a recent discussion on the implementation of peer observation in our department at the School of Languages, Anglia Polytechnic University. A number of comments revealed that many of those present saw the exercise as threatening or critical, and assumed that the observer was making some form of assessment or judgement on the performance of the teacher:

'The feedback should be as nice as possible, so that you don't offend people.'

'The danger is that friends could watch each other and be uncritical.'

'People should be watched by at least two others.'

Some of these are valid and laudable comments. However, my contention is that they all arise from a false view of what the objective of peer observation should be.

In the above contexts, the teacher's role is passive. There is an emphasis on teachers being observed, and being told about their teaching, rather than a process of active self-development through reflection, and self-awareness. It is debatable to what extent teachers will improve their performance in the classroom from being told what is wrong with their teaching; a very natural and common reaction would be for them to become defensive, and to resist any future suggestions. It is also important to realize that teaching styles and methods are very subjective, and that, despite much research, so far there has been no proof that any one method or style of teaching is significantly more successful than others (Ellis 1994). It seems to me, therefore, not only that we are unqualified to judge our peers, but also that our judgements are subjective, and therefore of limited and questionable value to anyone other than ourselves.

Uses of peer observation
These judgements also have to be communicated in some way. Those of us who are teacher trainers know that giving constructive feedback is a very demanding skill, to which we give a great deal of thought, and in which we have been trained. There is a very real danger that when feedback is given by those with no training, it may only serve to give offence. Alternatively, the observer may feel obliged to make only positive comments, in which case the whole exercise becomes a pointless act of mutual back-patting. It is also very likely that the teachers, knowing they are to be observed and commented upon, would put on a ‘model’ lesson, in order to receive positive feedback. However, this would give an unrealistic view of day-to-day teaching, and therefore be of dubious value to staff development, and to the wider dissemination of good teaching practice.

Another 1990s buzz term is ‘team building’, both in sport and in the workplace. The whole ethos of a team is that members are mutually supportive, and do not pass judgement on failures, whether in the form of a missed penalty goal, or an unsuccessful lesson. The aim is, or should be, to work together to improve team and individual performance and confidence, to present a united front, and to give mutual support in the face of external judgement and assessment. Good teachers need not only knowledge but enthusiasm, confidence, self-value, and a desire to question, experiment, and grow professionally. A commitment to mutual support would be more conducive to their future confidence, and willingness to experiment, than the feeling that would come from what they might consider to be unjustified negative feedback.

Further models of peer observation

Model 3: Colleagues observe each other against a background of agreed criteria. This is followed by constructive feedback, and discussion: ‘The aim of the observation is to help improve the skills of the observed, therefore quality feedback is essential.’ (Fullerton 1993: 82)

Model 4: Pair mentoring. Two teachers work together, observing each other’s lessons, discussing areas of mutual interest, and planning future strategies (Whisker 1996). This is less threatening, but limits awareness of other teaching styles to just one other teacher.

Model 5: Lessons are videoed. Teachers watch extracts from lessons, relate these to agreed criteria, discuss, and propose future developments. (Claydon and McDowell 1993)

These models, if well-implemented, are much more benign and constructive than models 1 and 2. They usually emphasize the importance of trust, supportiveness, and the recognition and development of good practice, rather than the locating and correcting of bad practice (Brown, Jones, and Rawnsley 1993). They are, nonetheless, still based on the development of the person observed, and on the assumption that people improve and develop best through the comments and knowledge of others. This may be true at the initial training stage, although even then reflection and self-awareness can be vital, but I contend that for experienced teachers this is not the case,
since genuine development comes about through self-awareness, reflection, and open-mindedness to other approaches and styles. In part this can be encouraged through in-service training, or external staff-development; yet to stop there would be to ignore the fact that we have a highly valuable and free resource in our midst, which requires little administration: other teachers. The observation process itself can play a crucial role in preventing teachers from becoming routinized and isolated. Furthermore, research shows that teachers’ own experience of being taught, or of observing teaching, has more influence on their own practice than training (Lortie 1975). It would therefore seem beneficial to widen that experience. The emphasis in a reflective context, however, is very different.

**A reflective approach**

In a reflective context, peer observation is not carried out in order to judge the teaching of others, but to encourage self-reflection and self-awareness about our own teaching. The focus is on the teacher’s own development, rather than on any presumed ability to develop the teaching of one’s peers or colleagues. Those of us who have observed in this spirit know that there is a great deal to be learnt by reassessing our teaching in the light of other teaching styles. It stimulates awareness, reflection, and a questioning approach, and it encourages experiment; it may also make us aware of exciting techniques that we are temperamentally unable to implement. This approach ensures the observation of good practice, which is likely to be more productive than overt or even covert criticism. If, as sometimes happens, a teacher is totally lacking in self-awareness and self-criticism, there would seem to be little chance of any approach helping them to become a good teacher.

**Implementation**

Consideration needs to be given to how such a model can be implemented. It needs to be formalized in some way, not just applauded, and then allowed to fade due to the pressure of workload. There is a need for teachers to decide jointly on such factors as how often a teacher should observe, possibly who they should observe, what arrangements should be made with the observer, and what the focus should be. It is important to realize that although the emphasis has shifted to self-development, many teachers will still feel nervous about being observed, and implicit judgements being made about their teaching. It is, therefore, important that teachers should be reassured, consulted, and allowed to feel that they retain an element of control and ownership of the process.

There is also a need for some form of feedback. This is necessary both for institutional monitoring of the system, and for full ‘reflective’ value to be gained from the observation. In order for insights to be clarified, and development to be effective and shared, there needs to be some dialogue or written response. This could take various forms, including seminars, discussion groups, feedback forms, and pre- and post-discussion with the teacher observed, as long as the emphasis is always on what the observer has learnt, or decided to think about. Hopefully,
this will lead to action research, and other staff development such as
enquiry into theory, courses, and conferences, and to an atmosphere of
enthusiasm and enquiry about the processes of teaching and learning.

**Proposed models of reflective peer observation**

I propose two possible models:

**Model 6:** An area of general interest or potential problem is selected,
e.g. variety and pacing. Teachers observe a class, and fill in an
observation task sheet or feedback sheet about ideas generated, and
any possible further action for their own development. A workshop/
discussion is then held where everyone discusses the topic. All teachers
observed should be anonymous, unless, with their agreement, the
observer wishes them to demonstrate or explain some example of good
practice. This could form the basis for articles or papers based on action
research.

**Model 7:** Each teacher observes a class on an area particularly relevant
to his/her own concerns and area of teaching. There could be a bank of
questions, criteria, or observation sheets to focus and promote ideas
(Wajnryb 1992, Brown, Jones, and Rawnsley 1993). In our particular
case it was decided to use a simple feedback sheet for the observer to
record what he or she has learnt from the observation. The role of the
feedback sheet is both to clarify ideas, and to make suggestions for
future staff development in the area of workshops, seminars, or
demonstrations. The anonymity of the observed should be respected,
as in model 6. This could also lead to action research papers.

The size of the school, department, or institution, and the similarity or
otherwise of areas of teaching, will influence whether these models are
carried out jointly by the whole group, or in smaller groups. There is also
a need for a co-ordinator to make sure that insights are shared, good
practice is disseminated, and that the scheme doesn’t die through inertia.
After a year in operation the model should be evaluated by all involved,
and any refinements or alterations made. I should be particularly
interested to hear from any institution which has implemented a model
along ‘reflective’ lines.

Other points which should be remembered are that teaching is about far
more than what goes on in one class, and that there is a need for staff
development in such areas as assessment, course development, learner
training, and preparation of materials. Also, this model of observation
should not preclude those who would like to be observed, and have
feedback on particular problems from supportive colleagues.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, therefore, I would argue towards a view of the
experienced teacher as professional, with autonomy and independence,
and as the initiator of his/her own development, rather than as a skilled
workman/woman dependent on development by others. Teaching is an
art and not a science, and this art can best be developed by a ‘reflective’
view. This includes reflection on action—the ability to reflect both
before and after on our own practice, reflection in action—the ability to
make decisions and adapt during the process (Schön 1983), and creative reflection—the examining and assessing of our own values and beliefs in the light of the theories and practice of others (Calderhead and Gates 1993). Thus, observation becomes not a vehicle for the judgement of others on the basis of our own assumptions, but instead an assessment of those assumptions on the basis of their teaching.

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References


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