

PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING: A NEW TREND

Shri. Nisalkar Santosh Shankarrao

Asst. Prof.

Venutai Women's College of Education, Satara.

Introduction:

This resource is intended to offer guidance to individuals, Research Scholars and to Schools on how to facilitate peer observation of teaching (POT). POT is a formative process where a colleague (or peer group) observes another individual's teaching and offers structured feedback on this teaching. The aim is to enhance learning through critical reflection upon teaching practice by the person observed as well as by the peer observer, and ultimately to enhance the quality of teaching and student learning.

At the University of Glasgow, there are some Schools and Colleges whose staff regularly undertake POT. These include participants on the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) at the Learning & Teaching Centre, and some staff in other areas. These guidelines aim to provide clear information on POT in order for staff and Schools within the university to decide upon whether POT is appropriate, and if so, what kind of peer observation is most appropriate and how peer observation could be undertaken within their own specific disciplinary contexts.

It is intended that within the University of Glasgow, the POT process and outcomes will be collegial and constructive.

This document includes: rationales for why POT is considered to be valuable; principles of POT; stages of the peer observation process; some examples of forms which could be used for undertaking POT feedback and discussion; and guidance on different ways in which Schools might wish to engage in POT in practice.

Benefits of peer observation:

Most teaching staff acknowledge the importance of continuing professional development in their subject area as well as in their teaching. POT is intended to contribute to enhancing the quality of teaching within the university and to supporting staff personally in developing their teaching practice.

POT can help to bring discussion of teaching – which is often a hidden practice – into the public domain (Blackwell & McClean, 1996), and can contribute, to enhancing the value of teaching (Gosling, 2005). This discussion of teaching can help staff to learn about their own teaching practices, but also to learn about and from colleagues' teaching. The POT process can enhance the sharing of good practice and more personally can enable staff to receive positive feedback on what they do well (Whitlock & Rumpus, 2004). POT can reassure some staff that their teaching is seen positively by their peers, whilst also being useful in helping to reveal hidden behaviour that individuals may not be aware of within their own practice (Blackwell & McClean, 1996). Indeed, the opportunity for shared critical reflection within POT can lead to the challenging of assumptions about teaching (Peel, 2005). The opportunity to discuss teaching with peers is also an opportunity to deal with known problems (Blackwell & McClean, 1996). Other benefits include finding out what students are learning in colleagues' teaching sessions. The documentation completed can provide useful materials for portfolios of practice or other continuing professional development records. Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond (2004) argue that all of these processes have the potential to enhance the quality of teaching within higher education institutions.

Purposes of undertaking peer observation:

Colleagues need to be committed to taking a critical look at their own practice. Staff concerns about POT are often linked to more formal assessment of practice and promotion (Shultz & Latif, 2006). It is crucial to be clear about the reasons why you are undertaking POT, whether individually or as a School. Where Schools are considering adopting a programme of POT, it would be wise to discuss this with staff and clarify purposes and concerns. Where staff question the value of POT, this may lead to instrumental approaches where staff simply go through the motions but don't really engage meaningfully with the POT process. Peel (2005) argues that an instrumental approach to POT is not likely to be effective.

Gosling (2005) suggests there are three main motivations for POT: evaluation, development or collaboration.

An **Evaluation model**, "...is characterised by judgements being made on the quality of teaching in order to serve a management purpose...for internal quality assurance purposes, to prepare for external audit or to make judgements about individual teachers for probation, promotion or investigating underperformance".

A **Developmental model** "...focuses on assisting staff to improve their teaching...can be explicitly staff-led with no predetermined agenda...may be used with inexperienced

lecturers to assist them achieve standards of competency, for example on Postgraduate Certificates...”.

A **Collaborative or Cooperative model** “...is part of a broader project to establish a culture that nurtures the improvement of teaching within a department. Collaborative peer review of teaching is about finding ways of creating and sustaining conversations about teaching which are constructive and purposeful and which open problems in teaching to public debate and discussion” (Gosling, 2005:118). Whichever approach to POT you choose to pursue, the overarching principles of POT are outlined below.

Principles of peer observation

In exploring peer observation of teaching, a number of key principles emerge from the literature:

1. Confidentiality (Gosling, 2005; Carter & Clark, 2003)
2. Separation of POT from other university processes such as underperformance or promotion (Gosling, 2005; Carter & Clark, 2003)
3. Inclusivity – involving all staff with teaching responsibilities irrespective of grade or status (Gosling, 2005; Carter & Clark, 2003)
4. Reciprocity with a focus on mutual benefit to observer and observed (Gosling, 2005)
5. Development focus rather than judgment (Carter & Clark, 2003)

The second and fifth principles illustrate contestation of the evaluation model of POT, present in the literature.

There is substantial discussion as to whether POT should be an optional or compulsory process. Where the process is optional, staff will engage through choice and are likely to demonstrate greater commitment. However, optional POT leads to piecemeal adoption of the process and makes it difficult for POT to be used as a School-wide development tool. Compulsory programmes of POT risk staff being or becoming resistant to the process.

Identifying peers

Some of the concerns that staff might have with adopting POT may be alleviated through sensitive ways in which peer pairs or groups are decided. POT can take place within a peer group, but often involves peer pairs, and it is this latter arrangement which is focused on here. If an individual is allowed to select their own peer, this can have many benefits. As

colleagues at the University of Western Australia point out, the aim is to receive “formative feedback provided by a trusted colleague” (UWA, 2008). Both parties need to have mutual respect and trust and be comfortable giving and receiving feedback. One way of achieving this formative and supportive emphasis is for the person being observed to be the person in control of choosing who will observe them, what aspects of their teaching they would like feedback on and how they will follow up on this feedback. However, making changes to peer observation pairings over time can be a constructive way of making sure that the POT process stays critical and that new perspectives on teaching practices can be considered. A peer can be selected from the individual’s own School, from another School or from a central academic development unit (Gosling, 2005). It may be useful to have feedback from someone in the same School who can comment on the teaching of specific subjects, but it may also be useful to have feedback from others who are likely to focus more on the teaching process. Peers can be at varying stages or levels of experience as long as both parties are comfortable with the arrangement, but care may be needed where there is the possibility that differences in status or experience lead to issues of power getting in the way of genuine mutual support.

Where a School wishes to adopt a POT process, consideration will need to be given as to how peers will be identified. Some suggestions are listed here:

1. Individuals could identify their own peer observer
2. Peer pairings could be allocated by the Head of School
3. Use could be made of an existing mentoring system – although consideration would need to be

given about whether this was a reciprocal pairing where a mentor would also receive feedback from a mentee.

4. A circular system could operate where peers observers are allocated to observe the person

next to them alphabetically or randomly i.e. A would observe B would observe C, would observe A Whichever system is used, opportunities will need to be created for broader discussion of POT processes and outcomes at School wide level.

Peer observation of teaching stages

The process of peer observation usually involves three stages that can be of varying lengths and types:

- 1) The briefing meeting or pre-observation stage,
- 2) The observation of teaching, and
- 3) A post-observation meeting. Each of these is described here.

1) The briefing meeting

The first stage of peer observation should be a briefing or pre-observation meeting. This meeting is an opportunity for the two colleagues to meet and discuss how the observation will be organized and what kind of feedback is being sought. There are a number of issues which will need to be clarified at this stage including: where and when the observation will take place; who the learners are – what level and how well the tutor knows the group; and the aims and intended learning outcomes for the session. In addition, consider and agree on how the observer will be introduced to the students. The tutor under observation should use this meeting to outline to the peer observer which areas of their teaching practice they would like specific feedback on.

Many POT schemes suggest consideration of some of the following areas as a useful starting point to identifying specific areas for feedback:

- **Organization**
- **Structure**
- **Methods/approach**
- **Content**
- **Enthusiasm**
- **Clarity**
- **Interaction**
- **Voice**
- **Body language**
- **Use of visual aids**
- **Delivery and pace**
- **Student participation**
- **Use of resources**
- **Use of environment / accommodation**
- **Teaching style**

Suggestions for more specific questions about learning and teaching might include some of those listed here:

- Are the intended learning outcomes for the session clear?

- How well does the teaching match the intended learning outcomes?
- Is the material sufficiently research-informed and up-to-date?
- How does the teacher support students to take responsibility for their own learning?
- How engaged were the students in the session?
- Were students invited to participate? In what ways? How was this facilitated?
- Do the students receive feedback? What kind of feedback?
- To what extent has the teacher included all the students?
- Is the teacher supporting the students' individual personal development?
- Does the teacher support students' critical reflection on their own learning?

As a bare minimum, peer feedback should include some positive comments about the teaching and identify any particular strengths of the teaching approach taken. It is also important for the observer to take a critical, yet supportive stance in suggesting areas for development. Colleagues are likely to benefit from limiting the number of areas or questions being addressed at any one time in order to avoid overload on either the observer or observed. This also creates opportunities for discussion to achieve more depth in those areas of particular interest. It can be helpful for the tutor being observed to decide whether they would prefer open comments and/ or to be rated on a likert scale and to make this clear to the observer beforehand.

2) The observation

The observer should arrive early and place themselves as unobtrusively as possible. The observer usually does not take part in the class but the reason for their presence should be explained to the students so that they understand that their performance is not being observed. The students should be given the option to refuse to allow the observation to take place.

The teacher then undertakes the teaching session trying as much as possible to behave as they would do when not observed. The observer should focus on the process of the facilitation of learning rather than the content of the session unless the teacher has asked for specific comments on the subject and content. The observer may find it helpful to take detailed notes or to complete an appropriate form to aid giving feedback later on. (For examples of forms see the later section on examples of forms for peer observation.)

3) Post-observation meeting

Colleagues often arrange to meet for 30 minutes to an hour directly after the teaching session. Some observers prefer to write up their notes before having this meeting. However, it is good practice to arrange the post-observation meeting as soon after the observation as possible. This enhances recall of the details of the session and thereby facilitates reflection by the observer and observed.

If the meeting does not take place immediately after the session, it is important for the teacher to reflect on the session and note what seemed to work well, what did not seem to work so well, and any particular areas of interest or concern. The observer should write up a summary of the key points from their observation – particularly in those areas where feedback was sought - to be able to give this to the teacher at the meeting.

Giving Feedback :

The observer should aim to give constructive feedback i.e. pointing out what worked well but also what perhaps went less well and where appropriate make suggestions for improvement. Giving critical feedback can be difficult but it is essential if the teacher is to benefit from the POT process. Observing someone else's teaching is a very subjective experience but the observers' thoughts on what they observe can be highly illuminating for the teacher. If during the meeting the observer and teacher agree that there are any errors in the report these can be noted and the report amended.

The University Teaching Development Centre at the Victoria University of Wellington outline four essential elements for ensuring feedback is constructive: *positive phrasing* – feedback messages need to affirm and acknowledge effort and achievements; *concreteness* – comments are grounded in specific, observable behaviour; *action orientation* – suggesting to the individual a specific plan of action to follow; and *focus* – offering feedback on behaviour that the individual can change (UTDC, 2004).

Reflecting on the process

Once the post-observation meeting has taken place and the report has been received, the teacher should continue to reflect on the process and, in particular, reflect on the comments that the observer has made in their report. The post-observation meeting may have involved devising a brief plan of action on the basis of the areas discussed, but if not, it is worth the teacher taking time to consider how they might adapt their teaching practice in the light of the POT process and outcomes. The observer may also wish to reflect on the process

of observing; in particular, consider what they have learned from the observation experience. It can be useful for colleagues to continue meeting in order to further develop critical reflection on the teaching session and outcomes.

Examples of forms for peer observation

Forms for recording peer observation are generally split into the three main stages of observation: pre-observation forms to support the person being observed to clarify which areas of their teaching they would like feedback on; peer observation forms which the observer completes as the basis of giving formative feedback; and post observation forms which facilitate dialogue between the observer and the observed and enable the person observed to be able to identify areas for development and related action points.

Example Form (1): Pre-observation form

Name of teacher:

Name of observer:

Date, time and venue of teaching session to be observed:

Number and level of students:

Course title and topic:

Relevant background context, *e.g. has the teacher met the students previously?*

Where does this session fit into the rest of the course?

Aims and intended learning outcomes for teaching session:

Is there anything you would like the observer to give specific feedback on?

Consider how the observer will be introduced to the students?

Example form (2): Teaching observation form

Name of teacher:

Name of observer:

Date, time and venue of teaching session to be observed:

Number and level of students:

Course title and topic:

Things the tutor has done well (*e.g. structure, clarity, pace, organization, interaction, body language, visual aids, enthusiasm etc.*):

Areas for reflection and possible improvement (*e.g. structure, clarity, pace, organization, interaction, body language, visual aids, enthusiasm etc.*):

Comments on specific areas of focus identified prior to observation:

Example form (3): Post-observation form

Prior to completing this form, the observer should send a copy of the teaching observation form to the teacher. The teacher should reflect on the contents of the teaching observation form and also on their own views of how the teaching session went. If they have gathered any student feedback from the session, this should be explored alongside the other accounts of the teaching session.

1. Were there any differences or similarities between the views of the observer / teacher / students?
2. Were there any surprises for the teacher in the feedback from the observer?
3. Can you identify together any areas of good practice from the teaching session?
4. What areas of development can you identify from the feedback and how do you intend to address these?

How can Schools engage meaningfully in peer observation?

If a School is considering adopting a POT process, there are several key questions which will need to be considered. The motivation for the POT process in terms of evaluation, development or collaboration has already been mentioned. In addition, Schools will need to consider the following:

Will the POT process be mandatory?

If the process is to be mandatory, how will this be managed? What kind of impacts will voluntary or mandatory POT have on the process? Will staff be consulted about POT proposals? How would any resistance to the scheme be treated?

How can Schools ensure that peer feedback is constructive?

It is extremely difficult to guarantee that feedback will be constructive, but discussing the meaning of constructive feedback before launching a School-wide scheme would be highly advisable. It may be possible to offer a staff development course in this area. Peers should be aware of the need for positive as well as developmental feedback. Another possibility might be to increase awareness of some simple but useful feedback models, see for example, Pendleton's feedback technique from general practice (Pendleton et al, 2003). Pendleton's technique includes four steps, adapted here to peer observation: 1) asking the teacher what they think they have done well; 2) the peer observer offering what they think the teacher has done well; 3) the teacher suggesting what they think they could improve, develop or change; and 4) the peer observer offering their views of what the teacher could improve, develop or change.

How often will staff be expected to be observed or observe colleagues?

If POT is carried out continuously, staff may become worn out by the process and may become more resistant. It may be worth having a particular time of year when POT takes place so all staff are aware it is happening and it then does not take over all teaching. Schools might also consider concentrating on certain aspects of teaching each year or every other year as part of a POT developmental programme. If POT is carried out too frequently staff are more likely to adopt instrumental rather than meaningful attitudes.

How flexible will the POT scheme be?

Will there be standard forms and guidelines for POT within the School? Will individuals be able to modify the process to suit their particular needs?

How long should the observed session be?

Should the teaching sessions observed be of a particular duration? Staff may find it easier to feedback on a session that is 1-2 hours long rather than a longer course. It can be difficult for an observer to maintain a focus on feedback areas for a whole day or for other long sessions and these are tiring for both the teacher and observer. However, the sessions don't need to be of any particular standard length.

Conclusion:

Many of us immediately associate peer review of teaching with peer observation. Direct observation can provide valuable exchanges of ideas and approaches to a variety of teaching situations, it is unlikely to encompass all the elements which comprise the role of 'teacher'. Issues such as overall course design; quality of assignments in promoting student learning, assessment (both formative and summative), and student support are more readily reviewed by methods other than direct observation. The notes which follow give some indication of peer review systems which are already in operation, systems which could perhaps be used to better effect and other ideas which individuals or Schools may wish to consider.

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