

## Teaching Observations: A Meeting of Minds?

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Teaching observations in a Higher Education context can be underpinned by an observer's intention to enhance learning and teaching or used as a managerial tool to ensure standards are met or maintained. In this article, we investigate whether the emphasis on the developmental value of teaching observations is misleading. We seek to examine whether the 'educational developers as observers' model actually provides evidence that teaching observation can be developmental and stimulate reflective practice despite the approach stemming from government initiatives towards standards-driven teaching. The conclusions provide a view of whether this has implications for fostering formative notions such as critical reflection and enhancement of teaching practice, via the developmental nature of the scheme.

A relatively new phenomenon in higher education in the UK — observation of teaching — is becoming a commonplace process within educational establishments and this is reflected in the research literature (Cosser, 1998; Fullerton, 1999; Shortland, 2004; Wankat & Oreovicz, 1993). The focus of the literature is concentrated upon the way in which schemes have been implemented (Hammersley-Fletcher & Ormond, 2004), highlighting the rationale behind their development, design and structure. However, as Kemp and Gosling (2000) point out, observation can have two distinct purposes.

One purpose reflects a managerial response, a desire to evaluate the quality of teaching and is bound up in the accountability agenda within higher education. Indeed much of the impetus for the increased use of observation, and in particular peer observation (colleagues observing each other's teaching with the intention of improving practice), appears to stem from government initiatives driving at the enhancement of the professionalism of teaching in higher education. Middlehurst & Kennie, (1997, p. 58) said that "teaching expertise is beginning to be separated from research expertise" as academic autonomy is replaced by increasing accountability to a range of stakeholders. The result, as suggested by Nicholls (2001 p. 74), has been a competence-based approach to professional development that highlights "uniformity and comparability of outcomes above quality and creativity". Following such a perspective the observation of teaching, rather than being seen as a constructive feedback tool that engages with practice, becomes viewed as a management tool that assists with the measurement of standards as part of responses to external reviews.

Another purpose that observation can have, according to Kemp and Gosling (2000, p1), is "a developmental means of enhancing the quality of teaching." Hirst (1984) suggests that observation of teaching, in addition to offering staff necessary continuing professional development, can support the renegotiation of prior conceptions and build stronger links between educational theory and practice. However according to Cosser (1998), to date there is little evidence to support the notion that teaching observations are viewed as being developmental by

staff in Higher Education. He cites a range of studies that suggest the process is "ineffective" (Van Patten, 1994) and often "detrimental" (Lieberman, 1986). He shares the view of Fleming, Shire, Jones, Pill, and McNamee (2004) that teaching observations are merely a "managerial vehicle".

The current research took Gosling's (2002) suggestion that there are three different models of the observation process as a start point. Two of these models rely upon peers from the same discipline, either senior staff acting as observers or teachers with a similar level of experience observing each other. The evidence suggested that such 'peer review' processes were often of limited developmental benefit and were often resisted by academics. The third model Gosling identified involves educational developers as observers. Bell (2001) has argued for the merits of a combination model where the emphasis is on peer review by colleagues with educational developers playing a secondary, arbitrary role. There appeared little evidence, other than Gosling's, with regard to the impact of the 'educational developers as observers' model. The research reported here investigated whether the 'educational developers as observers' model, although perhaps stemming from the government initiative towards standards-driven teaching, actually provides evidence that teaching observation can be developmental and stimulate reflective practice.

### Teaching Observation in Higher Education: Brief Historical Review

By 'teaching observation' we mean direct observation of teaching by colleagues (Fullerton 2003). Teaching, according to Ramsden (2003) is defined to include the aims of the curriculum, the methods of transmitting the knowledge those aims embody, the assessment of students, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the instruction with which they are provided. The teaching observation process therefore takes account of all these aspects of the process.

A significant part of the research on teaching observations consists of that undertaken within the compulsory sector where the process is an accepted

practice. Teaching in higher education is, however, considered to be substantially different from teaching in primary and secondary education classrooms (Berge 1998). The limited transferability of experience may result from the different skills required of higher education students and the different learning outcomes they are expected to achieve by the end of a university course. It may also result from a series of common conceptions about teaching in higher education that Ramsden (2003, p85) exposes. These include:

- Learning is ultimately the students' responsibility.
- Good teaching in higher education is an elusive, many-sided, idiosyncratic and ultimately indefinable quality.
- Teaching is not important at all because the greater part of learning in higher education takes place apart from lectures and other formal classes.

These conceptions may help to explain why staff in higher education institutions appear to be resistant to the increased use of teaching observations. The view generally expressed is that they are "managerially owned, capability or quality assurance driven observation schemes" that result in "suspicion, mistrust and resistance" (Shortland, 2004, p. 220). For many it appears that observation of their teaching is yet more evidence of the "growth of external and internal regulation and monitoring . . . associated with academic deprofessionalisation" (Newton, 2003, p. 428). As approaches to teaching and learning have gone from the "individual" through "guided" to "directed" approaches (Skelton, 2004) teaching observation is seen as another method by which autonomy is reduced.

#### *The Peer Observation Model*

In regard to the peer observation model that Gosling identifies the evidence is certainly not encouraging. Although the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education, NATFHE (2001) has suggested that both observers and observees can benefit from the process, Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond (2004, p. 499) indicate that peer review runs the "risk of becoming unfocused and therefore of limited developmental advantage". Their research suggested that both observers and observees were unclear as to the results of the process. Shortland's (2004, p. 226) evidence indicates that staff completed observation documentation "simply to comply with the managerial requirement to do so, having not actually undertaken the observation". Even when staff were free to select their own peer reviewer it was found that they remained distrustful of the process or, as Bell (2001) suggests, they were possibly reluctant to engage in observation programmes because they saw them as a form of appraisal in which judgments were made about the

level of competence of those being observed. Just as Willmott (2003) has argued in relation to using peers to review research, using peers to review teaching may similarly obstruct the full implementation of the process.

Despite the above criticisms, the observation process provides a "rare opportunity for an observer to see and analyse what students are actually doing" (Fullerton, 1999, p. 221) as a result of the actions of the observee. Further, as Barnett (1992, p. 123) argues, "academic knowledge does not count as knowledge without it having been subjected to some kind of peer evaluation". A difficulty arises however, as Nixon (1997) suggests, when academics consider the duality of their role: as teachers and subject specialists. When they conceive their identity as located within their discipline it is unlikely, Nixon argues, that they will explore with colleagues the shared aims and values of teaching in higher education. Can educational developers therefore assist and "foster greater reflection on teaching styles, strategies, and general teaching philosophies" that Millis (n.d.) argues should be the focus of the observation process?

#### *The Educational Developer Observation Model*

The limitation of using educational developers as observers derives from a belief that without subject knowledge the feedback lacks context. A peer reviewer, with appreciation of the inherent complications of the material can provide feedback on the process, the content and how effectively these corresponded. Gosling (2002, p5) also argued that the educational developer model also presented the risk of a "lack of shared ownership and lack of impact."

However, involving an educational developer who is an 'external academic', without distinct disciplinary knowledge appears to offer an opportunity to address some of the negative aspects of the peer review process identified by Gosling in his first two models. The process is made more transparent. Cosser (1998, p152) argues that such 'external' observations remain flawed and maintains that despite the apparent neutrality these external observers will remain 'blinded by their own conceptions'. He argues that you cannot separate content and process without fragmenting the conceptual nature of learning and teaching and therefore rendering it meaningless. The suggestion is that any observational process is judgemental and loaded. Although the ideal is for an observation that is developmental and not judgemental, by the very nature the process has to involve aspects of the latter. The educational developer model overtly acknowledges this. Both parties are aware that evaluation is required to support development and as such there is an element of "power" held by the observer. Evidence from research (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2004; Millis, n.d.) also suggests

that observees believe that there are benefits to be gained from having 'external' observers. Rather than focus on 'content' the observers were seen as more likely to focus on the process of teaching and issues such as the 'student experience' (ibid).

*Design and Implementation of Teaching Observations in the Educational Developer Model*

The correct format and appropriate process of a teaching observation has been discussed in educational research (see Hammersley-Fletcher & Ormond, 2004). The process itself varies considerably from institution to institution. In some institutions the process consists of one form filled by the tutors/observees, where they outline intentions for the session, introduce the learning outcomes and describe how they believe they will benefit from the observation process in terms of professional development. Elsewhere, the process focuses on an exchange of forms between observer and observee. There is broad agreement on good practice about the constructive elements the observation sessions should incorporate. These elements are constituent parts of any observation process; however the educational developer model can be particularly effective in emphasising key aspects, such as:

1. Reaching a consensus about what actually happened during the observed session. This becomes the product of negotiation between the observer and the observee and is documented in the observation forms.
2. Evaluating the observee's performance by the observer, where either the formative or summative or both aspects of this evaluation are emphasised.
3. Utilizing a consistent approach to specific topics/headings, such as teaching strategies, evaluation and feedback, and professional development, which are used to guide the process.
4. Developing further targets, which are initiated by the observer, however they are also the product of the post-observation discussion. The observee is advised to consider these in an attempt to enhance the teaching profile. Where observation is not a one-off but is linked to a series of observations these areas can form the basis for future observed sessions.

### Methodology

The present research focused on examining the impact of teaching observations on participants' practice in two programmes:

- A postgraduate certificate in Academic Practice designed for teaching staff beginning their careers. New lecturing staff

are expected to be observed 4 times over a two-year period.

- A graduate certificate in Academic Practice designed for Teaching Assistants in Higher Education. Participants are observed on 3 occasions.

Within both programmes the role of the observer in the teaching observations is undertaken by 5 members of an educational development unit (and not by peers from the participant's own department). In order to gain insight into academics' perceptions of their own teaching, the research initially sought to gain an "awareness of the range of meanings" (Akerlind, 2003, p. 378) that observees/participants assigned to the observation process. The views of 48 participants were sought by questionnaires which were distributed between 2002 and 2004 after the completion of the programme.

Given that the focus of the study was on the process of teaching observations and aimed at reflecting individual perceptions, a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches was selected. Teaching observations involve complex social situations with a large number of variables that cannot be controlled and as such a case study strategy is an appropriate method to use (Yin, 2003). A case study strategy enabled action and events to be set within context by examining one selected setting. The study was designed to take account of the uniqueness of each event by focusing on a particular instance of educational experience (teaching observations) in order to gain theoretical and professional insights from a full documentation of that instance (Freebody, 2003). Achieving this would then deepen our understanding of the implications of observations in higher education undertaken by educational developers.

The questionnaires (see Appendix 1) comprised a number of semi-structured questions in which participants were encouraged to add their comments on the process. These explored the participants' views of teaching observations and the relative value of each of the pre-observation, observation and post-observation components. Other questions investigated whether the process was felt to be supportive and helpful to the participant's practice, and the perceived developmental aspect of the observation process and value to the participants. The decision to use open-ended questions was motivated by a wish to gain as wide a range of responses as possible. For instance, Question 1 was 'What is your view of the teaching observation process?'

Qualitative data collected from the questionnaires were analysed independently by two evaluators to determine common perceptions towards teaching observations which were considered as fundamental to the process by the

participants. The evaluators had extensive experience observing participants from a range of backgrounds and disciplines. Building on the initial focus on participants' perceptions, data were coded by being classified into categories. The evaluators independently selected and coded repeated phrases and views. The categories were mutually exclusive; however there were thematic overlaps, for instance distinct categories each referring to a different component of the observation process (pre/post-observation).

It became apparent that only a partial understanding of the phenomenon under study, teaching observations undertaken by academic developers, was emerging. As Kyburz-Graber (2004, p. 63) warns, the case study method can lead to "superficial inquiry into specific situations". As a result we expanded the case study to examine the approach of the 5 observers who had conducted the observations. Using the categories identified by the evaluators, 16 statements about teaching observations were produced (see Table 1). For instance, regarding the reflective aspect from categories 'reflection including criticality' (evaluator 1) and 'facilitates critical reflection' (evaluator 2) a statement ('teaching observations encourage critical reflection on teaching') was drawn from the questionnaire data to illustrate participant's views on reflection.

The statements (in random order) were given in a card-sorting exercise to the five observers to rank (from 1 to 16) in order of importance/relevance to the teaching observation process. The objective was to explore whether there was any correlation between the views of observers and participants.

## Results

Table 1 shows the ranking scores the observers assigned to the above data categories derived from the participant questionnaires. The sum of the rankings resulted in a total score for each category. The minimum possible score was 5 (five observers ranking the statement as first in their list) and the maximum score was 80 (five observers ranking the statement as sixteenth in their list).

The ranking was then examined to consider which perceptions drawn from the participants questionnaires were seen as the most influential by the observers. These categories are discussed in relation to the original aim of the research: to consider whether the 'educational developers as observers' model provides evidence that teaching observation can be developmental and stimulate reflective practice.

These categories are: critical reflection, deepening understanding of learning and teaching strategies, observer-participant relationship, the developmental aspect, the disciplinary aspect, and relative value of the observation components.

## *Critical Reflection*

The reflective process is the area that provides the greatest opportunity for making "inroads into the quality of learning and teaching and can be engendered by a process whose structure is clear and where appropriate time is allocated" (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2004, p. 502). The observers considered encouraging critical reflection on teaching as the most important role of teaching observations (see Table 1). Criticality of thought can help practitioners to move towards what Light and Cox (2001) describe as professional realisation and is a result of a deeper understanding of the theories that were covered in the certificate in Academic Practice programmes attended by the participants. As the observers were the staff who ran or contributed to the programmes attended, it may not be that surprising that they made this link. The observers appear to believe that teaching observations enhanced the connections between theory and educational practice. Interestingly, although participants raised critical reflection, this was not one of the major categories that they had identified within their teaching observations.

## *Deepening Understanding*

Observers noted the importance of the teaching observation process in enabling ideas and techniques to be examined in more detail (see Table 1). The participants certainly found it important in enabling them to receive support to test ideas, to develop the confidence to try out new methods and to enhance their understanding of learning and teaching strategies. Cosh (1998) has suggested that there is little real evidence that people develop and improve as a result of the judgements or comments of others. However, the research reported here suggests that the educational developers' model does produce greater understanding which has led to perceived improvement by the participants.

## *Observer-Participant Relationship*

Observers ranked highly the belief that observations should provide a non-intimidating environment for the participants and where feedback was "supportive" (see Table 1). The creation or development of such an environment was linked to the success of the observation process. The relationship between the observer and the participant was a frequent occurrence in the comments in the collected data. Most participants referred to the teaching observation experience as potentially 'daunting' or 'intimidating' at the outset. However, this negative aspect was decisively diminished by the supportive nature of the pre-observation and post-observation sessions. Indeed this relationship sometimes blossomed into mutual appreciation and

TABLE 1  
Data Categories and Ranking Scores of Observers.

Data Categories	Observers					Total Score
	A	B	C	D	E	
Teaching observations encourage critical reflection on teaching.	1	2	2	1	1	7
Teaching observations help to flesh out and sometimes to deepen understanding of some of the ideas and techniques that are discussed in the taught sessions.	9	3	6	5	2	25
Teaching observations succeed when they offer a non-intimidating environment.	3	1	8	9	6	27
Teaching observations provide a framework from which observees can develop.	6	10	7	2	3	28
The teaching observation process provides a supportive environment where feedback is discussed.	7	9	4	3	9	32
Teaching observations focus on techniques and delivery rather than on discipline specific issues.	5	15	3	7	7	37
The post teaching observation sessions are extremely valuable in aiding the teaching observation process.	11	6	1	4	16	38
Teaching observations highlight problematic aspects of a teaching session.	2	8	11	6	13	40
Teaching observations are helpful when they focus on teaching skills rather than on session content.	8	11	9	8	8	44
Teaching observations offer a good opportunity to discuss with colleagues a range of issues related to learning and teaching.	14	5	5	11	10	45
Teaching observations reassure observees and increase confidence.	4	7	13	10	12	46
The pre teaching observation sessions are extremely valuable in aiding the teaching observation process.	13	4	14	12	5	48
Teaching observations assess the quality of teaching.	12	13	12	14	4	55
Teaching observations are more helpful for participants who have no experience of teaching.	10	12	16	15	15	68
The participant can make the teaching observation process more or less developmental by selecting the session to be observed.	16	16	10	16	11	69
It is useful to have the same person observing rather than a different observer for each teaching observation.	15	15	15	13	14	72

acquired mentoring dimensions.

The creation of a supportive and non-intimidating environment for participants to receive feedback was deemed crucial data. An important factor of this feedback was that it was not summative, as during the whole process the formative nature of the observations was emphasised. The feedback was seen as particularly effective when feedback meetings were held as soon as possible after the observation.

#### *Observation as an On-Going Process: The Developmental Aspect*

The emphasis of some teaching observation schemes has been highlighted as being developmental (Shortland, 2004). The implication of professional

development is that it is long term and that there is progression. However, research evidence from peer review schemes suggested that there was no long term element involved (Shortland, 2004) and continual professional development was the thorniest of the problems as issues relating to the observer-participant relationship emerged (Brown, Jones, & Rawlinsey, 1993).

Our case study highlighted that the developmental aspect was ranked highly by the observers. The participants responded to a number of questions that explored the developmental nature of teaching observations. The dominant view was that there is a developmental aspect, although this was sometimes dependent upon factors such as choice of session to be observed or employing the same or

different observer. However, the impact of these qualifying factors varied and therefore no predominant factor could be identified (e.g., maintaining the same observer for all the sessions to be observed). The important element is that participants felt that teaching observations conducted by educational developers were part of a longer term developmental process. The importance of "trust" (Shortland, 2004) between observer and participant was also identified as essential in developing reflection with the potential to enhance practice.

#### *The Disciplinary Aspect*

It seems that the observers' views on what constitutes 'good teaching' derived from a non-disciplinary view of the teaching session (see Table 1), although subject knowledge or subject application are two facets of the implied subject expertise that is rewarded in the observation 'checklist' that is used as part of the observation process. A relevant question is 'how is this expertise measured' if the observer background is for example in humanities, but observes a tutorial in engineering. The data suggested that sometimes for the participants this expertise was meant to signify confidence in 'delivery' and evidence of knowledge of the subject's complexities. Little concern was expressed by participants about the lack of disciplinary knowledge of the observers. It was acknowledged that the observation looked clearly at the process of teaching rather than exclusively at the content delivered. The participants did not raise concerns about the credibility of the observers to assess teaching quality, an issue raised in Cosser's (1998, p. 153) research, where the participants appeared to be concerned that reviewers might not have the "right qualifications to assess teaching ability." Indeed the second largest response to his research was that those undertaking observation should have some qualification or training in Education. The educational developers/observers in this study had these qualifications and as a result this concern appears not to have surfaced.

#### *Relative Value of the Observation Components*

Although the above appear to be the correlations between the observers' and participants' views of the impact and role of teaching observations, it is also worth noting the views concerning the process at the three stages. The observers ranked higher the post observation sessions than the pre-observation discussions (see Table 1). The post-observation sessions were considered to be more valuable in aiding the developmental aspect of the teaching observation process. A likely explanation is that the pre-observation session is sometimes limited to context-setting and organisational issues whereas it is in the post-observation discussion that significant issues are fleshed out and considered. The participants in their evaluation of the observation process equally differentiated between pre and post-observations (see Table 2) indicating that the post-observation was the most significant of all three components.

#### *Other Categories*

Other categories such as maintaining the same observer for more than one teaching observation, whether the format of the observed teaching session increases or decreases the developmental aspect of the process, whether teaching observations are more appropriate for inexperienced/experienced staff and the use of teaching observations as an assessment mechanism were brought up by the participants. These categories were not ranked highly by the observers who considered these less fundamental to the nature of teaching observation because they did not directly and significantly contribute to increased reflection and the developmental aspect.

#### *Conclusion*

Evidence indicated that observers consistently and explicitly related the observation of teaching to development of teaching practice through the enhancement of reflection which was expressed as a key aspect of the process by participants. The evidence argues for the merit of having educational

TABLE 2.  
Participants' Views on Relative Value of Observation Components.

	Highly Valuable	Valuable	Some Value	No Value
Pre-observation	21	14	2	0
Observation	28	9	2	0
Post-observation	36	5	2	0

developers as observers. The 'educational developers as observers' model artificially fragments process and content by emphasising teaching strategies and links to learning and teaching theories within the disciplinary confines.

The research compared the observers' views with the views of the participants. Those observed acknowledged the educational developers as a source of teaching expertise. The case study findings suggest that the formative aspects appear to be those that are considered the most positive by both the observers and the participants. The formative nature of the process was particularly valued by the observees and this concurs with findings by Hodgkinson (1994) and MacKinnon (2001). The summative aspect was not a major component for observers, however the implication was that there should be a procedural framework within which the formative aspect can be nurtured and developed. However, the desire for teaching observations to develop critical reflection, which was the key aspects for the observers, did not appear to be equally acknowledged by participants. The participants' predominant expectation was commonly to gain a verdict upon their teaching competence. As part of this there was an expectation that they would also gain 'tips' on how to improve their skills. The positive knock-on effect appeared to be on increasing confidence. The developmental aspect was recognised as important although participants put more emphasis on assessment of teaching ability. The developmental aspect was often implicit in the participants' comments and a number of them expressed a wish that the process be continued beyond the formal requirements of the programme.

That said, observations within an educational developer observation framework do provide a time to consider knowledge and deepen understanding, and all recognised the importance of constructive and supportive feedback. The formative nature of such feedback determined the attributes of the relationship between observer and observee being non-intimidating and supportive and will potentially contribute to development and improvement.

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APPENDIX 1

**Teaching observations questionnaire**

Name: (optional)

School/Department: (optional)

1). What is your view of the teaching observation process?

2). Please comment on the value of the following aspects of the teaching observations:

	Highly valuable	Valuable	Of some value	No value
Pre-observation	21	14	2	0
Observation	28	9	2	0
Post-observation	36	5	2	0

3). Have the teaching observations helped your practice? Yes/No  
If yes please state how.

4). Has the teaching observation process felt supportive? Yes/No  
Please give an explanation for your answer.

5). Do you feel the teaching observation process is developmental? Yes/No  
Please give an explanation for your answer.

6). Would you recommend the process to your colleagues? Yes/No  
Please give an explanation for your answer.

7). Any other comments.

Thank you