

A review of peer observation



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Creating an effective learning environment is a challenging proposition for a lecturer. In addition to knowing and delivering the material, the lecturer is required to be knowledgeable in both classroom management, and interpersonal techniques. Willerman (1991) suggests that there is a need for a method that will facilitate improvements in these techniques in a manner that does not threaten self-esteem. The peer observation of teaching methods is considered a way in which the effectiveness of teaching and the learning environment provided by academic staff in higher education establishments is quantified and improved (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2004). Peer observation of teaching is receiving widespread interest, and is being utilized in numerous institutions across a wide range of faculties (Cosh 1998).

Gosling (2002) acknowledged three central models of peer observation of teaching: 1) The Evaluation model which involves senior staff observing lecturers and providing feedback, 2) The Developmental model which includes educational developers, expert teachers, or learning and teaching co-ordinators in the observation process and 3) Peer review model where lecturers observe other lecturers and provide feedback. They mainly differ in the position and prominence of the observer and the function of the observation (Light et al 2009).

The principal component of the peer review process is observation of teaching practices (Light et al 2009). However Light et al (2009) state that peer observation should be considered a supplement rather than a replacement for student supplied evaluation. Students are considered the most reliable sources of feedback on teaching practices and delivery as they

are the proposed recipients in the learning and teaching process.

Nonetheless, with thorough preparation, colleagues can offer an all important alternative standpoint regarding effective teaching practices to that provided by students (Chism 1999).

Peer observation also represents a means of learning and sharing good practices with other lecturers (Fry et al 2003). There are several compelling reasons cited within the literature that support the utilization of peer observation: To improve the quality of teaching and learning through open discussion and systematic critique, to help cultivate a collegial atmosphere through dialogue about common issues of concern and to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of teaching by examining aspects not covered by student evaluations, such as currency of content, balance and breadth of the curriculum (Fry et al 2003). Peer observations can be useful in determining whether the observed session relates to the overall module aims and learning outcomes and how, if at all, it links to previous and future sessions in order to ensure that the students are achieving the learning outcomes and that learning is taking place. The process is also helpful in identifying the appropriateness of assessments within a module, such as presentations, exams and assignments and to assess the methods and materials used by the observed lecturer.

Both the observer and the observed can benefit from peer observation. It offers the observer the chance to gain insight into different teaching methods and their efficacy whilst also providing the opportunity to determine how students respond and engage with different teaching methods. For the observed lecturer the observation offers the chance to receive feedback

from those in the same field in order to improve confidence and develop teaching skills (Fry et al 2003).

However, there are issues that have been raised within the literature regarding the utilization of peer observation as a method of improving teaching in higher education (Light et al 2009). The peer observation process can be excessively intimidating for both observer and observed potentially leading to a non-representative session being delivered or poor feedback given, particularly if a significant power or status difference exists between the two. Furthermore, observers with their own agenda and/or a different interpretation of the most effective method of teaching may undermine the observed individual's confidence/development, particularly if he/she is inexperienced (Light et al 2009). Significantly, Shortland (2004) suggests that if the observer is not chosen carefully mutual support for ineffective teaching practices can occur, potentially leading to a de-emphasis on the student's perspective of the learning environment.

Nonetheless the peer observation process is generally well received as it promotes a support system between academic staff; helps advance the quality of teaching by means of open discussion and provides a more complete evaluation of teaching by examining aspects not traditionally covered by student evaluations (Fry et al 2003 and AAHE (1998).

Reflection on peer observations

For the first observation I took on the role as observer to observe a colleagues' lecture. The session being observed was administered in typical lecture format to a group of around 20 3rd year Physiology top-up students.

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The session itself is entitled research skills and is designed to introduce/prepare the students for the year ahead in terms of the abilities that they will need to develop in order to pass their 3rd year at university.

For the second observation I took on the role as observer to observe a colleagues' lecture.

I found the process of observing another member of staff to be a rewarding experience which gave me insight into teaching methods other than my own. This type of lecture i. e. Introductory/skills session is something that I have always found difficult to deliver as such I found it beneficial to observe a session of this nature. In observing the session I feel that I have learned a number of key things which I hope to incorporate into my own teaching.

For instance as can often happen the lecturer was forced to deal with a very good student who monopolized all of the lecturers attempts to encourage student interaction/engagement. This is something that I find extremely difficult to deal with during my own sessions as I always try to encourage engagement/questions and as such to simply ask the student to be quiet would obviously not be productive. However the lecturer that I observed I feel dealt with the situation very well by simply asking the student to summarize what key aspects of the session. This prevented the student from and allowed others a chance to talk if they felt that they had something to contribute.

However despite the observation of another member of staff being a relatively positive experience, I found it difficult to examine the teaching methods as the member of staff that I observed was significantly more

experienced than myself, given that I am a relatively new lecturer I found this process uncomfortable. Furthermore, the individual that I observed was someone that I know well; therefore making the process even more difficult I feel perhaps with hindsight that observing someone with whom I am familiar was not the best option for me and thus I should avoid in the future, even if this involves observing a member of staff from another department.

For the second part of the process I was observed. Prior to being observed I met with the observer and discussed the module as a whole including its assessment criteria and I planned to do in the session. The session was a computer session where the students continued in learning to use a motion analysis package designed to quantify 3D kinematics from gait analysis. In addition to this the session was the last week before their first assessment (in which they are separated into groups and have to provide gait analysis to an elite footballer, they are assessed in their competency) and as such the last opportunity to ask questions regarding this assessment.

I feel that the session as a whole went well, after the first couple of minutes I was largely unaware that the observer was there at all. I feel that the session as a whole went well and I fulfilled the learning outcomes highlighted in the lesson plan. The group of students was quite small (7-10 students) thus the likelihood of disruption is minimal so there was little concern regarding this prior to the session commencing. Feedback from the observer suggested that the session had gone well, this served to enhance my confidence in my own teaching as I was slightly apprehensive prior to the commencement as this was my first observation and I was concerned about what others thought

of my teaching. As a result of this session I feel that I will be more confident and assertive in future sessions.

Conclusion

I feel that the process of peer observation was beneficial for me particularly in helping me deal with disruptive students a problem that I sometimes struggle to deal with. The observation process allowed me to see how another (more experienced) member of staff dealt with the problem and I am likely to incorporate this into my own teaching if necessary.

In addition to this I also feel that I benefitted from being exposed to additional methods of assessment, outside the typical essay/exam based measures. The lecturer that I observed had the students write a critique of a relevant paper in their field. This is a method that I have not yet used before in my own teaching, but I found that it seemed to compliment the learning outcomes of the module (that I observed) very well and discussion with the lecturer at the end of the session confirmed that the students engage well with this report. As such I will try to incorporate this method into my own teaching as critical thinking is something that students in my own area of teaching typically lack and could potentially benefit enormously from.

To conclude, from my own experience the process of peer observation is a valuable method of developing reflective practice that both observer and observed can benefit from. However I also believe that the observer and observed should not know one another well and should be at a similar level in terms of authority and prestige in order to be as honest and objective as

possible and maximize the benefits that both sides can obtain from peer observation.