Tired Of Teaching Observations? A Case Study Of One Approach With A Focus On Communication And Collaboration

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Abstract

Peer observation of teaching within Higher Education is well-established across the sector with a range of models used and many studies confirm its value in supporting the professional development of staff. This article outlines the experiences of a group of staff from a northern university who had reached the stage of feeling that peer observation was not contributing to their teaching development. Working with an external consultant and a designated 'buddy' an agreed schedule of observations took place that focused on the communication aspects (teacher immediacy) of their teaching. Through a qualitative approach the views of the staff involved were explored over a 12 month period. The findings showed that a focus on teacher immediacy factors and collaborating with a buddy supported individuals in developing teaching approaches plus re-energised their view on peer observation. This work has resulted in the production of a university resource to support staff in exploring and developing their own teaching and that of others through peer observation.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the experiences and perceptions of a group of experienced lecturers within a peer observation process that was set up to help them develop their own teaching style and to share their development with a nominated 'buddy'. The group of staff working on this project comprised of eight experienced lecturers (none with less than 6 years teaching) in a Faculty in a post 1992 university in the north west of England. All individuals volunteered to be involved and were keen on trying something different, including developing themselves and working with others. There was some scepticism about the process and the communication focus at the beginning and also some anxiety about being observed by somebody external. To overcome this, the project started with a discussion to clarify what would happen, when and how. Staff perceptions at the start of the project can be found in the findings and discussion section. The Faculty had operated a peer review scheme for many years but an evaluation carried out in 2006 indicated that apart from new staff who were observed during the University's Postgraduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LTHE) course the process was not felt to be as helpful as intended. The Faculty therefore developed a number of strategies for reviewing and extending the scheme one of which was for experienced staff with teaching and learning roles to work together on a project that focused upon communication aspects of their teaching.

This coincided with a parallel development as part of the University's Centre of Excellence for Teaching and Learning (CETL) where a communications' expert was working with undergraduates on a Sport Development programme to help them with their presentations. The consultant was a trained Master Practitioner in Neuro-Linguistic Programming and an experienced Life Coach. The work he was doing with students covered fairly standard communication skills such as verbal and non-verbal behaviours and, use of the environment. However, students reported they had found the methods the consultant used to be very useful. The students' tutors were also impressed at the noticeable improvements in their students' communication skills. The success and enthusiasm shown by participating students motivated the group of lecturers to draw on the consultant's expertise when drafting a peer review project proposal of which the aims were:

· To examine some of the successful components of individuals' different communication and teaching styles with a view to developing a more strategic model of peer review for experienced staff;

· To train and develop key staff in teaching and learning leadership roles within the Faculty with a view to creating processes and resources for sharing the methodology with others.

1.1 About the project

Each lecturer volunteered to take part in the peer review project. The lecturers linked up with a 'buddy' who they agreed to work with for the duration of the project. The first stage of the project was for the external consultant to observe a teaching session of each individual and offer feedback. The consultant's focus during the observation was the teacher's communication skills, or teacher immediacy, which covered the following categories:

☑ Voice

☑ Body language

☑ Environment

☑ Positioning

Teacher immediacy is an American concept that looks at communication between staff and students and what the teacher can do to make the students more connected with them. Teacher immediacy is a concept explored by Mehrabian in the 1970's (see Witt, Wheeless, and Allen 2004) and is based upon reducing the 'physical distance' between communicators. Chesbro (2003) found 'immediate teachers' tended to keep sustained eye contact, speak with vocal variety, and use positive facial expressions, which are all seen as attributes of effective communication (Chanock 2005). Those skilful in immediacy-producing behaviours, such as using people's names, smiling, maintaining eye contact (Baker 2004), can decrease the perceived communication gap between people (Bernstein et al. 2009) and therefore impact positively on the students' learning experience. Allen et al, (2006,22) suggest that 'the ability of a teacher to improve the outcomes of the educational environment by changing his or her communication behaviours represents a major shift in perspective for persons studying classroom communication'. For the purpose of this study the immediacy factors noted above were the ones focused on through the self-reporting from the staff involved. There is a need in the future for studies to explore in what ways, if any, these behavioural attributes make a difference to the student learning experience and whether it is about the individual factors such as the voice or body language or the whole experience from the

lecturer.

This approach presented the group with a different way of exploring teaching through the peer observation process. Group members had fairly extensive experience of being observed but the specific focus on communication, in particular immediacy factors was new to all of them. It could appear self evident that experienced lecturers would be well aware of the importance of effective communication skills but, as a result of sharing stories about teaching, it became obvious that colleagues would benefit from support. For example, one lecturer was experiencing behavioural problems with a student group and had exhausted strategies and techniques for improving the teaching and the students' learning. Another lecturer reported challenges in bringing groups together and was straining her voice in doing so.

The external consultant was chosen due to his experience with the teacher immediacy aspects of communication. Observations were arranged by mutual consent and although some discussion in advance of the activity took place it was agreed the consultant would observe and provide feedback on the communication aspects outlined in the four areas noted above. Unlike previous experience of peer observations the external consultant did not wish to view a lesson plan. Rather the focus was based upon verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication through which the consultant provided one- to-one feedback to lecturers, subsequently developing an action plan for teaching improvements that they could work on with their 'buddy'. The feedback was confidential to the observee who also had complete control over which developmental aspects they wished to focus upon. As this was a new observation process the project group agreed that it should include some qualitative research to enable them to disseminate the findings further and these are shared within this paper. Furthermore, the lecturers wanted to focus their development on strategies that enhanced the student experience as well as their own teaching development.

The participants then agreed on their 'buddies' and set out the ways they would like to work together for the next twelve to eighteen months, this was done based on staff experience rather than through any specific training. They all however, took part in a training session with the external consultant where they explored the teacher immediacy factors, what this meant in relation to communication with the students and what to look for when working with their buddy in this different approach to peer review. This was important for them to keep the focus on immediacy as they started to work and support each other.

Their perceptions of the project and their own practice were collected at various stages as set out in the methodology. The project group met twice a year to share experiences and to discuss the issues and challenges. It became evident quite early on that the level of engagement between the participants was different. Regrettably, two of the group unfortunately were unable to continue for personal reasons. One of the limitations of the research element of the project was the reduction in numbers as the project evolved. Figure 1 demonstrates the model that was adopted in this peer observation process.

Figure 1: The Peer Observation Model Adopted

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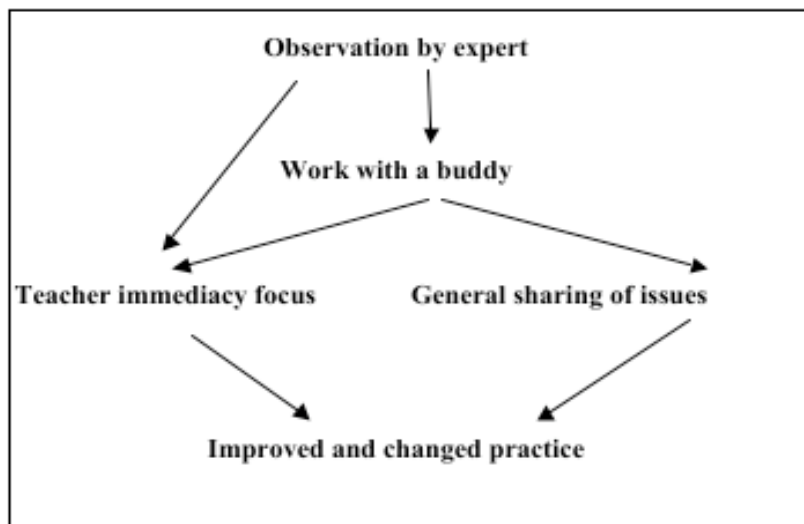
1.2 Rationale for the project

i)   The peer observation model

A formal peer review framework has been in place at the university since 2004 but observation of teaching had been in operation since the mid 1990s. All project members had participated in this scheme for a number of years. Gosling (2005) outlines three models of peer observation namely:

- An evaluation model – used for quality audits and as part of probationary schemes for new staff or for promotion for more experienced staff. Gosling (2005, 13) refers to this as the 'judgemental or management-led

model'.

- · A developmental model – in this approach the focus is on helping staff to improve their practice in an advisory or facilitative way. Choice of development areas could be fairly free or prescribed by the institution. This approach could be used as part of university courses for inexperienced lecturers.

- · A collaborative model – an equitable model whereby there is a genuine desire to learn from each other with no imposed agenda. Peer observation in this model is genuinely collaborative and, 'there is not a clear distinction between the one who is the developer and the one being developed' (Gosling, 2005, 13).

This university's peer observation schemes over the years have embraced all of Gosling's (2005) models to some extent. Therefore, the lecturers had some experience of each of the models before embarking on this project. Part of the lecturers desire to become involved in the project was a feeling, over time, that the primarily *developmental* model they were part of each year was not contributing to improvements in their teaching. Lecturers reported that they were taking part because they had to and although feedback received was constructive it was not always challenging or moving their teaching forward. Hence, the lecturers desire to try out a new approach. Positioning this approach within Gosling's (2005) model is not straightforward however. Ideally, the project would be better described as *collaborative* although the first stage of the model involved the lecturers being observed by an experienced consultant who was not engaging in a reciprocal observation. Although participants knew the observer the consultant was very much deemed as the 'expert' so perhaps there was an element of the *evaluation* approach in there too.

A team from University College Dublin (UCD, 2007) developed their own categories for a peer observation project involving 22 teachers who were following a Graduate Diploma in teaching and learning. These were:

- · Type A: control by observee

- · Type B: control by others

Their work drawing on studies by Peel, (2005) and Adshead et al., (2006) indicated that participants involved in peer observation schemes that are monitored lead to poor take up. Therefore, the UCD team tried to develop a Type A scheme as part of the Graduate Diploma programme. Their research discovered that a successful Type A scheme would have the following dimensions:

- ☒ 'Choice over entry to peer observation scheme

- ☒ Choice of observer

- ☒ Control of focus of observation

- ☒ Control over how feedback is given

- ☒ Control over data-flow

- ☒ Control over next steps'

(McMahon & Barrett, 2007, 509)

Following a review of the various models and research on peer review it was evident that the model outlined in Figure 1 did not fit existing models but rather contained elements from those already outlined. Gosling (2009, 8) provides a useful summary of how some universities have moved 'beyond the peer observation of teaching' with some adopting, what he calls, a 'peer-supported review (P-SR)' approach. In examining this in the context of this study's scheme it is evident that this is similar to that offered by Gosling (2009). Characteristics associated with P-SR include: opportunities for staff to engage in non-judgemental dialogue and to engage in 'collaborative learning processes' (Gosling & O'Connor 2009, 9). In this example, staff (who were peers) agreed on a focus (enhancing their communication skills with a view to improving the student experience) and worked together in a non-judgemental way to learn from the observation activities.

ii)   *The focus on communication skills*

Observation of teaching schemes that focus on teacher immediacy are not widely used or reported on in the higher education sector and therefore this study may go some way in providing more information. Claydon and colleagues (2002) developed a Teaching Process Recall (TPR) scheme where participants recorded themselves teaching on video with the help of group members giving and receiving critical feedback. In this study experienced lecturers used actual teaching situations to examine communication approaches and put in place strategies to support individuals in enhancing their own styles. One of the objectives of TPR was to adopt a more analytical stance towards the teaching and learning processes between teacher and students (Claydon, 2002) and earlier work by the authors of this study found that teacher immediacy does play a vital role in teacher development within the HE context (Nixon, Vickerman and Maynard 2010). Moore and Kuol (2007,135) reported that 'throughout most of the commentaries on what constitutes good teaching, an ability and a willingness to communicate effectively appears to be the most commonly cited

factor...both by teacher and student groups.' It was hoped that participants in this study could enhance their teaching due to increased effectiveness in their communication approaches.

2. Methodology

This study set out to examine two research questions namely: how did the peer review model that included a specific focus on enhancing communication skills develop experienced lecturers professional practice; and how did the peer review model support collaborative learning?

The lecturers involved in this study were based within a Faculty of Education at a large Northern United Kingdom university (n=24,000) where it was university policy for staff to engage in some form of peer review of teaching The lecturers tried out a different approach to peer review focusing on their own communication styles with a particular emphasis on communication aspects of their teaching. All lectures had at least 6 years Higher Education teaching experience and were leading or supporting teaching and learning roles. All were teaching students at undergraduate and/or postgraduate level.

Ethical approval was gained through the Faculty's standard submission procedures whilst informed consent to engage with the study was obtained through verbal agreement of the lecturers. The lecturers were assured of confidentiality of their findings (Robson, 2002; Marshall and Rossman 2006) and informed all data would be anonymised to protect individual identity. Lecturers could withdraw from the research study at any time and the interviews were carried out by a researcher who was not involved with the project. Content analysis (Marshall and Rossman 2006) was used to thematically identify the key themes and issues identified by the lectures.

Table 1: Summary of the stages of the peer review project

Stages		Research process and data analysis
1.	Project members agree objectives, agree buddy system and meet external observer.	Pre-questionnaires conducted before initial meeting with external observer (n=8). Data analysed thematically.
2.	Individuals observed by external consultant and provided with feedback, developmental areas agreed.	Post-observation questionnaires and thematic construction of data (n=6).
3.	Buddies work together for 18 months focusing on the developmental areas. Peer observations carried out with follow up discussion and support.	Individual interviews conducted with each of the experienced lecturers (n=4).

 The experienced lectures involved in the study were asked to complete a pre (Stage 1) and post (Stage 2) evaluation questionnaire. The purpose of this was to compare and contrast lecturers' views and perceptions prior to and following work with the external consultant and their buddy. The Stage 1 questionnaire examined a series of open questions with the purpose of asking lecturers to reflect upon: what they hoped to get out of the project; what their expectations of engaging in the peer review process where; how it might influence, change or impact on their role and what they considered to be the opportunities and challenges concerned with the project. The Stage 2 questionnaire posed a series of open questions for lecturers to reflect upon their initial expectations of the peer review project, the outcomes for lecturers both personally and the impact it had on their roles.

The final stage of the data collection was after 12 months and individual interviews were undertaken by an external research assistant. The four lecturers who had been most heavily involved in the whole project were chosen for this stage in order to draw together their views on their personal and professional developments during the project.

3. Findings And Discussion

This section reports on the findings in relation to the initial aims of the project, i.e. to examine successful components of individuals' communication styles and to provide an opportunity to create processes and resources for sharing the peer review model with others within and beyond the Faculty.

Before the project began all participants were asked about their perceptions and feelings of being involved in this model of peer review (Fig 1). Under the general category of expectations 57% expected the project to help them improve their practice, 14% thought it would provide opportunities for self reflection and 14% hoped it would provide insights into the dynamics between lecturers and students. The majority (71%) indicated that it would be beneficial to all involved with 14% however reporting that it would be a challenge and were anxious about the observation itself. When reporting on impact on their roles all respondents hoped that the activity would help them when supporting others within their staff development roles.

Reporting on what they were excited about 29% of respondents reported being interested in improving their feedback and 14% interested in working with an expert in communication. Respondent four said: '*I hope to find out things related to my whole approach to teaching and learning that will improve the practice of two way communication with the learners and my colleagues.*' Furthermore Respondent five echoed this reporting that they were interested in'*...insights into improving my teaching and how I communicate with students. A deeper awareness of how I behave and what impact this has on a group of learners.*'

However, there was some apprehension from respondents with two individuals expressing concern about being observed with such a heavy focus on communication respondent one stating '*I was sceptical at the start and slightly anxious of what the project involved.*' In relation to the two research questions it is evident from the data that staff were to some extent initially anxious with the peer review project focus on communication, although they welcomed opportunities for collaborative learning with their colleagues.

Following the observation and the subsequent work with a buddy, 60% of the group reported that their expectations of the project had been exceeded, Respondent three stating that '*My expectations have far exceeded what I thought I would get out of the*

project both personally and in relation to wider use by the university'. More specifically 40% of the sample commented on having a greater insight into their own teaching and learning, whilst 20% found the opportunity to self reflect important and 20% highlighting the opportunity to work with another colleague as a positive.

In relation to immediacy, all four respondents were very positive about their increased awareness and development since working on these areas of communication. Respondent four highlighted development in her non-verbal behaviour as one of the most important outcomes '*a focus on learning and teaching that is not so much subject content focused, but more looking at my own non verbal communication patterns'.* Wragg (1999, 73) supports this approach emphasising the importance of how we communicate as well as what, '...a moving pointed finger may illustrate the line of a graph but may signal aggression through jabbing or accusation'. Other respondents reported on improvements to their teaching as a result of the process, '*much more aware of my own behaviour and am attempting to change some of my patterns and mannerisms to develop my own teaching style to support student learning'* (Respondent one). Key factors that were highlighted by the staff in relation to this area of non-verbal communication included issues around, where you stand to deliver different elements i.e. delivery and question and answer and the effect this can have on the audience. The use of the body as a tool to emphasise key points and convey emotions to include the audience in the material and how to look to all four corners of a room to engage everyone and maintain the personal feeling of eye contact. Wragg (1999) emphasises the importance of non-verbal aspects – posture, movement, gesture, facial expression and eye contact. 'Posture can reveal interest, threat, boredom, excitement, a whole range of human emotions' *(*Wragg 1999, 70). As lecturers we think long and hard about the content of the message and this project suggests we also need to think about how we communicate this to have a greater impact on student learning.

The second element in relation to immediacy that was reported positively on in this project was that of verbal communication. Wragg (1999,12) highlights the importance of using voice effectively in the classroom and suggested that this should be a focus during observations, 'the spoken word...can be enhanced by variations in voices when teachers use loud or soft tone, emphasise certain words, or changes from high to low pitch.' Respondent one commented on the increased awareness of the impact of pace of the spoken work, "*Once I had heard what others heard when I speak fast I realised I needed to slow down and let my words sink in. I now consciously think about how fast and I am speaking and put in pauses and breaks to help the students take in the*

message." Respondent four was struck by the use of tone and became much more aware of how variations in tone can help communicate and connect with the audience. Exercises were suggested by the external to help the project team develop their verbal communication, one which worked well for one individual was talking whilst using a metronome to pace the words. The findings of this project indicate that peer observation and subsequent development work on immediacy factors can help individuals to develop their styles and this in turn is important in creating conducive learning environments for students.

Respondents reported being excited about trying out new techniques arising out of a fresh approach to peer review. Respondent five stated '*having feedback related to my communication skills, gained new interest in peer review'*. The usefulness of gaining personal feedback was also highlighted, 'e*xperiencing high level feedback has been very important in helping me to alter my practice'* (Respondent three).

In addition to working with their 'buddy', the whole group met regularly to discuss common themes. Respondent three notes that it was almost like a partnership '*we have gone back to the whole group and taken cues from everybody else within it rather than just working together'.* Project group members found ways of working that benefitted them but there was a strong feeling that working with others enhanced their engagement with peer review and their own practice and developing their communication approaches. Respondent 4 found it '*refreshing*' as a process with the immediacy angle '*very useful'.*

Although the communication focus of this project appears to have been an important factor in improving teaching and learning practice, reflection on the activity is clearly another major feature. This is reported on extensively elsewhere. Peel (2005,489) classes peer observation as a 'transformatory tool' emphasising the importance of self-reflection and reflective practice. It was noted that due to being re-energised about peer review this level of reflection was enhanced (Respondent five), thereby showing that offering a different approach to peer observation may have many benefits to individuals.

After the project had been running for over one academic year, four of the participants were interviewed about their experiences, it must be noted that these four individuals had all been heavily involved in the project and had been proactive in keeping it going. The key themes that arose out of these interviews were;

- the approaches affected all participants positively in relation to the way they viewed peer review;

- all individuals developed their immediacy skills and changed their own practice;

- all individuals believed that being involved in a group project raised the awareness of teaching and more time was spent talking about it.

In relation to this approach and peer review as a process, Respondent three notes '*I think it has the potential to get people re-engaged with peer review and to be excited by the way they teach.*' Respondent four thought the '*buddy process had a lot of virtue*' and considered '*that this was worth carrying on with*'. Respondent four reported that working with another colleague to talk about teaching was one of the key project outcomes and through this renewed interest in peer review had been gained.

A key critical success factor arising from this project was the importance of the relationship with buddies. Respondent three commented, '*this is crucial, as across the project there were people who didn't want to work with other people*'. The level of trust between the individuals was very important, Respondent three continues, '*it's important you can be totally honest with them and that you trust each other*'. Another group member talked about the importance of having a relationship where difficult conversations can be had and critical yet constructive feedback can be given. Connelly, Jones and Jones (2007) when discussing collaboration highlight the importance of mutual respect and trust. The level of trust developed with buddies was central to the success of the project, staff chose who they wanted to work with but even so they had to put effort into the process and the relationship. Respondent two stated "*this project worked for me due to my choice of buddy however this is a very difficult element to build into such work, without the right person I would not I believe have had as much personal growth.*" For any work of this kind matching people to each other seems crucial as does a solution when things don't work as planned.

Sullivan (1998,6) states that, 'collaboration is defined as a dynamic process of creating power sharing partnership for pervasive application...for the purposeful attention to needs and problems in order to achieve likely successful outcomes'. The approach adopted in this project was one that engaged and enhanced the practice of experienced lecturers and perhaps could be compared to that of reciprocal coaching (Zwarta, Wubbelsb, Bergena,and Bolhuisc 2007) where individuals regularly discuss their efforts to support student learning. Key features noted by the participants, were

being able to choose who to work with, a focus for the observations and subsequent discussions and regular conversations and whole group meetings to share experiences.

In relation to teacher immediacy, all respondents talked about what they had focused on and how they had been developing their individual communication styles. Respondent one notes that after the project they '*experience lectures that are a lot calmer and there is a lot less chattering in the audience.*' This project was viewed as a success overall by all four of the respondents who talked about what they had learnt, what had changed in their practice and how they felt differently about their teaching and also that of others.

4. Conclusion

The model as described in Figure 1 appears to have merit in relation to developing individual practice through a peer observation process. Despite some scepticism and anxiety all participants that continued through the project felt that they had gained both in relation to their immediacy and communication skills and in their own teaching. There was agreement that they all felt more positive towards peer observation and in some cases were re-energised by this different approach. The level of reflection about their teaching seemed to have increased due to the re-connection with this type of peer observation. The dialogue and development work with the buddy was a very strong positive aspect the issues here being that trust, honesty and commitment were crucial, without this the highly personal level of development might not happen to the same extent. This level of peer observation may therefore be better with more experienced staff that are prepared and want to really explore and develop themselves as communicators and as learners themselves.

4.1 What has happened since.

The approaches that have been reported on and evaluated in this study have been extended throughout the university. Drawing on the expertise of the external observer and working with a group of actors the individual stories have been filmed and compiled in to a web based resource for staff exploring immediacy issues in teaching and how these can be picked up in peer observation. The resource has been disseminated through the University virtual learning environment to all staff and a number of staff teams are using it as their focus for peer review taking on both the

immediacy aspect and the collaborative working approach. From this the issue of feedback in relation to peer review and its importance and inherent difficulties became apparent and members of the original project group have now developed a resource to support effective use of feedback to further enhance peer review in the university.

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