

Peer Observation in Teacher Development

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This presentation began with a consideration of the elements that teaching practice on an initial teacher training course is designed to promote (Gower 1983, 1995), including:

- Sensitivity to problems of language use for learners;
- Sensitivity to how learners learn, the skills they need, the strategies they employ and the problems they have;
- Classroom management skills;
- Teaching techniques.

We then proposed a series of guidelines for the observation of peers on the training course. Guidelines are provided for each day's teaching practice, with a focus each day on a different area of teaching skills, such as grading language, staging instructions and checking meaning. This gives the peers observing their teaching partners an additional opportunity to focus on the practical implementation of some of the key teaching techniques taught on the course, which enriches both their contributions to the feedback discussion and their own teaching practice. In the final week of the course, instead of specifying guidelines, we ask the observed teachers to tell their peers what they want them to focus on.

We studied in detail two examples of peer observation notes from Scrivener (1994), noting that comments should be objective, supportive and non-judgmental, but in fact often include interpretative comment on the intentions or attitudes which the observer thinks might underlie the observed behaviours.

In the context of the training course, formal observation is often based on the trainer's expectations, and linked to assessment, focusing on the aims and objectives of the course, not those of the trainee teacher. Feedback is therefore likely to be corrective, and teacher change resulting from such feedback is likely to be convergent, with the teacher required to move closer to some agreed norm ((Kurtoglu-Hooton, 2004). This narrow view may stem from preconceptions about the processes of teaching and learning that can usefully be challenged (Gabrielatos 2004), and the identification of such preconceptions allows us to make feedback to trainee teachers more constructive and so more likely to facilitate teacher change. Some of the preconceptions discussed include:

- Learning has specific and uniform goals;
- There are specific ingredients that a good lesson absolutely must have;
- There are specific models for good lessons.

Having explored the distinction between initial training and further development, we posited a parallel distinction in the objectives of teaching practice in these two contexts. In the training context, the objectives of teaching practice may be summarized as:

- To provide an arena for assessment;
- To have your teaching evaluated and criticized;

while in the context of ongoing development, objectives of peer observation might be:

- To encourage self-awareness;
- To enable you to make decisions about how you teach.

Having examined the various roles of observation, we suggested guidelines for peer observation designed to promote the development of self-awareness for

experienced as well as novice teachers. These focus on the use of observation as a tool to provide constructive and formative feedback.

Finally, we considered the value of peer observation as an element sustaining development in the wider context of classroom research. As White (2003) notes, “Where two experienced teachers are involved they should take the opportunity to reflect on the underlying rationale of their teaching, rather than more superficial issues of procedure or technique”. Being observed and reflecting on feedback is the most immediate way for teachers to increase their awareness of how they teach, while “Peer observation can provide opportunities for teachers to view each other’s teaching in order to expose them to different teaching styles and to provide opportunities for critical reflection on their own teaching” (Richards 1995). This kind of reflection on practice, stimulated and supported by a colleague’s observation is an important factor in the cycle of ongoing development. As Norrish (1996) states, “Once the virtuous circle of establishing a climate of non-judgmental professional interest is established, then teachers will begin to regard themselves as researchers with a professional stake in their own theory generation.”

During the discussion, colleagues commented that it was very useful to provide detailed guidelines for the peer observation during the pre-service training course, and we explored the possibility of linking these more closely to the areas covered in the input sessions on each day of the course. It was also noted that our guidelines focus very much on teacher behaviours, and colleagues suggested that a focus on the learners and learning outcomes should also be included.

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