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Perceived Impact of Peer Observation of Teaching in Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper explores participant perceptions of the impact of a Peer Observation of Teaching scheme offered as part of an accredited Postgraduate Certificate in Teaching for academic staff/faculty in higher education. The Postgraduate Certificate Program has been designed to support the continuing professional development of academic staff/faculty through integration of peer learning. Inherent in the design and delivery of the Peer Observation of Teaching scheme is the belief by all involved that learning about teaching in higher education, and heightening a sense of professionalism, stems from a continuous process of transforming and constructing personal meaning in a variety of related ways. This program has its theoretical basis in the Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1983) and the perceived impact of the scheme has been evaluated based on this cycle; participants over the past 5 years on the program have provided valuable insights into the demands of active engagement with abstract pedagogical theory, purposeful critical reflection on classroom practice, and a challenging of assumptions through shared reflective dialogues with colleagues. Of particular interest is how the scheme aids the integration of theory and practice, the value of interdisciplinary learning and how new teachers can benefit.

Keywords

Peer observation of teaching, critical reflection, teaching portfolio, continuous professional development, higher education

There is little doubt that learning and teaching in higher education has become more challenging and more complex in recent years, and all for a variety of reasons. In this new millennium, academic staff/faculty are increasingly challenged around a number of key philosophical issues including contested visions of the role and purpose of higher education itself and around the increasing marketization of knowledge production in a global economy. Individual academics no doubt position themselves in relation to all contested issues and develop tacit and conscious philosophies that inform their professional practices. Also challenging for the role of academics is increasing diversity in disciplines, increasing student expectations from teaching and learning, new demands in course design and delivery, and increasing emphasis on professional qualifications. The large question on what constitutes 'good teaching' has itself been addressed globally by research. For example, Stefani (2005) in New Zealand in looked specifically at factors that might be expected to contribute to successful study outcomes for undergraduate students. However there remains a growing fissure in this area. Trying to determine whether or not good teaching, of any kind, supports or encourages good learning is a thorny issue. There is not a generic definition of good teaching that suits all contexts and student cohorts.

Such a plethora of challenges means that academic staff/faculty needs outlets to talk about their teaching. This paper discusses one such outlet, a peer observation of teaching scheme in the context of a Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching, which is an accredited continuous professional development (CPD) program for academic staff/faculty, located in a higher education institution in the Republic of Ireland. In the context of this CPD program, the definition of peer observation of teaching is the formal

process by which the good practice of staff engaged in learning and teaching activities is identified, disseminated and developed. The Republic of Ireland's education system is quite similar to that of most other western countries, and there are three distinct levels of education: primary, secondary and higher (often known as *third-level* or tertiary) education.

Argued strongly in the paper is the importance of the climate of the peer observation of teaching scheme, one which is approving of dialogue, encouraging of open debate and supportive of risk-taking in teaching. The scheme has been designed to provide a forum for debate and dialogue around what constitutes 'good learning' for students and 'good teaching' by academics, as these issues figure prominently in dialogue, thinking and practices in higher education. Critical insights on the scheme are offered through a synthesis of relevant theoretical literature, discussion of the mechanics and climate of the scheme, and evaluations by the academic staff/faculty participating over the past 5 years. The latter is complemented with my own experiences both as an educational developer and one of a team of tutors initiating and supporting the peer observation of teaching scheme.

Overview of the Program

Currently, there is no professional training requirement for higher education teachers in the Republic of Ireland as far as their teaching is concerned. However, there is growing recognition within the sector for training provision for lecturers and other academic staff/faculty who have a teaching component to their work. To address this, in 2000, a Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching was offered through the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). This program aims to enable academic staff/faculty in the third level sector to be effective, competent lecturers by providing them with a range of skills and knowledge to design, deliver and evaluate education programs. It has been targeted

at new and existing academic staff/faculty in higher education institutions in the Republic of Ireland, including lecturers, librarians, and academic support staff. The latter two have responsibility for teaching in their areas. It is continuing apace today, with currently over 100 academic staff/faculty having successfully graduated from the program. To date, all participants on the program have been self-selecting and chose to engage with the program for their own Continuing Professional Development. Two thirds of graduates are new to teaching in higher education, and come to the programme within the first one to two years of their practice.

The Postgraduate Certificate Program consists of two modules: *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* and *Designing Curricula and Assessment Strategies*. Each module involves a three-hour workshop/session each week and can be completed in one semester. This Postgraduate Certificate would normally be completed part-time in one academic year. With a focused intentionality, the Program uses a thoroughly researched and popular model of learning: Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 1983). The aim is that having experienced this model of learning as program participants, the lecturers will be well placed to implement and adapt it in order to facilitate the learning of their students.

The learning in the Postgraduate Certificate begins with the real experience of the lecturers in the role as teachers and facilitators of learning in their institutions. Participants are facilitated to reflect on their experiences in order to confirm strengths, raise questions, improve their practice and innovate. This reflection takes many forms including pair work, group discussion, written exercises, workshops, and portfolio work. Participants are encouraged to make links between their reflections on practice and the theories and principles of learning and teaching. The generalization and abstraction also takes many forms including

reading pedagogical theories, exploring best national and international practice, book reviews, online discussions on WebCT and developing a personal philosophy. Participants ask questions about the theories of learning and teaching from the viewpoint of their current practice. They also theorize from reflections on their practice. Experiential learning is a major key to learning. Participants try out different ideas and methods in their own situations, taking risks where relevant: their critical reflections provide key insights for further classroom experimentation and taking risks in the learning and teaching strategies being employed. Lesson planning, project work and peer observation are among the strategies used to facilitate participants testing out the application of their learning. The Peer Observation of Teaching Scheme that is the focus of this paper, has been integrated to Module One (see Figure 1).

While peer observation of teaching is used in a variety of higher education contexts, such as forming part of an application for tenure, or as part of quality monitoring processes, it has been deployed on this program specifically as a critical reflective device for teachers developing an individual teaching portfolio. Indeed, Shortland (2004) reports that peer observation has become part of development programs for both new lecturers and established staff, being used for CPD purposes. However, not all reports on peer observation are positive. Cosh (2002) has argued that there seems to be no real evidence that people develop and improve through the judgments or comments of others: “In the case of experienced teachers in particular, a natural reaction to explicit or even implied criticism is to become defensive and inimical to suggestions of change” (p.172). A counter argument to this is that the participants in this present study were engaged in the scheme in order to reflect upon their own teaching and for active self-development, rather than to make judgments upon others.

The recognition from the literature is that although used for a variety of purposes, it is generally held that peer observation of teaching is about enabling change for the better. (Shortland, 2007; McMahon, Barrett & O'Neill, 2007) The process of peer observation on this program involves colleagues who review a lecturer/educator's teaching through classroom observation and exploration of instructional materials and course design. Peer observations are particularly useful for self-assessment and improvement of teaching skills; but it is important for participants to keep in mind that what is gained through peer observation will ultimately benefit students. Therefore, observation is intended for reviewing the teaching process and its relationship to student learning. Ultimately, peer observation aims to provide the participant with feedback, support and assistance from their colleagues. Moreover, when they observe, they will be able to see teaching from the students' perspective. Webb (1996) believes the more we as teachers can share a common form of life and common experience with others in our institutions, the greater is the possibility that we will be able to extend our horizons to encompass a fuller understanding.

Clarity on the Scheme's Rationale

At the induction session of the Program, it was important to convey the rationale behind this peer observation of teaching scheme to the participants. Chism's (1999) suggestions (see Table 1) on the 'who', 'what', 'where', 'when', 'how', were very useful in this, particularly for illuminating the 'why' of the scheme.

It was important to distinguish for the participants in the scheme that they would be involved in a developmental model of peer observation which would focus on assisting them to improve their teaching. Such a model is fairly typical in Postgraduate Certificate Programs of this genre for academic staff/faculty. This model involves tutors on the program advising

and facilitating the participants on working together to develop ways of improving their teaching. The role of the tutor in this scheme is to assist all the participants in the scheme to improve their teaching skills, through modeling of practice in observation and the giving and receiving of constructive feedback on practice. Gibbs (1995) has argued for the need for observer training or briefing because observation of teaching is particularly subjective and fraught with difficulties and so requires a clear framework.

According to Gosling (2005), the objectives of peer observation of teaching within such a developmental model are:

- To facilitate reflection on the effectiveness of the participant's own teaching and identify their development needs;
- To improve the quality of learning and teaching;
- To foster discussion and dissemination of good practice; and
- To increase participant awareness of the student experience of learning. (p.16)

The developmental model assumes that we have a strong evidential basis for knowing what good practice in teaching is, but as argued in the introduction to this paper, this remains a contested area. However, there is evidence that advice given to participants on such Postgraduate Certificate Programs does lead to them adopting a more student-centered approach in their teaching (Gibbs, 2003; Gibbs & Coffey, 2001).

Theoretical Underpinning of the Scheme

This section discusses the prior literature addressing the key areas for peer observation: the reflective practitioner, self-efficacy, Kolb's experiential learning cycle, and, to a lesser extent, because it appears to be becoming outmoded in the literature, SGID.

A fairly common theoretical framework underpinning several of the peer observation of teaching schemes reported in the literature is the reflective practice model (Bell, 2002). This model involves: the reconstruction of one's experiences; the honest acceptance and analysis of feedback; the evaluation of one's skills, attitudes and knowledge; and the identification and exploration of new possibilities for professional action (Schön, 1983). In his later, seminal research, Schön (1987) described reflective practice as "a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilled" (p.31). Critical reflection within the scheme is composed of three components: questioning or reframing assumptions; taking an alternative perspective; and realization that assumption change changes meaning. This can lead to transformative learning, whereby reflection should be a shared rather than a personal experience for best learning.

The concept of reflective practice and its potential role in professional, personal and organisational development in HE is fundamental to the scheme. Askew (2004) reports that that a reflective model of peer observation of teaching can become a key process in the professional learning of academic staff/faculty and contribute to fashioning a consciously reflective learning organization. Indeed, it can prevent teachers from becoming isolated and teaching from becoming routine and mundane. Linked to this, the current scheme utilizes a mentoring component; mentoring literally means 'wise and trusted advisor or counsellor'. It is an essential aid to the academics' professional development, looking beyond day-to-day activities to the future through fostering talent and potential. Peers are invited to consider how the processes of coaching, mentoring or both could assist their professional development and teaching activities. The scheme encourages colleagues to reflect on how they could use

‘coaching’ techniques to strengthen their knowledge and understanding to influence the quality of students’ learning outcomes.

In addition to the recognition of the importance of reflective practice, this current model being reported is based upon Bandura’s (1997) theory on self-efficacy. According to Bandura (1977), people's beliefs about their efficacy can be developed by a number of sources of influence. The most influential source of these beliefs is the mastery experience. When a person believes they have what it takes to succeed, they develop a resilient sense of efficacy. If faced with difficulties or setbacks, they know that they can be successful through perseverance. The perception that one's teaching has been successful increases efficacy beliefs raising expectations that future performances will be successful. In contrast failure, especially if it occurs early in the learning experience, undermines one's sense of efficacy. The second influential source of these beliefs is the vicarious experience. It is one's direct or vicarious experience with success or failure that will most strongly influence one's self-efficacy. Learning does not need to occur through direct experience. When a person sees another person accomplish a task, the vicarious experience of observing a model can also have a strong influence on self-efficacy. By observing others succeed, our own self-efficacy can be raised.

The act of observation has been regarded as essentially a sensory experience. Hergenhahn (1982) notes that Bandura’s theory of observational learning suggests that “anything that can be learned by direct experience can also be learned from observation” (p. 405), although the teacher must also take into account a range of attentional, retentional, motor and motivational processes (p. 406). In a similar fashion, individuals’ self efficacy can be reinforced when they observe their peers perform tasks successfully, “observing similar

peers improving their skills conveys that students can learn as well” (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002, p. 172). In this model, participants’ self-efficacy was enhanced by means of observing others as evidenced in the evaluative comments from participants.

Social persuasion is a third way of strengthening people's beliefs that they have what it takes to succeed. People who are persuaded verbally that they have the capabilities to master given tasks are likely to put in more effort and continue it over time than if they believe self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when they are faced with difficult situations. Taken altogether, a teacher with high self-efficacy tends to exhibit greater levels of enthusiasm, be more open to new ideas, more willing to try a variety of methods to better meet the needs of their students, and more devoted to teaching.

Kolb’s experiential learning model lies at the heart of the PG Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching. The scheme brings this to the fore by enabling the participants to reflect on their current practice, share their experience with supportive peers, take risks and experiment in a supportive and friendly learning environment, and come to an understanding of new concepts with which to analyse their teaching and new methods to adapt and try out in their practice. Experiential learning is intrinsic to the scheme in that knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. The peer partnerships (mentoring relationship), if they remain in tact, can engage in continual testing of practices and ideas leading to professional development over time, and this concurs with Shortland’s (2004) research. Yet it is important to remember that experience is framed and shaped by the culture in which it is experienced. The amount of experience is unrelated to its richness or complexity. This scheme facilitates the use of new information in authentic situations and can lead to increased learning for each of the participants.

The steps involved in a typical peer observation of teaching scheme can arguably be likened to those in Small Group Instructional Diagnosis (SGIDs) where the process involves an initial meeting with the teacher, a classroom interview, which requires 20 to 35 minutes of class time (depending on class size), and a final report and teacher follow-up with students (Clark & Redmond, 1982). However, SGIDs are specifically a vehicle for gathering student feedback, and involve a process designed to gather information directly from students and teachers with the goal of aligning expectations to improve teaching and learning.

Mechanics of the Scheme

The peer observation of teaching scheme is entirely confidential between observer, teacher and Program tutors, and is only used within the confines of the Certificate Program.

Participants may be observed as many times as they wish, but they need to select two peer observations to include in their teaching portfolio, which is the assessment mechanism of the program. There are three stages to the observation process, as illustrated in the accompanying model (see Figure 2).

Before the peer observation of teaching takes place, it is important to have a preliminary or pre-observation meeting with the observer. This meeting should focus on the teacher's goals for the observation, and what they would like the observer to focus on, so that the feedback can be meaningful. Also at this pre-observation meeting, it is important to identify appropriate observation opportunities, bearing in mind that the class visited should involve typical class activities such as small group work, laboratory work, a lecture, or discussion. Further, issues to be agreed upon include the following: the overall teaching schedule; the arrangement for observation of teaching session(s) and scheduling of a feedback session a few days later; the learning outcomes for the agreed session(s); the

assessment schedule and teaching scheme for the module (to see how session fits in with course outcomes); the criteria for observation, as determined by the model selected or developed; and the format for comments on observation, as determined by the peer observation model selected or developed.

The peer observation of teaching itself is carried out as already agreed upon at the preliminary meeting. It may be useful if the teacher (teacher) informs the student group about the observation a week or so in advance. Students need to be informed about the observation and assured that the purpose of the observation is to assist in the development of the teacher's or observer's professional skills. Much of the observer's attention should be on the students, in order to focus on their listening, motivation, understanding and learning. However, as Martin and Double (1998) suggests, it is important for "the observer to be involved in the experience without being drawn into dialogue or intellectual debate" (p. 164). At the end, the teacher being observed should take a few minutes to make some notes about the class session.

After the observation, it is vital to have a post-observation follow-up session. By focusing on three key points – a review of criteria and agreements, a review of the learning outcomes of the module and the observed session and a review of the lesson plan – this meeting can be perceived as a simple "giving and receiving feedback model." However, as Gosling (2005) states, this notion of 'giver' and 'receiver' needs to be replaced by a dialogue model in which both parties are regarded as equal and mutual beneficiaries of the process. The teacher normally begins this meeting by sharing his or her thoughts on the observation, before listening to the observer's comments. Then, constructive feedback and discussions on teaching style and delivery are at the core of the meeting, and it concludes with identification of action steps for improvement to practice.

At all stages in this process, reflection on practice is key to increasing levels of self-efficacy in teachers. In the process of becoming ‘self’ aware, Peel (2005) suggests that, “particular attention is paid in the literature to the debates around critical reflection, reflective practice, reflective dialogue and transformative learning” (p. 491). Reflection about professional practice is promoted as valuable, especially where it is through “reflective dialogue” (Brockbank & McGill, 1998, pp. 5-6). Osterman and Kottkamp (1993) offer a definition of reflective practice that holds resonance for the model of peer observation of teaching used in this CPD program for academic staff/faculty.

Reflective practice is viewed as a means by which practitioners can develop a greater self-awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and development.

(p.19)

From an analysis of the case studies reported in the literature of the various models used for peer observation of teaching, it seems that critical reflection is a necessary prerequisite to the developmental discourses associated with teaching in higher education.

Climate of Observation on the Program

The climate of the peer observation process in this program is established and cultivated from the outset. Research has been conducted around the importance of the relationship between observer and teacher, with the relationship needing to be based on confidentiality and the creation of a non-judgmental environment (Brown and Jones, 1993; Tremlett, 1992). The ethos behind the process can be summed up as formative, developmental, collaborative, reflective and enabling a personal exploration of practice. At all times there is support of:

- willingness by participants to explore ideas and share reactions, to give and receive feedback;
- developing trust among participants which allows for honest and open exchange to encourage reflection about teaching;
- working with peer observers who are warm and responsive, inspiring trust and confidence in the person being observed;
- ensuring academic staff/faculty being observed are open to change and welcome insights from colleagues;
- helping academic staff/faculty take an active role in the observation process through self-assessment of strengths and areas for development in learning and teaching, and reflection on teaching;
- a focus on the observable, providing teachers with the kinds of constructive feedback which they desire; and
- having enough time to include a preliminary conversation about the desired focus, the observation itself, and a chance to discuss reactions face-to-face.

The participant has control over all stages in the establishment and flow of the process (see figure 3). This is based upon principles of adult education, whereby learning on the scheme is a social process whereby the participants need to collaborate and interact with each other. The participants in this scheme are involved in learning because they want to be. As learning is collaborative, it needs to engender mutual respect. It is emphasized that learning within the scheme is noncompetitive and should take place in a supportive environment. Learning should be problem and experience centered, non-threatening, and supportive. Learning should be open-ended, focus on problem finding and solving, and be tolerant of

uncertainty, inconsistency, and diversity. As the participants interact with their peers, they will learn to learn from each other, and this can increase motivation as they realize that they have control over the entire peer observation of teaching scheme. They take control of the process by setting their own goals, working out the mechanics of the scheme and evaluating their own learning at its close. The self-directed nature of this scheme means that the experiences are structured so that there is opportunity for dialogue, interchange, and opportunity for peers of a heterogeneous group to interact.

Peer observation of teaching has been seen by some to be a social tool to enhance teaching practice (Peel, 2005). In this Program it was in a sense, 'a means to an end' since it was integral to the satisfactory completion of a teaching portfolio, and by default, the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching. An important insight to emerge from the scheme was the seeking by participants to understand both their own and others classroom behavior and in doing so, revealed a great diversity in practice. It has been acknowledged that insights into personal practice are gained both from the act of observing as well as from being observed (Martin & Double, 1998).

Participant Evaluation: Methods of Data Collection

For this to be a fully collaborative scheme of peer observation of teaching, it is argued that it needs to allow sufficient opportunities for all participating to voice their views of the scheme and to be able to make proposals for revisions. Evaluating the scheme is an essential part of sustaining it over any length of time. As Gosling (2005) believes, this is part of the negotiability and self-reflexive nature of peer observation of teaching as a social practice. It enables participants to express their reactions to what has happened and to develop their understanding of the meaning of the experiences they have had.

To gain insights into the lived experiences of the participants in the scheme, various data was used including evaluation forms, interviews, and document collection. Ninety participants agreed to evaluate the scheme by completing the evaluation form. The primary narratives consisted of three in depth, semi structured interviews (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) with six participants in each group. In addition to the three interviews, all 90 participants agreed to allow their peer observation components of their teaching portfolio to be analysed which focused on the peer observation activities, pre and post observation meeting notes, and challenges and successes within the scheme for them.

In order to continue evaluation of the scheme, and based on the review of the literature, a more detailed qualitative evaluation is in the process of being constructed, and will be distributed to future participants.

Results

A number of positive and developmental outcomes from the scheme emerged from these evaluations. These were categorized under the following areas of Kolb's learning cycle: application of theory to practice, reflection, and experimentation, and discussed in the light of

the issues they raise for educators involved in the design and delivery of such peer observation schemes.

Application of Theory to Practice: Discovering New Ways of Talking About Teaching

There were instances where participants were involved in comparing the quality of their teaching against experiences and knowledge of relevant educational theory. Bolin (1988) believes that heightened connections between theory and practice are evident in reflective educators, and this is borne out by the following comment:

In the Peer Observation, the participation of colleagues and learning from others helped me apply what was learnt from the theoretical aspects of the program. (2001-2002 participant)

While there is an increasing body of literature to help promote scholarly dialogue about teaching (Gilpin, 2000; Gosling, 2005; Boyer, 1990; Shulman, 2000), and indeed an International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, many staff still find it difficult to talk about their teaching and in some departments, teaching is seldom discussed. Gosling (2005) suggests that one view about why this has happened is because the language we have available to us for this purpose has become impoverished. Palmer (1998) portrayed a rationale for this:

We rarely talk with each other about teaching at any depth – and why should we when we have nothing more than ‘tips, tricks and techniques’ to discuss? That kind of talk fails to touch the heart of the teacher’s experience (p. 11)

However, for the apprentice teacher, starting out on their career in teaching, the practical tool-kit approach of tips and techniques, does have its merits:

Discussing ideas and techniques of learning and teaching with peers was so important; I learnt so much from my class-mates in terms of the how-to of teaching, and the follow-up discussions gave us a chance to explore a bit deeper the why part. (2002-2003 participant)

The greatest areas for learning for me were the peer observations where we all participated and had an opportunity to learn from our peers and pick up some 'tricks of the trade' and try these out in my own practice. (2005-2006 participant)

Bamber (2002) argues that such apprentice teachers have the most to learn from feedback on peer observation and often appreciates the advice that is available to them.

Reflection: Illuminating the 'Why' of Teaching

The benefits accrued for the majority of participants went further than techniques, teaching aids, or 'tricks of the trade' as arguably these alone are insufficient to enhance teaching. According to Peel (2005) this requires a synthesis of substantive knowledge, a critically *reflective* engagement with teaching practice, and a confidence in one's self. Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005) have indicated that reflective practice involves the process of teaching and the thinking behind it, rather than simply evaluating the teaching itself. It is therefore addressing the question of *why* as opposed to *how* and, most important, it is about learning from this process.

The peer observation is beneficial to both the observer as well as to colleague being observed; I found these very good because in writing reflectively about the experience you were subconsciously trying to figure out why you would do this and whether you were doing it better. (2003-2004 participant)

Martin and Double (1998) believe that in an educational setting, a process of peer observation that encourages and supports reflection is likely to have important benefits in terms of the refinement of teaching skills.

The peer observations were fantastic as I have had the opportunity to think about discuss personal areas of my teaching that it has not been feasible in general class sessions. (2005-2006 participant)

Peer observations were essential, in that they confirmed my ability to get the knowledge across to my students, while giving me valuable insights into how to further improve my delivery. (2005-2006 participant)

Good thoughtful insights about my teaching skills were gained from listening to my observers. (2005-2006 participant)

The peer observations have been particularly worthwhile for allowing me the chance for a micro exploration of aspects of my teaching. (2005-2006 participant)

Experimentation: Increased Confidence and Self-Efficacy

It is important to note that observation may be an unthinking, mechanical process that does not necessarily modify intentions. Behavior that is modified through observation is not necessarily modified for the better, as is experimentation with new strategies for the first time in front of a live class. However, reading about, reflecting upon and experimenting with strategies in the classroom can support the teacher in movement towards improvement in their teaching craft. According to Brockbank and McGill (1998), it is the layering of

reflective activities that can contribute to transformational learning that involves reflection about knowledge, action and self, together with reflection on that learning. At one level, the peer observation of teaching provided a range of opportunities for critical discussion and feedback on performance. When delivering teaching, it is important to remain receptive to other teaching styles and methods in order to maintain a level of experimentation within one's own repertoire and diminish repetitive and tedious learning for one's students.

Testing out new strategies that I had read about on the program, and had a chance to observe my peer adapting for their practice really was important for me. (2004-2005 participant)

For most participants, engaging in this scheme provided the first feedback on their teaching they had ever received, which for many was a welcome affirmation of their teaching skills. For many, it offered a forum for conversation and scholarly exchange about teaching.

The tutor review gave me less confidence in my teaching but the peer reviews were really helpful to me developing strategies for delivering my course. (2000-2001 participant)

These were painful at the time but very useful; I did feel uncomfortable for the first one, but when I saw how much I was in control of how things were done, I looked forward to the next one and grew in confidence about them and my teaching role. (2003-2004 participant)

Many expressed a developing sense of confidence in their teaching approach. Encouraging teachers to share insights and provide each other with support can enhance their self-assurance and zest for further exploration of their practice. Developing their sense of professional worth is vital and placing an emphasis on the dissemination of good practice rather than on the locating and correcting of poor practice can be fundamental to success.

The peer observations provided valuable feedback on my classroom environment – areas that had been working well received confirmation of that fact, and areas that I had identified as needing improvement, well I got a few different perspectives on why things were going wrong – all were worth considering; I felt more confident that I had been working along the right lines. (2003-2004 participant)

I found these most useful, in fact more so than I had anticipated. It was great to get some affirmative feedback and to at least know that I am on the right track. (2003-2004 participant)

These were an excellent experience; it was honestly great to be observed and to observe others; it gave me assurance that I can teach. (2003-2004 participant)

Experimentation: Perceived Changes

As reported in Bell's (2002) study, and mirrored here, some participants reported making immediate changes to their teaching practice, articulating improvements in the design and implementation of learning and teaching activities. It was interesting to note in Bell's study that such changes were categorized into technical, pedagogical and critical changes (p.

33). Similarly, in this present study, it was found that technical changes and more profound pedagogical changes were perceived. The former related to skills and techniques observable in the classroom, with technical foci including commentary on provision of online components of courses and the use of audio-visual media in teaching sessions. Pedagogical foci included commentary on developing students' critical thinking, communication and collaboration skills, strategies for motivating students in class and content sequence cohesion.

I thought that the peer observations and subsequent written feedback and discussions on how my students were learning in class and how the course content were structured were a very good indicator of improvements made to classroom practice. (2004-2005 participant)

The peer observations and follow-up discussions were the most important aspect of the program for enabling me to make much-needed changes to my practice in terms of my presentation skills, introduction of more activity to lessons, and how I was using WebCT to support my classroom teaching. (2004-2005 participant)

These post observation discussions were invaluable for pointing one in the right direction to make improvements or to see someone write well done, good job! (2004-2005 participant)

I received a lot of very valuable feedback on how I delivered my lectures, particular on my use of video and audio clips, which I was able to put into use straight away. (2005-2006 participant)

I went for a recent interview for a permanent lecturing position in my college, and I sincerely believe my graduation from the certificate and in particular, my involvement in the peer observation scheme was a valuable asset that I drew upon; it contributed to my presenting well at the interview and it was evident that my knowledge and understanding in learning and teaching had greatly developed; I drew on examples of how I introduced more peer learning and students working together and redesigned the learning outcomes to concentrate on analysis and critical and creative thinking, all which are vital in my nursing course. Overall, I greatly appreciated the unassuming and respectful support and professionalism from all involved throughout the scheme..

(2005-2006 participant)

Indeed, it has been suggested by Wade and Hammick (1999) that a self-diagnosed need for learning provides great motivation to learn than an externally diagnosed requirement. The participants recognized that observation offered them potential to promote self-knowledge and personal development, particularly when it is part of a continuing process; in fact, each year of the scheme, there were plentiful requests such as this one for continuation beyond its scheduled life span.

Probably not possible from a scheduling point of view, but the scheme could be improved further by some follow-up observations in the second semester to observe teaching developments. (2004-2005 participant)

An important consequence of the scheme is that everyone who participated had a chance to learn how to be more effective by watching the teaching of others.

As a new teacher, I found the opportunity to really get to know my colleagues on the program and learn from them through this scheme, has shown me the advantages of maintaining such connections. (2001-2002 participant)

Arguably this can be a double-edged sword in that it can be a revelation to see how someone else deals with a problem with which we are struggling, but we may not be able to replicate precisely what works so well for another teacher. What is best practice for one teacher might not work in the context or hands of another. That very notion of “best practice” is also contentious, along with what is “improving teaching.” That is, what precisely constitutes improvement will reflect the nature of the discipline, the ethos of the department and institution concerned, the personal philosophies of the teacher, and most importantly, the characteristics of the students being taught. For observation of teaching to have a decipherable and agreed objective, it is important to have a shared understanding about what types of improvement are being looked for.

However, the experience of observing another teacher in action and discussing their ideas about teaching provided a useful learning opportunity for these participants. There appears to have been advantage to like-minded colleagues coming together to consider and discuss issues in relation to their practice.

Knowledge shared and gained from my peers in this scheme - and friendships formed as a result - were the most important parts of the whole program. (2002-2003 participant)

“Opening up” the culture of teaching and learning is an important function of the scheme as part of this PG Certificate in teaching program. Its essence is about “membership of [the] academic community” as illuminated in Rowland’s (1999, p. 306) research.

Collegiality and the development of professional relationships is an important element of peer observation. However, working with, and learning from, others raises the issue of power in the voluntary peer relationship; the observer may be viewed as being in the more powerful role. Indeed MacKinnon (2001) has gone as far as stating that the power relationship between observer and teacher can become imbalanced. Rowland (2000) believes that informal collegial relationships are often the most fruitful. Trust is critical for a successful reflective experience and time is required to build this. Webb (1996) believes

the more we as developers can share a common form of life and common experience with others in our institutions the greater is the possibility that we will be able to extend our horizons to encompass a fuller understanding (p. 105).

An interesting finding of this study was the role of interdisciplinary learning in the scheme. Sharing of, empathy with, and development of diverse subject practice is worth further exploration in itself. Learning takes place from the 'double' perspective of being the observer and the observed. The interdisciplinarity dimension of peers on a program such as the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching coming together to offer each other feedback on practice is an important consideration. Each would have diverse disciplinary commitments and the open process and climate of the scheme helps them explore their own values and knowledge to develop educational understanding and practice.

The peer observations were excellent. I actually think I might get other colleagues from other departments in the School to do it for me every so often in the future as it is a great learning experience interacting and communicating with colleagues in this way, and needs to be further capitalised upon in order to make them fully worthwhile. (2005-2006 participant)

More of them would be great, because of the variety of classes I teach I would have liked to have had two observations for each so as to cooperate with more colleagues from other disciplines and as a result be able to compare feedback and continue to make relevant changes to my classroom practice. (2005-06 participant)

However, it is believed that participation on this scheme has taken the lecturers beyond the point of being a subject specialist who reflects on subject content and into consideration of learning and teaching philosophies and cultures. In this way, it is suggested that increased academic debate is being encouraged on the program.

There were a number of problems identified with the scheme. Areas for development included further consideration by participants of organization of practice and time management including building in more time for preparation for the scheme, and from the program perspective, further consideration of subject domain and generic 'matching' of observer and teacher.

The peer observations were a very worthwhile exercise, especially when you receive positive feedback. Again a lot of time required to prepare these sessions and do up paperwork. They also happen at a very busy time of year. (2002-2003 participant)

They required lots of preparation and were time-consuming. (2005-2006 participant)

I found myself my own best critic. The feedback from my peers was all positive and so I found it hard to learn anything from them. (2005-2006 participant)

Perhaps have a little bit more time receiving feedback from one's peers, in particular for dealing with particular aspects of delivery that need improvement, and provision of specialist advice on how to make successful improvements where necessary.

(2005-2006 participant)

Summary

While it is recognized that many may disagree with the need for such a mechanism at the higher education level, this peer observation of teaching scheme has provided a means for fellow educators to observe events that may increase learning in action and that the teacher might contemplate before and during his/her teaching. This study has shown how the scheme aids the integration of theory and practice, the value of interdisciplinary learning and how the practice of new teachers to higher education can benefit.

A number of implications for the practice of designing and delivering developmental peer observation of teaching schemes arise from this work. In order to overcome resistance to talking about teaching and enable participants on such schemes to get to the essence of the teacher's experience, we need to provide the climate and opportunity to talk about teaching. This is important for staff to not feel uncomfortable or threatened when they do so and so they can feel genuine benefits to themselves and their students resulting from participating in the scheme and devoting time to teaching and learning issues. The climate of the scheme is vital and I would stress to participants that as part of the Postgraduate Certificate Program their involvement in teaching observation of peers is potentially a unique experience for them as currently in Irish higher education limited opportunities exist for reviewing and improving teaching practice.

In practical terms a peer observation of teaching scheme needs to have a clear structure with agreed purposes, procedures and outcomes, involving suitable preparation, follow-through, and rules of confidentiality. Saroyan and Amundsen (2001) have described teaching “as a complex, cognitive ability that is not innate but can be both learned and improved upon” (p.344). Specifically, teaching is a complex process involving the dynamic interaction between the students, teacher, and the knowledge, and the power of teaching is found in the strength of the interactions between these three. Enhancing and building these interactions requires the teacher to be creative, knowledgeable, and passionate about the subject. This article has considered the fact that educational practice is value-laden and the real quality of teaching – in the lecture theatre, seminar room, or laboratory – is critical to the learning of all students. Arguably, however, the possible risks involved in this developmental model of teaching observation are complacency, conservatism (unwillingness to take risks) and a tendency to be unfocused.

Marshall (2004) has noted that “the power of peer observation resides in its developmental and collegial orientation and its exposure of colleagues to affirmation, constructive criticism, and the experience of how others teach differently” (p.187). From this evaluation of the scheme in the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching, peer observation of teaching has been perceived by participants to be particularly useful for self-assessment and improvement of teaching skills. Peer observers have learned through the process of watching another teacher and those being observed have learned through the valuable comments and observations of their observer. Within this context an attitude of trust and helpfulness has been essential for the success of the peer observation

scheme so that the positive outcome is for both observer and teacher to enhance their understanding of their professional practice.

It is important to keep in mind that what is gained through peer observation can ultimately benefit students. Therefore, finally, it is recommended that evaluation of longer term impact of such initiatives take place by involving the actual students of the academic staff/faculty in such schemes to ascertain what if any real benefits are produced for enhancement of student learning, for improvement to individual teaching practice, and to lead to change in departmental climates.

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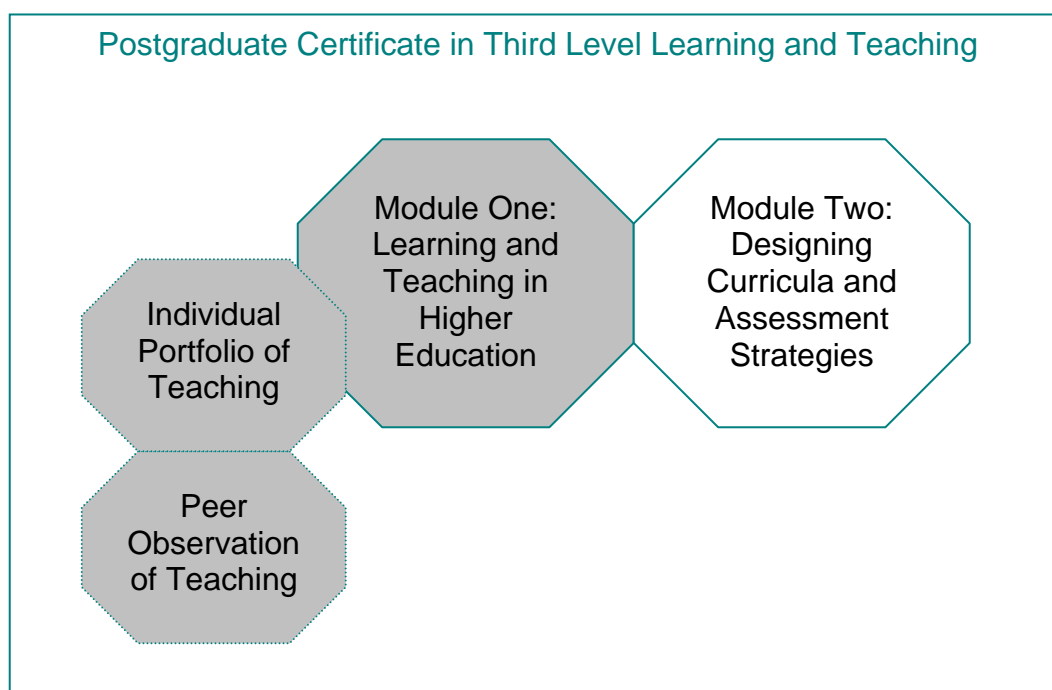


Figure 1 Integration of the Peer Observation Scheme to the Postgraduate Program for Teachers

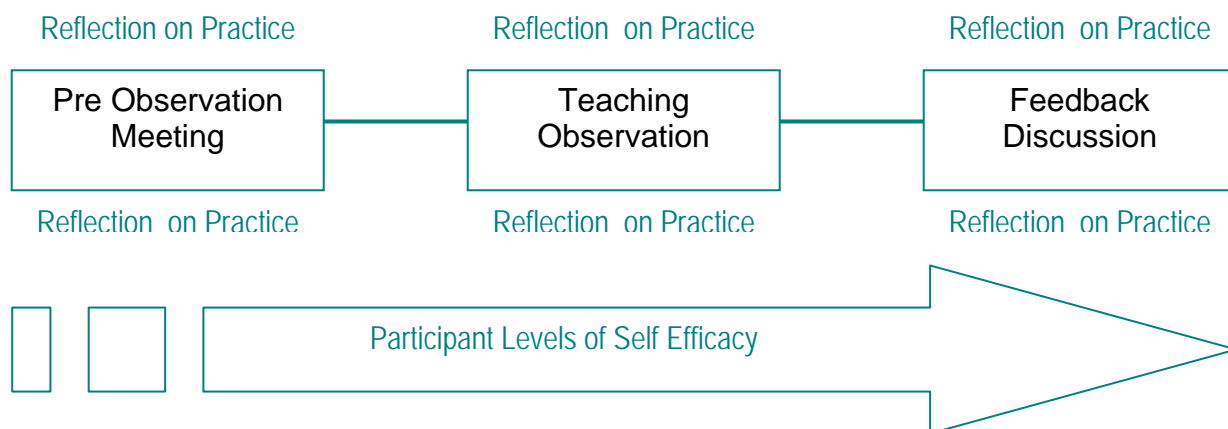


Figure 2 Model of Peer Observation for the Postgraduate Certificate in Third Level Learning and Teaching

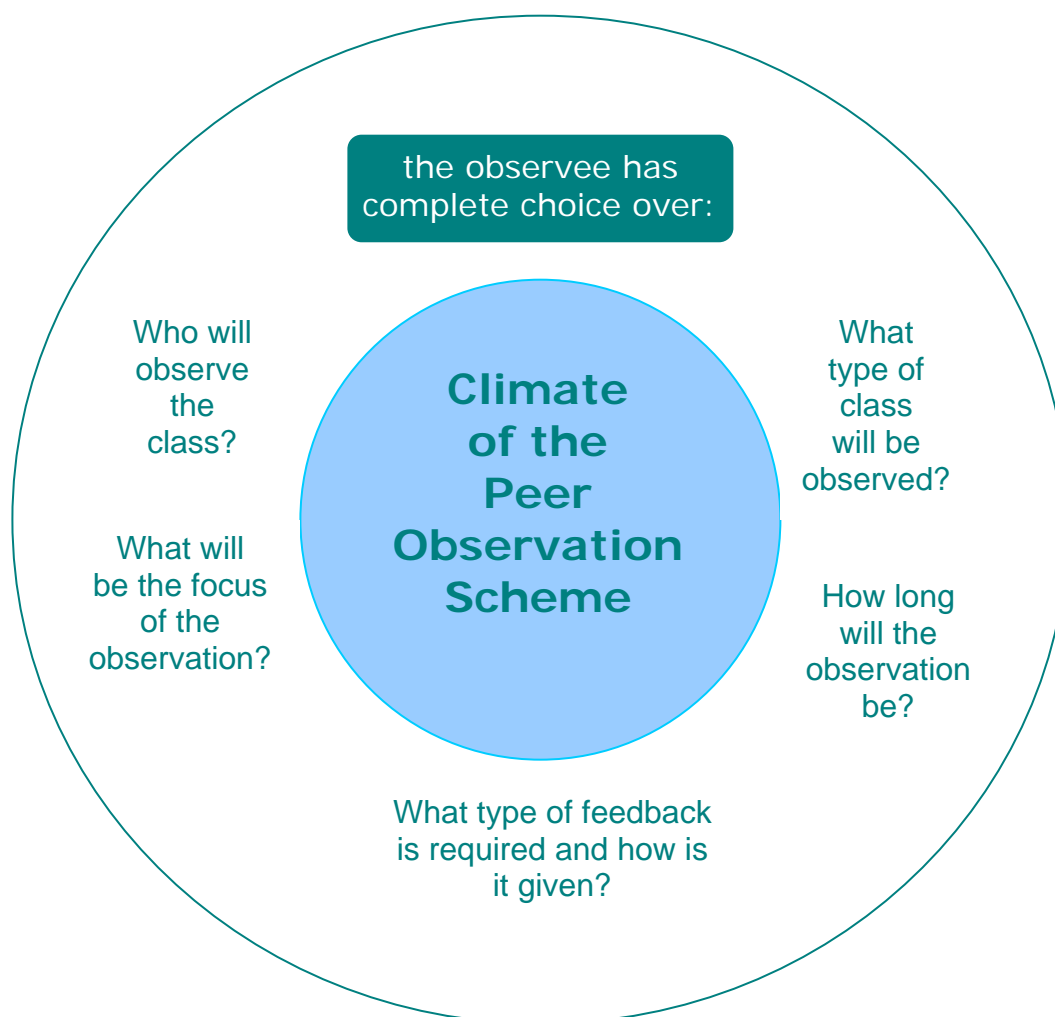


Figure 3 Climate of Peer Observation on the Programme

Table 1 The Rationale and Context of the Peer Observation Scheme

Who	Provision and discussion of the definitions of 'peer': within this Program, this involves consideration of who is eligible to conduct observations of your teaching
What & Where	<p>Enumeration of the range of practices defined as teaching (a 'what' and 'where' of peer observation). These practices might include but are not limited to classroom teaching, scholarship on teaching, advising, web-based instruction, distance learning, dissertation and thesis advising, independent study, curriculum development.</p> <p>Articulation of the areas of focus for the observation of classroom teaching (e.g., articulation of course goals, learning outcomes, mastery of course content, effective use of instructional methods and materials, appropriate evaluation of student work).</p>
When	Definition of the schedule by which all participants on the Program will be observed: between September and January of each academic year.
How	Establishment of the process by which peer observation of teaching will take place. This involves consideration of what tools and methods will be used to observe the teaching sessions, and what types of documentation will be required of participants as peer observers.
Why	<p>Contemplation of the purposes for which teaching is being observed, and the principles involved: this involves articulation of the relationship among the various types of evaluation of teaching currently taking place in higher education today (i.e., student, peer, administrative, self), and articulation of the relationship between and provision of opportunities for both formative and summative evaluation of teaching, with the sole emphasis of the scheme in this Program being for formative development purposes only.</p>