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In Praise of Peer Observation of Teaching: Inter-disciplinary Reflections from Early Career Lecturers.

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Abstract.

This paper presents critical reflections on the interdisciplinary peer observation experiences of early career lecturers at an Irish University in 2020. Participants (from electronic engineering, economics, history and law disciplines) engaged in a reciprocal peer observation of teaching process. This article highlights the observations and lessons learned from the experiences of the participants. In doing so, the study demonstrates the potential benefits of interdisciplinary peer observation, which may encourage early career teachers to adopt a similar approach for teaching observations in other higher-level education institutes.

Keywords: Education; Interdisciplinary; Peer Observation of Teaching; Peer Review; Teaching Style.

1. Introduction.

This article presents the observations and reflections of four early career lecturers who have undertaken an interdisciplinary and collaborative peer observation process with a view to understanding and improving their teaching. Peer observation of teaching is a collaborative, reciprocal observation process whereby lecturers and teachers at various levels/stages of their teaching may engage with their peers and observe each other's methods and practices as part of a structured, mutually beneficial procedure. It is a voluntary system of professional support that can help lecturers/teachers at any stage in their career gain valuable insights about their

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teaching performance in a confidential, trusting and formative climate (Gosling, 2005; Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014). Lessons learned from our engagement with the peer observation process across different academic disciplines (ranging from applied sciences in business and electronics to the humanities in history and law) are presented in this paper. By providing participant reflections and conclusions from their distinctive disciplines, this paper provides insights on the importance, and benefits of peer observation of teaching for early career teachers within an interdisciplinary context.

2. Context and Methodology.

Peer observation is a reciprocal process whereby lecturing/teaching staff can observe one another to develop their classroom practice (Eri, 2014; Gosling, 2002). It may be broadly defined as a "*collaborative, developmental activity in which professionals offer mutual support by observing each other teach*", with the purpose of providing constructive feedback on the teaching process (Bell, 2005, p. 3; Swinglehurst et al., 2006, p. 7). As such, the peer is expected to act "*in good faith to assist the teacher being observed to reflect on and consider teaching problems as interesting professional issues about which all teachers should be curious*" (Gosling, 2002, p. 38). Moreover, the focus is on individual improvement (Engin and Priest, 2014), which entails "*non-judgmental dialogue where staff feel safe to reflect on their established practice and underpinning values*" (Tzotzou, 2014, p. 17).

The peer observation process discussed in this article, occurred as part of a Graduate Teaching and Learning programme organised for university teaching/lecturing staff at the University of Limerick. All of the participants completed the course programme in the 2019/2020 academic year. As part of the requirements for one of the programme modules, learners were required to complete a peer observation process. First, participants were introduced to the peer observation process in the lecture. They were then divided into several groups for the actual process – the authors' assigned peer observation group consists of four individuals across four distinct disciplines - Electronics, Business, History and Law. Whilst taking cognisance of the small-scale nature of this exercise, several studies have shown that an interdisciplinary peer observation of teaching such as this, with observers chosen from different subject areas, encourages professional dialogue about teaching and learning among the participants (Chester, 2012; O'Keeffe et al., 2021; Torres et al., 2017). Specifically, peer observation in an interdisciplinary context can provide opportunities for professional conversations between

participants, which enables them to share and develop their perspectives on teaching experience and skills (Crehan et al., 2021). The collaborative model of peer observation, in which teachers observe each other's teaching with the aim of improving the quality of their teaching, and fostering both self and mutual reflection (Kocur, 2021), was used, as evidence shows this model reinforces the formative nature of the exercise (Bell & Copper 2013; Gosling, 2002).

The next step relates to the choice of observation methods to be used. A range of observation methods exist (Wragg, 2013; Richards and Lockhart, 1996) including timed samples, rating scales, feedback forms and video recordings. For this process, the use of written and structured feedback was chosen. A video or audio recording of the lessons for later analysis was deemed problematic; equally, the use of a video camera in the classroom setting was avoided, as it was likely to adversely influence the observation process, particularly in smaller classes (Gosling, 2002; O'Leary, 2020).

Following this, all participants agreed on the modules and sessions to be observed. With four participants, a "*round robin*" scheme was implemented where every observer sat in on two other sessions./lecturers from two of the remaining three participants. One lecture (some being one hour in duration, some two hours) from each module was observed for this study. The observed modules for the participants were "*Instrumentation and Control 1*", taught to a cohort of third year Electronics, Applied Physics and Erasmus students; "*History of Family*" taught to Master of Arts Students; "*Industrial Economics*" taught to fourth year Business Students and "*Law and Ethics*" for third year Nursing and Midwifery students. Schedules for observation dates/times were also agreed between the respective observers and observees for each module.

Before the actual observation session, a meeting between the observers and observee took place. Specific details of the agreed observation session(s) were decided. Any aspect of teaching practice where feedback was desired was identified by the observee in advance of the peer observation session. For example, one observee was interested in the observer's perspective regarding potential difficulties that learners might encounter during their remote teaching sessions, while another participant was looking for feedback on the accessibility of their discipline-specific subject matter to non-disciplinary learners. On the other hand, the remaining two participants wanted feedback on how to make the material more engaging/interesting and improving the overall student experience

More broadly, the observer could also give insights into general teaching-related considerations

such as teaching delivery, student experience, lecture pace, clarity, learning outcomes. A feedback template/form was used to provide a structure for the observation feedback. After the observed session, this form was completed by the observer and shared with the observee. Drawing on Gibb's Reflective Cycle model, the observation report encouraged critical reflection by the observee on their practice (Gibbs, 1988; Smith, 2020). Such critical reflections by observees are crucial because they stimulate professional dialogue between the participants during subsequent meetings (O'Keefe et al., 2021). In our case, follow-up meetings were scheduled one week after the observation session. This allowed sufficient time for reflection. Moreover, through this shared dialogue, the observee can gain a better understanding of their teaching practice and identify specific areas where improvement is required.

For this research, we, the participants, added an additional step whereby we synthesised these individual findings into our key lessons and learnings from the experience. We collected our key findings and takeaways from the observation sessions/process (whether as observer or observee) and collectively reviewed and analysed them over a number of meetings to identify our key lessons and learnings from the process. The next section of this paper presents the individual reflections of all four participants; this is followed by the "Discussion & Conclusions" section, which discusses some of these key findings we developed as part of this undertaking.

3. Individual Reflections on the Peer Observation Process.

3.1 Reflections from an Engineering perspective.

As an engineer and scientist, I have to admit that the peer observation process was very alien and foreign to me. Not only was there a reluctance and worry over having other teachers and lecturers observe and critique my teaching, but there was also an underlying sense of scepticism in the whole process, the critical reflection section and the perceived personal benefits to me as a lecturer (Visone, 2022).

That aside, there was much to recommend about the process and the feedback engendered. Observation feedback was quite positive overall, which was both a relief and a reinforcement of my teaching style and practice. Both observers reported on a good control of class start, clear outline of lecture goals and outcomes. Personally, I have always found the start of the lecture the hardest, gaining and holding the students' attention in order to start the lesson. It was good

and reassuring to see the peer observations found the start to be effective and well structured.

Regarding my teaching approach (as described in Villarroel et al., 2018, for example), observers regarded me as being knowledgeable and clearly understood throughout the lecture. As I try to ground the lectures and theory in the practical, lab-based experiments and project(s) for the module, a lot of the theory and material covered in the lecture gets related or referenced back to the practical work that the students complete. This helps reinforce the learning for them and allows them to consider the new knowledge from both a theoretical and practical viewpoint.

Regarding student engagement (Nguyen et al., 2018), observers found students were "*actively listening*" and "*listening intently*" during the classes. The students "*didn't ask many questions*" and there was "*not much engagement from students in terms of asking questions*". From observing the teaching of others during the peer observation sessions, student note taking during my classes is noticeably absent. This could be because the material I cover is relatively introductory; it could also be due to the students having the notes in advance. While students were engaged and listening in the classes, both observation reports commented that interactions were minimal within the class. In general, I have noticed that the students do not ask many questions during the class. Whether that is due to shyness, understanding or some other factor is still unknown. One observer commented on my lack of affirmation to the student responses. This is something that needs to be worked on - I need to be more positive in responding to the student's answers and re-affirming the validity/correctness of the answer going forward.

Both observers were satisfied with the close of the lectures. Learning outcomes were re-visited and a lead-in to the next lecture was provided, placing it in the overall content of the course and the notes series.

Positive aspects included the well-prepared slides, the practical focus of the discourse, voice projection and energy/movement in the classroom. Areas identified for development included a lack of eye contact with the class at times throughout the lecture and more student questions/note-taking during the sessions. Explicitly reminding myself to make eye contact with students around the class during the lecture and focusing on not "talking" to the board are key aspects of my teaching I need to focus on more.

As an observer (separate from observe, as illustrated in O'Leary, 2020), the process turned out to be equally as rewarding and enlightening – be it from comparing students' behaviour in another discipline/environment to my own, as was the case with noticing the notetaking in one

of the sessions – laptops, slides, pen/paper and tablets were all used to take notes as the lecture progressed. This is noticeably lacking from my own lectures, in retrospect. From observing a blended classroom model with one observee, I was very impressed with the blended learning level and detail in the preparation, delivery and presentation of the lecture.

In my particular case, this has been my first encounter and engagement with the peer observation process. Overall, I have found it be a highly rewarding process, both from the point-of-view of seeing my peers teach and having them consider my teaching style and practice. Lessons learnt and improvements to be made are always welcome and can only ultimately help me to become a better, more complete practitioner.

3.2 Reflections from a Business perspective.

This collaborative peer observation of teaching exercise was my first experience with this evaluation tool. I was initially anxious about engaging in the observation process, due to the fear of opening my teaching practice to scrutiny and not feeling competent enough to assess the teaching practice of colleagues in two different disciplines (Law and Engineering). However, both observers were professional and objective in giving non-judgmental and constructive feedback (Fletcher, 2018), so I became more comfortable psychologically (Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2011). My main motivation for participating in the peer observation of teaching process was to gain insights for self-development and to enhance the quality of my teaching. The collaborative nature of the peer observation exercise also provided me with the opportunity to learn effective teaching strategies from colleagues in other disciplines that could be adapt to my own teaching (Martin and Double, 1998; O'Keefe et al., 2021). The use of a standardised observation form by two observers from different disciplines to gather feedback on the same lecture ensured that the observation process remained objective. Altogether, I had two observation sessions as the observer and the observed respectively.

At the start of the first session, I was conscious about being observed. However, as the lecture progressed, I became more relaxed, focusing solely on the students and my teaching. Additionally, objective feedback received from the observer during the post-observation meeting further helped to ease my anxiety. Thus, by the second session, I was more comfortable with the process. During both sessions, the observers were unobtrusive, sitting at the back of the classroom (Kenny et al., 2014). In so doing, they were able to provide feedback on student behavior in the class. As it is not always possible to observe students' activities during the

lecture, particularly in a large classroom setting such as mine (with over 80 students), it was helpful to receive their feedback on the impact of my teaching strategies on student engagement in the lecture.

Both observers were supportive throughout the observation process, providing detailed feedback in a timely and confidential manner as recommended by Whitlock and Rumpus (2004) and offering suggestions on how to address the areas identified for improvement. For instance, similar to many other academics teaching large classes, increasing student engagement during lectures has been a major challenge in my teaching. Reflecting on the observation process and feedback received, offered critical insights into my teaching practice which facilitated identification of the successful (e.g. use of interactive presentation software such as Mentimeter to assess student learning) and not so successful aspects of my teaching (e.g. inviting students to answer questions). A shared willingness to use the observation process to learn more about our teaching (Gosling and O'Connor, 2009) enabled the exchange of ideas drawn from our experiences in our respective disciplines. I intend to apply the knowledge gained from these interactions by experimenting with new methods such as small group exercises and icebreakers in my classes.

In my role as an objective observer, I was aware that I lacked the expertise required to judge the content of the lectures, thus, my feedback was limited to teaching approach and strategy. The classes to be observed were also significantly different in size and discipline; specifically, one small group of twenty-five engineering students and a larger class of eighty nursing and midwifery students. Due to the above differences, the risk that the peer observation of teaching process would not deliver learning benefits to me was rather minimal (Kenny et al., 2014). My vantage view as an '*outsider'* provided me with an increased appreciation of the importance of certain elements such as maintaining constant eye contact with students, copious use of graphics and images in lecture slides and increased use of movements to improve student engagement in the classroom. I intend to actively implement these strategies in my teaching.

Experiencing and reflecting on this peer observation of teaching process (as the observee) has been valuable in helping to situate my teaching practice and in identifying areas for development. Participation as an observer has also provided me with the opportunity to give constructive feedback to my colleagues in a non-judgmental manner, which I believe will be useful in helping to improve the quality of their teaching. Moreover, the inter-disciplinary nature of this peer observation exercise offered insights into effective aspects of the teaching practice

of colleagues in other disciplines that can be applied to my own practice. Brinko (1993) notes that feedback is more effective when considered as a process, rather than a one-off event. Hence, based on my positive experience with the process, I plan to employ peer observation of teaching as a tool to develop and improve my teaching on a more regular basis.

3.3 Reflections from a History perspective.

Having participated in peer observation once before, the value of the process was already clear to me and I had no concerns about engaging in it again. Lasagabaster and Sierra (2011) suggest that trust is '*a fundamental objective*' of the pre-observation phase and, for me, knowing the other participants through our shared experiences on a Graduate Diploma in Teaching, Learning and Scholarship programme, a sense of trust was already implicit; I viewed both of my observers as the 'critical friend' Bell (2001, p. 37) refers to.

As the observations took place during my second year as a lecturer, I asked my observers to consider my teaching from a general perspective to help me gain a better overall understanding of my practice. I timed the observation to coincide with a student evaluation of teaching (SET) survey so that I could critically reflect on the results of both instruments of feedback, helping me to understand my teaching '*in the round'*.

The peer observation was constructive. I had informed my students about the observation the week before it took place, explaining the importance of feedback and reflection to professional development and making it very clear that my observers' focus would be on me as a teacher rather than them as students. Knowing that there were two observers (one in the classroom, and the other online) did not affect my teaching, and the classroom students did not appear to change their behaviour because of the observer in the room. The lecture went to plan without unexpected issues.

It is interesting to note that as I become more experienced in receiving feedback, I am less nervous about receiving it. Rather than feeling defensive about any suggested improvements I find myself seeking critical feedback in order to improve my teaching. Both feedback reviews I received were useful, and while the feedback was mainly positive, some areas for improvement were identified, particularly in relation to online students listening in to the lectures. For example, the online observer suggested I repeat student questions or comments for the class before answering them in case they were hard for online students to hear. He also reminded me to refer to the slide number in the audio and be aware of any background noise. These will

be easy for me to implement, but will greatly enhance the student experience. Some feedback and suggestions were more complex and require further reflection, such as their suggestion to record the audio over the PowerPoint presentation, which currently would mean me giving the same lecture twice. However, I am considering moving the classroom online to a greater extent that may allow more recorded lectures to be included.

While the primary purpose of observing my peers was to give them feedback, I found I also came away with new ideas for my own teaching. This was not surprising; Cosh, (1998) states that observation is just as likely to lead to changes in practice while Kenny et al., 2014) observed that '*new ideas were commented on to borrow for future teaching'*. One observee adds the Dewey library classification number to book references on her slides so that students can easily locate them in the library, while the other used Mentimeter with her class, and I have subsequently used these within my own teaching practice. Kenny et al. (2014, p.225) also note that following peer observations, there is '*widespread evidence of learning through self-evaluation about [teachers'] own teaching styles but also on a very pragmatic level in relation to what they would do differently next time'*. I found this to be my experience. Analysing this peer observation, I think the preparation and evaluation were a little rushed on my part. The observations took place during the second half of the semester and it was difficult to find a time for everyone to meet. I wrote up my notes straight away but left them aside with the intention of reviewing them. In retrospect, it would have been better to have sent them as they were, since I made minimal changes subsequently.

Following the peer observation, my action plan is to engage in additional peer observations in the future, so that I am continually honing my teaching practice. I am very interested in the language of feedback and prior to my next observation I intend to read more of the literature on discourse analysis and peer observation to ensure that I am giving my feedback in the best way possible. I also think there may be more value for me in focusing my next peer observation on a particular area of my pedagogy. The peer observation has given me greater confidence to try new ways of teaching, knowing that as part of my reflective cycle 'toolkit' it can help me to analyse how effective they are.

3.4 Reflections from a Law perspective.

Murphy-Tighe and Bradshaw (2013) make the important point that funding and research imperatives cannot have the effect of detracting from the fundamental role of '*educating*' in

higher education. As early career teachers (most often referred to as early career researchers!), we are frequently encouraged to devote the majority of our energies other than towards teaching. Engaging in this peer observation process felt like taking a step towards re-valuing teaching and to committing to my own professional development as a teacher.

As with any '*performance*', there was naturally a nervousness about offering one's teaching up for scrutiny but perhaps also a hope that there might be some positives to take from it (Brinko, 1993). As it was the first time I had been involved in peer observation, I asked the observers for general impressions of my teaching and feedback on the level of student engagement. Next time, I would certainly ask for feedback on specific aspects because it does bring focus to the process (as per Gosling, 2002) and it would allow me to chart my progress, if done on an ongoing basis. Having used the process, I would now be far less anxious about teaching review as formal evaluation. That said, in terms of confidence building - which is an important component of the observation process (Gosling, 2005) - I was happy on this occasion to have sought more general feedback by way of introduction to the process.

In terms of feedback on my own teaching, the comments from my peers were very useful. They said that while my approach was engaging (in that my tone and delivery is confident and conversational and establishes rapport), even though my slides are detailed, and that I provide many real-life examples to make the material accessible - that I am not reaching everyone. Their observations highlight that different learners learn in different ways (Kolb, 1984) and that I need to explore ways, perhaps using blended learning, in which to reach those for whom my approach is not effective. In common with my peer colleagues, I ask questions and do not get many responses. One observer suggested that it might be more effective in a large class such as this to incorporate technological aids such as quizzes to encourage students to use the knowledge gained and to gain the confidence to answer questions – and ideally generate discussions. Another strategy which another observer used and which I am now considering is to get students to write in class. This I think is so simple and yet so vital because so often we listen to lectures and read content but stumble when we need to articulate what we have learned. Using both strategies, that is, quizzes and writing, I now have what I think will be two very effective strategies to build student confidence, and to engage students who are not currently being reached.

I found the observation of other people's teaching as useful in my understanding of good and effective teaching as the observation of my own teaching. The fact that we were all from different

disciplines, as Chester (2012) recommends, I think enabled us to distill the essence of good teaching and effective student engagement without being distracted by the specific content of the individual lecture. It also provides the opportunity to see things from the students' perspective. One observer's lecture, for instance, showed me the value to students of top-class preparation. His slides were well laid-out and very clear and he spent time explaining where the lecture fitted in the scheme of the module. He also on a practical level told them why the specific lecture would be useful to them (as in it was a topic that often came up for co-op interviews). This created buy-in for his lecture, which is so important when there are so many competing demands for the students' attention. He also displayed clear passion and ease with the topic. The other observee equally set the scene for her lecture by showing how the topic fitted in the scheme of the Masters programme, which I think shows attention and respect for the students and their learning. She again displayed clear passion for and confidence in the subject material.

This peer observation process has taught me that it is so important for certain elements to be present in teaching. Effective teaching is not so different from constructing an article in that it is not a mystery or a random collection of uncontrolled variables; there are certain components that students expect and must see; knowledge, passion for the subject, preparation and absolute clarity as to what is expected of them. The knowledge that there are certain distinct elements to good and effective teaching takes the pressure off trying to guess why it works sometimes and other times does not. If certain elements are not established at the outset of the lecture such as where the lecture fits in, what the assignment is, when is it due, whether it is an exam question or not the student can be distracted during the lecture by the absence of answers to those questions. In summary, therefore, what I learnt from the peer observation process is that preparation and being attuned to student needs are key – as well as passion for your subject.

4. Discussion and Conclusions.

In this paper, we have presented the peer observation experiences and associated reflections for a group of early career interdisciplinary academics at an Irish University. The participants come from a range of disciplines - engineering, business, law and history. While each participant has presented their individual impression(s) and observations on the experience, a number of identifiable themes and common points of note are evident across the disciplines that are worthy of interest.

Firstly, peer observation can be a daunting undertaking, especially for early career academics, irrespective of discipline. However, while all of us were anxious beforehand about putting our teaching practice up for observation, we would now all overwhelmingly recommend the process; it is an opportunity to "*own*" your teaching practice and to develop it in a supportive environment. We felt that starting with a general observation of your teaching is a less daunting way of engaging in the process, in the first instance; subsequent peer observations can then focus on specific aspects of your teaching - committing to peer observation as an ongoing process is important.

We found that engaging in the peer observation process provokes critical reflection on teaching and leads to increased confidence about the prospect of formal review of teaching in an evaluative rather than formative context. Furthermore, using an agreed template for the observation process, for example, makes observations less subjective and exposure to the process helps participants become familiar with the language, structure and form of the observation process.

Student engagement was, for all of us, a strong consideration in our peer observations. While all of us are passionate about our subject area and relatively confident in our abilities, we shared a concern with student engagement, particularly in the larger classes. Often, we ask questions, but students lack either the confidence or the certainty to answer. Through professional conversations arising from the peer observation process, we identified several strategies for addressing this vital issue. These include the use of technological aids (such as quizzes and in-class writing), allowing more time for a response and affirming students' efforts.

Peer observation delivers potential benefits to both the observer and the observee. The general consensus is that we learned as much about teaching from observing each other as from being observed. In our roles as observers, we gained rare insights on the student perspective. Specifically, observing each other's teaching underscored the importance of establishing the '*nuts and bolts'* of the lecture at the outset. Moreover, having well-prepared, clear and accessible slides is crucial for effective teaching.

The interdisciplinary nature of the peer observation process was also extremely beneficial. Given the diverse range of our subject areas, we were able to focus on teaching approach rather than the content of the individual lecture. Exposure to each other's teaching methods was helpful in identifying strategies that we could apply in our own teaching and disciplines. It also highlighted the fact that as academics, we all grappled with similar issues and concerns in our

teaching, (for example, how to increase student engagement), irrespective of our disciplines. This is echoed in the literature with similar findings presented in other studies (e.g. O'Keefe et al., 2021).

From this, peer observation is truly a collective endeavour which allows us to define and promote good teaching practice. Furthermore, undertaking the peer observation process, as described above, has given us all the confidence and motivation to voluntarily participate in follow-up peer observation schemes hosted throughout the University. From a practical viewpoint, for readers looking to engage with the peer observation process, the first step we would recommend is finding other, interested individuals within your department, institute or University. Most Universities nowadays have some form of resource centre for the support and development of good teaching practices; this is a great place to start enquiring about structured peer observation programmes or indeed individuals who may be interested in engaging with you in an informal peer observation setting.

To sum up, peer observation is a powerful tool readily available to academics in a higher educational setting, which allows them to share, develop and continuously improve their teaching practice. Peer observation can be adopted at any stage of teaching, benefiting beginners as well as established educators. While some academics are wary of sharing in a teaching context, it is also an extremely beneficial undertaking that can allow participants to broaden and improve their teaching and educational competence. Whilst acknowledging the small-scale nature of this study, reflections presented in this paper highlight the crucial fact that peer observation undertaken in an interdisciplinary context is valuable for nurturing professional conversations about teaching and learning practices across disciplines.

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