

What Does “Peer” Mean in Teaching Observation for the Professional Development of Higher Education Lecturers?

Saranne Weller
King’s College London

The observation of teaching remains an integral process for the enhancement of practice as part of academic continuing professional development in higher education in the UK. This paper argues that failure to recognise the potential for peer-orientated development to reinforce restrictive norms of practice will be detrimental to the project of continuing professional development for learning and teaching. It is suggested that teaching observation schemes grounded in a peer model of observation within a reflective practitioner paradigm are potentially reinforcing parochial and performative constructions of teacher professionalism that ultimately enable resistance to changes to practice. It argues that for teaching observation to contribute to legitimate enhancement of teaching practice, such processes must be underpinned by pluralistic models of professional development that tolerate, and indeed require, critical differences of perspective that challenge rather than affirm the existing professional “self-concept” of experienced practitioners as it is enacted within current peer models of development in higher education.

The successful completion of an in-service postgraduate certificate in academic practice or higher education teaching has increasingly become, over the last decade, one of the standard expectations for confirmation of academic probation across the UK higher education sector. Yet it has been recognised that mid-career professionals may be far less likely to participate in comparable teaching-related continuing professional development activities (Martin & Double, 1998; Lueddeke, 2003). It has also been argued that, at different phases of their career, more experienced staff will value and benefit from different types of formal as well as informal professional development including practices of collegial mentoring, peer observation of teaching and collaboration with educational developers within work contexts (Ferman, 2002). Knight, Trowler and Tait (2006) have suggested that whilst accepting that learning can be promoted through event-based development activities such as formal postgraduate programmes or one-off workshops, “the problems of embedding that learning in the workplace are notorious.” As such, professional learning can be better construed “as a consequence of situated social practices” (pp. 320–21). Hence, desirable enhancement of practice is more likely to be achieved in collective and collaborative ways when disciplinarily contextualised (Knight & Trowler, 2000; Clark et al., 2002).

The observation of teaching, when it is implemented in a formative context with disciplinary or non-disciplinary peers, is widely regarded as fulfilling the criteria necessary for the development of teaching practice individually and collectively across teaching teams, departments, and institutions. For example, Gosling (2005) has claimed that the discursive processes encapsulated within the experience of observation can be conceived of as a social practice that

is both physically and intellectually situated within the practitioner’s own workplace and discipline. Such approaches to teaching observation have increasingly been recognised as having a potentially transformative role in the enhancement of practice (Bell, 2001; Hendry & Dean, 2002) for higher education practitioners. By enacting the teaching of observation within an institution, it is maintained that the developmental outcomes for the individual teacher will contribute to the development of the wider teaching community when such individual development is widespread (McMahon, Barrett & O’Neill, 2007). Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005), however, have argued that central to achieving this institution-wide quality enhancement are the mechanisms for the dissemination of best practice outcomes beyond the individual teacher. Yet research by Lomas and Kinchin (2006) has suggested that there is limited evidence for the successful propagation of enhanced practice across departments or institutions as a consequence of individual participation in teaching observation. The relationship between the individual and his or her peers then becomes a critical factor in achieving the outcomes of institutional enhancement practices.

This paper reports the outcomes of an evaluation of a teaching observation scheme for experienced academic staff introduced at a research-intensive UK university. In the context of an extensive published literature on teaching observations, the evaluation of a teaching observation scheme would not necessarily warrant further dissemination beyond the team responsible for implementation of the scheme. As such, this evaluative study was originally conceived with the view both to enhance the existing local processes and justify, at the policy level, the further embedding of the observation scheme within the institution. However, whilst the quantitative data derived from the evaluation

of the scheme provided strong evidence for participants' endorsement of the value of the observation process, the analysis of the qualitative data suggests that by accentuating the role of the peer within observation as an essential contributor to the effectiveness of the process, engagement in a peer-based model of developmental teaching observation potentially reinforces narrow, individualistic and parochial constructions of teacher professionalism that enable resistance to changes to practice. In interpreting the outcomes of the evaluation of the teaching observation scheme, this paper argues that the concept of the peer in teaching observation as the basis for individual, collegial, and cultural transformation and enhancement of practice in higher education should be problematised. The ways in which participants interpret and articulate the purpose of teaching observation itself and how they interact with others during the process of observation must also be understood as contributing to the fundamental "social character" of the observation process (Gosling, 2005, p. 9). Through an evaluation of participants' conceptualisation of the experience of observation, the potential limitations of the peer-based model of teaching observation implemented in this scheme are identified in relation to participants':

1. resistance to alternative critical discourses,
2. conceptualisation of insider/outsider status in relation to their discipline, and
3. understanding of professional identity as externally manifested rather than enacted as a way of being.

As such, the constructions of teacher developmental identity that participants reported in their evaluation of the teaching observation scheme are informed by an unproblematised conceptualisation of the peer observer as grounded in the realities of the lecturer's own world view and experience. This use of observation for the reinforcement of existing understandings of practice works counter to Ho's (2000) theories of professional learning whereby academic development seeks to change the conceptual basis upon which lecturers practice.

The Concept of the "Peer" in the Peer Observation of Teaching

If, as Donnelly (2007) has argued, the purpose of developmental peer observation of teaching is to identify, disseminate, and develop good practice, the act of developmental teaching observation, grounded in a reflective practitioner paradigm, is more frequently conceived in the literature as having profoundly individual-orientated outcomes whereby "consideration needs to be given to how feedback can contribute to a

teacher's self-concept" (MacKinnon, 2001, p. 22). As such, intra- and interpersonal outcomes are often foregrounded in models of teaching observation. A positive teaching observation experience contributes to the reassurance and confidence-building of teaching staff (Blackwell & McLean, 1996), and the key aims of teaching observation include the development of interpersonal communication skills and the "personal skills of evaluation and self-appraisal" (Martin & Double, 1998, p. 162). In particular, Peel (2005) has acknowledged that the instrumental act of teaching observation alone is itself not contributory to enhanced teaching practice. In her understanding of the potential developmental outcomes of teaching observation, Peel has argued that the personal construction of the meaning of teaching observation and the capacity for self reflection are key factors in the construction of the "professional persona as an emergent practitioner" (p. 490) as an outcome of engagement in professional development activities. Traditional and still influential definitions of identity formation conceive of the self as constructed as an outcome of social interaction and the internalisation of social roles (Beijaard, Verloop & Vermunt, 2000). Yet whilst social interaction with a peer is widely advocated for making teaching observation meaningful, there is still limited research into how the teacher conceptualises the identity of a peer or how the interrelationship between this teacher self and a perceived "peer" within teaching observation can contribute to the developmental outcomes of the process for the professional teacher's self-image.

The concern that non-peer based teaching observation could function as an institutional mechanism of individual compliance (Shortland, 2004) and a simultaneous assertion of the discipline as the primary area of scholarly identification (Quinlan & Åkerlind, 2000) have reinforced the argument that enhancement activities are best implemented not at the institutional or cross-departmental level but within a peer context that acknowledges the disciplinary culture as the defining criteria for evaluating practice. However, if effective teaching observation facilitates the collegial development of a shared language about learning and teaching and contributes to the translation of teaching from a predominantly private to a public activity (Gosling, 2005), the socialisation of individual practitioners into a departmental conception of teacher professionalism brings with it the potential for the academic practitioner to understand both the practice of teaching and their professional "self-concept" exclusively and uncritically within a series of behavioural norms that are denoted in the concept of the "peer."

Gosling's (2002) influential theorising of different models of teaching observation is an example of how accentuating the social and situated aspects of

observation can, in practice, ultimately reconstruct observation as a socialising process that closes down multiple perspectives that are essential to “provide a language and conceptual framework to discuss teaching which goes beyond the accepted norms of the department” (Blackwell & McLean, 1996, p. 165). Within the three dominant models of teaching observation, Gosling has emphasised the term “peer” as a central concept for understanding the development potential of observation. For Gosling, the identity of observer and lecturer are essential in distinguishing between the social and political context of an evaluative or appraisal-orientated model, in which differences of perspective are asserted and potentially “bias the judgement,” a developmental model, in which the observer “occupies the role of the expert – although still a peer”, and the peer review model, in which “there is real mutuality and respect for each of the participants as equal” (p. 2). Concurrent with this defining of the peer as an unbiased, social and professional equal is the notion that it is out of the “self and mutual reflection” inherent in genuine peer-based observation that the enhancement of teaching practice is realised (Gosling, 2002, p. 5). In this context, therefore, the concept of peer within the processes of observation and reflection constitutes a necessary sameness (“mutuality”) between the beliefs, values, and experiences of individuals that is essential for the developmental potential of teaching observation: “There is not a clear distinction between the one who is the developer and the one being developed” (Gosling, 2005, p. 13). In part, this recognises the potential for development to accrue to both observer and lecturer during the processes of observation, as Cosh (1998) has argued. Yet it also commends a sameness of perspective and experience that can have a potentially limiting effect on the genuine transformative outcomes of teaching observation practice.

Whilst Gosling has warned that there is a potential for limited definitions of who constitutes a peer to sustain narrow conceptions of practitioner identity and reinforce the existing values and cultural context of peers, his categorisation of models of teaching observation emphasises precisely that narrowing of the definition of peers. The relationship between the individual and the community within the university, as it is enacted in the relationship between observer and lecturer across Gosling’s three models, is located along a continuum from “power” (evaluation model), to “expertise” (developmental model) to “equality/mutuality” (peer review/collaborative model) (Gosling, 2002, p. 5) that arguably stigmatises difference of status and perspective as an articulation of observer bias or authoritarianism and lauds sameness as the inevitable expression of a liberal and non-judgmental perspective on teaching practice. The

danger of this assumption is that this tacitly inverts the traditional politics of the reflective self. Such a conceptual sleight of hand can only further problematise strategies aimed at integrating the individual outcomes of teaching observation into the “depersonalized” debates at School and institution level necessary for the broader enhancement of learning and teaching in higher education (Hammersley-Fletcher & Ormond, 2004, p. 502). It is this fundamental imperative to explore the definition of “peer” that underpins the evaluation of the scheme reported in this paper.

Implementing a Teaching Observation Scheme for Professional Development

A teaching observation scheme was introduced in a research-intensive, pre-1992 higher education institution as a key component of an emerging institutional continuing professional development framework. Engagement in the observation scheme was by self-nomination, and participation did not contribute to formal staff appraisal strategies. In the design of the observation scheme, following a review of the literature on teaching observation and of existing practice within the institution by the author, a model of teaching observation, derived principally from the work of Bell (2001) and Fullerton (2003), was adopted whereby participants completed three teaching observation cycles and a final reflective account of their teaching and observation experience at the end of the observation process. The model adopted facilitated the inclusion of two observers across three observations (two observations were completed by a lecturer from the central academic development unit and a third observation by a disciplinary colleague) that provided both a multidisciplinary, pedagogically-informed (educationalist) and disciplinary (colleague) perspective on practice. The model, therefore, represented a hybrid version of Gosling’s developmental and peer review/collaborative models with the weighting on observations by an observer not working within the lecturer’s department (Gosling, 2002). This hybrid model enabled the expert identification of pedagogic practice and facilitation of reflection as well as disciplinary feedback, and hence accentuated a broader definition of peer beyond a traditional disciplinary meaning.

The final reflective overview completed by the participant was planned to reinforce the self-reflective rather than evaluative orientation of the teaching observation scheme as described in Bell’s (2001) study. In the first year of the scheme, the final overview constituted a reflection on the feedback provided across the three observations for the purposes of demonstrating the best practice of the individual. This

was later modified in response to negative participant feedback, and participants were asked to independently complete a fourth self-observation in the light of the prior three observations and their own reflection on their feedback. As such, the teaching observation scheme was rooted in a widely-accepted professional development model of facilitated and individual reflective practice.

The observation scheme was implemented as a stand-alone activity to mirror an existing teaching observation process within a postgraduate certificate in academic practice for new academic teaching staff and to complement an institution-wide peer review of teaching process which operated on an annual or biennial basis within each disciplinary-based School. The observation scheme specifically targeted those staff who had not participated in a formal teaching development programme, and the broad demographic of participants constituted senior lecturers, professors, and, within the medical education context, consultants. Ultimately, the scheme also proved flexible to the needs of less experienced part-time teaching staff and, in particular, clinical teachers. Observers from the central academic unit were of a comparable professional status to the participants. Disciplinary peer observation practices similarly paired lecturers with broadly equivalent levels of experience. All participants were volunteers and as such were deemed to be seeking constructive feedback on their teaching practice for the purpose of enhancement and recognition.

Initially, 56 academic teaching staff from across all discipline areas within the institution registered to participate in the scheme. The three observations could be completed over an 18 month period, though in practice many participants completed the observations over a single semester. The observations themselves followed a sector-wide standard structure of pre-observation discussion, observation, and post-observation discussion with each stage recorded in an observation report written by the observer. Observations would in general take one to two hours with half-hour pre- and post-observation discussion. Pre- and post-observation discussions were responsive to the specific context of the observed lecturer and the observed session. However, participants and observers were guided to structure their discussion in relation to four areas of practice: teaching strategies and session management; subject knowledge and subject application; assessment, evaluation and monitoring; and professional knowledge and development. Excepting pre- and post-observation meetings, no further formal tutorial support was provided for within the scheme.

Evaluating Teaching Observation for Continuing Professional Development

The primary aim of the evaluation was to determine how participants perceived the teaching observation scheme and how they conceived its contribution to their professional development. Whilst it is acknowledged that a survey method can generate unsophisticated data that is limited in scope (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000), a questionnaire was chosen as the most likely tool to elicit sufficient responses to evaluate the appropriateness of the observation process from senior academic staff with considerable pressures on their time. A combined quantitative and qualitative questionnaire was developed based upon the questionnaire items used in previous studies seeking to determine perceptions of teaching observation by Cosser (1998) and Hatzipanagos and Lygo-Baker (2006).

The quantitative element of the questionnaire asked participants to rate the value of the separate aspects of the observation process (pre-observation, observation, post-observation, disciplinary observation, and final reflective process). The qualitative element of the questionnaire posed open-ended questions relating to their experience of teaching observation, for example, "What is your view of the teaching observation process?" and "What characteristics make for an effective observer?" Subsequent questions asked participants to comment on the outcomes of their participation in the teaching observation scheme, for example "In what ways has your experience of participating in the teaching observation process impacted on your practice?" and "Has the teaching observation process been developmental?" The questionnaire was distributed to 37 academic staff that completed the teaching observation scheme within the two-year period of the evaluation, and 21 participants returned completed questionnaires. Of the 21 respondents, 12 were female and 9 male and were working in general medicine, dental education or psychiatric medicine (6), nursing and midwifery (4), experimental sciences and engineering (4), humanities (3), and in math, computer science, law or management (4). The following discussion is based on the qualitative data collected using the questionnaire.

Participant responses to the open-ended questions were analysed by the author to identify and interpret common themes in participants' descriptions of their experience of teaching observation and their perception of the impact of the teaching observation process on their practice. Three distinct categories emerged from the clustering of the dominant themes: the participants' perception of the nature of critical discourse, the

situated nature of professional practice, and conceptions of professional development. As the lead academic responsible for the implementation of the observation scheme in the institution as well as an active observer, the analysis of the data was undertaken as a participant-researcher. Despite the need to remain sensitive to the values and assumptions such a perspective can bring to the analysis of the evaluation data, the insider status within the scheme also leads to insights into the specific context within which participants frame their relationship to their communities of practice and to the experience of observation. However, to offset the limitations of the data collection method and assert the validity of the categories developed through the analysis, extensive illustrative quotations from the evaluative data are included in the following descriptions of each of the three categories.

The Nature of the Critical Discourse of Teaching: The “Academic Jargon of Pedagogy”

The category relating to the nature of critical discourse identified the themes of critical dialogue, verbal accounts of experience, and the perception of pedagogic “jargon.” This category reflects how respondents perceived the role of feedback as it informed their understanding of their teaching practice, the ways in which they found the observation process enabled them to articulate previously undisclosed interpretations of their teaching and the negative characterisation of the widespread language of learning and teaching development.

In describing their experience of the observation process, a number of respondents identified the centrality of participation in critical dialogue to aid their understanding of their practice:

“[observers should] ask challenging questions of experienced teachers about their practice” (R1).

“the observations (and related discussions) were an extremely effective learning process for me” (R9).

“discussions being supportive and exploratory” (R14).

The value respondents placed on engaging in critical discussion with disciplinary colleagues varied so that whilst some respondents found such discussion informed their practice, with personal affinity between observer and lecturer valued, for others the relationships between colleagues prohibited desired levels of criticality:

“comments from colleagues influence how my teaching can get better” (R3).

“has the potential to elicit real insights in the teacher if there is a good rapport between teacher and observer” (R21).

“it can be difficult for known colleagues to give critical feedback if appropriate” (R14).

As an outcome of participation in reflective dialogue, several respondents commented on specific changes to the way they were able to express what they were doing in their practice:

“I was able to see the real value of some of the things I was doing instinctively in more analytic terms” (R6).

“[the observer] can elicit what it is the observed is trying to do, even when the observed might not have ever clearly articulated it!” (R9).

Yet despite seeing the value of critical discussion, for many respondents the possibility of engaging with pedagogic discourse distanced them from their “real” experiences. This was a particularly rich theme in this category as respondents emphasised their need for an observer to “not use pedagogical jargon but real language” (R4) when discussing practice:

“The academic jargon of pedagogy is often jarring and does not reflect practice in the way it is experienced” (R3).

“thought it would be just a jargon ridden ‘talking-shop’ [...] I feared it would be something for show, rather than being actually useful” (R9).

“engage with the teacher in non-technical language about what they are doing in class [...] I at no point felt the victim of a doctrinaire approach to best practice, or non-discipline relevant orthodoxy. This has not always been the case in my earlier experiences of teaching support” (R6).

However, despite the positive experience of the observation discussions, the requirement to complete a self-reflection on the teaching observations led this last respondent to comment that this reflective process:

“required me to translate into jargon the real experiences which had been so beneficial [and] made abstractions necessary of whose validity I was not convinced” (R6).

The importance of developing a critical discourse of professional practice in higher education is posited by Rowland (2001), and, as the positive response to

participation in discussion in the data cited above demonstrates, the primacy of discursive practices within teaching observation provides opportunities for practitioners to articulate their teaching acts in new ways. As Gosling (2005) has argued, the challenge in bringing private acts of teaching into a public domain is that the language available for describing teaching practice has become impoverished and respondents indicated that participation in observation discussion facilitated the articulation of experiences in critical ways (“insight”, “analytic terms”). Yet the repeated distinction by participants between their sense of the “real” experiences and the language used to express this through reflection reasserts the need, as Clegg, Tan and Saeidi (2002) have suggested, to problematise the assumption of a straightforward relationship between reflecting and acting within professional development.

Whilst the process of discussion with the observer provided the lecturers with opportunities to “see” their practice from new perspectives, the emphatic resistance to the “jargon” of pedagogy by a number of respondents and its perceived lack of application to the reality of their teaching evidences a continued conceptual hiatus between the teaching experience and its verbalisation during teaching observation. The assumption that “non-technical language” can capture, in unmediated ways, the reality of the teaching experience expresses a problematic certainty that such “non-technical language” for describing personal values, theories, and acts has common meaning within a practitioner’s community (Griffiths & Tann, 1992). In essence, there is an assumption that peer-to-peer discussion can be framed in plain language because each discussant understands the language in identical ways. In such a context, jargon is the language of the “other” from outside the peer community and as such is disregarded as a language that is meaningless because detached from the “real experience” of practice.

The repeated assertion by respondents that pedagogic language distances them from the experience implicitly articulates a resistance to alternative discourses operating outside the familiar, “real” world experiences of the lecturer as actor in the teaching context. It expresses a common-sense assumption about the nature of teaching itself, of teaching as acts that can be expressed through a commonly-shared language of peers. To characterise the participation in alternative discourses as an act of translation into a new language is to demarcate explicit boundaries of knowledge and acting that resist the critical turn reliant on “the critical deployment of multiple discourses [...] integrating critical reason, self and action” (Barnett, 1997, p. 137). By diminishing the possibility of “jargon” to express experiences of reality, the lecturer can retain the distinction between the theories and the practice of teaching whilst closing down the possibility to act as

the “interpreter of new discourses” (Barnett, 1997, p. 142) requisite to fulfil Barnett’s concept of critical professionalism. The individual and collective implications of such discursive conservatism are the reinforcement of the lecturer’s existing knowledge of “self-concept” and the social groupings within which “real” experience is enacted and interpreted by discipline and department peers. By implication, to articulate experiences in a different way and to possess a different world view is to transgress the bounds of the “real” world. To be a peer is therefore to experience the world in the same way as a reality and to be able to express that reality through a shared language.

The Situated Nature of Observed Professional Practice: The “Outside Observer”

The category of the situated nature of professional practice related to the themes of situated problem-solving, the concept of the “outsider” perspective, and examples of change as instrumental rather than conceptual enhancement.

For many respondents the primary rationale for teaching observation was essentially perceived to be remedial and not only derived from, but bound into, the actual specific observed teaching. For these respondents, observation-based development, therefore, had a fundamentally situated problem-solving role that respondents did not explicitly see as more broadly applicable in other contexts:

“I think it would be helpful to call in an observer at a particular juncture – e.g. if a course seemed to not be doing well, or if one was launching a new course [...] it would be hard to recommend it regardless of such circumstances” (R 4).

“it would help to show up bad habits” (R11).

“to see what works in a given situation, rather than start from preconceived ideas” (R17).

Within this problem-solving orientation, respondents were undecided about how to manage and value both disciplinary and “sympathetic outsider” (R9) perspectives. Whilst a number of participants believed it important that observers were from a cognate discipline, others valued the “outside” perspective which “can provide a more fundamental view” (R11) of their “inside” contextualised practice. In characterising the desired attributes of an observer, respondents suggested:

“Neutrality, preferred ‘outside’ observer to in-house as I believe it is easier for them to be objective and honest in their feedback” (R10).

“Familiarity with teaching and teaching techniques and preferably some understanding of the subject matter. For the former an ‘outside’ observer may be in a better position to offer new ideas, but if these are unconstrained by the latter they [...] are often impractical” (R13).

“All disciplines can become focused on particular issues or gravitate towards similar teaching styles/expectations so having time to reflect with people outside of the School was useful” (R14).

When describing how engagement in the observation process had or can better impact on their practice, respondents characterised this development in instrumental rather than conceptual terms. Whilst recognising that impact could be manifested in both a “diffuse way” and “specific way” (R12), the examples respondents gave of their perceived change are principally related to changes in teaching methods within specific contexts:

“I picked up a lot of useful tips in terms of slide organization, amount of info on slides etc.” (R18).

“As far as teaching goes, I think my needs are likely to be technical as much as anything” (R17).

“A system of providing ‘tips’ on how to improve teaching, deal with specific situations etc. may be of more widespread interest. Such a scheme would dilute the theoretical component” (R3).

The situated nature of teaching observation is considered one of its strengths for the development of practice, and the positive responses of participants to the feedback they received support the perceived value of observation for effecting changes. The repeated characterisation of “inside” and “outside” observers for a number of participants highlights this conceptualisation of practice as both a physically and epistemologically located activity. Whilst several participants had expressed discomfort with the non-native language of pedagogy, other participants clearly saw potential value in gaining alternative perspectives on their practice. Yet the repeated conceptualisation by these participants of their practice identities as “inside” subjects exposed to “outside” interpretation demonstrates that, despite openness to alternative views for some respondents, there is a distinction between a situated notion of practice and an external theorisation of that practice. In characterising the non-disciplinary observer as capable of giving “objective” feedback from a position of “neutrality” whilst retaining the need to resist feedback that is “unconstrained” by “familiarity” with the values of the discipline, these

respondents articulate very precise notions of the relationship between observer and lecturer as peers.

The metaphor of insider and outsider articulates in a powerful way a fear of the “other” at the heart of the experience of teaching observation, as Kinchin (2005) has found. Rather than demonstrating the benefits of interdisciplinarity observed in other teaching observation models (Donnelly, 2007), this evaluation identified an explicit labelling of, and resistance to, different disciplinary perspectives. A number of competing concepts, including objectivity (“neutrality”), domesticity (“familiarity”), and containment (“unconstrained”), surround the attempts by these respondents to explain the experience of negotiating the “other” in the teaching observation context. So whilst there is a broadly positive response to the opportunity to engage an “outsider” in the review of practice, the experience provokes profound concerns about what Palmer has described as the nature of a “live encounter” with the “other” that might “threaten our view of world or self” (as cited in Kinchin, 2005). The perception of the situated nature of practice within teaching observation facilitates a self-protective approach to this encounter by ensuring that the normative safety of the discipline is regarded as the *a priori* basis for all feedback on practice as an outcome of teaching observation. The usefulness or impracticality of outside observer feedback is always determined in its relation to the accepted values and discourses of the respondent’s discipline.

Conceptions of Professional Development: “Surely That Also Counts as Development”

The category of conceptions of professional development related to the personal issues of self-esteem or reassurance and respondents’ perception of the scope of professional development for learning and teaching.

For a number of respondents the principal outcome of the observation experience related to confidence-building as practitioners. In most cases, such confidence was allied to the perceived approval of their existing practice rather than the confidence to explore new conceptions of practice with only vague ideas about future development:

“gives confidence and affirmation of what one does well; gives focus for development” (R7).

“The feedback was positive so this provides confidence that approaches used in my teaching is on track” (R14).

“I am sure it will lead to some changes in my approach, but also strengthening my confidence in

the things I already do – and surely that also counts as development” (R17).

A number of respondents viewed the observation scheme as contributing to their enhancement of practice, frequently using construction metaphors to conceptualise their professional development as an externally-manifested “process” (R1) of building upon prior experience:

“There is always scope for improvement, an improved understanding of the process of student learning” (R3).

“as the observations continued I built upon the post observation discussion modifying the way I taught at each stage” (R19).

“built upon previous observations and comments and I will use the experience to develop my teaching practice” (R20).

“make more use of some elements of my teaching that the observer found especially effective, and to think of how I might build on them” (R6).

Whilst the observations evidently fulfilled the interpersonal objectives of many respondents in terms of confidence-building and reassurance of their approach as practitioners, the ways in which participants undertaking the observations understand the nature of their development distinguish between professional development as a constructive incorporation of new ideas into existing practice and professional development as a transformative act that reconfigures the nature of the professional being itself. The recurrent metaphor of development as building in a number of respondents’ comments expresses an understanding of enhancement strategies as cumulative in effect. Framed in this way, engagement in teaching observation is for the purposes of identifying the strongest foundations of current observed practice as the basis for either the modification or the addition of improved practices. When linked to the dominant outcomes of personal and professional reassurance and affirmation, the expectations for professional development are not radical but progressive, an outcome that is certainly not illaudable.

Yet the danger is that there is an underlying implication that such an approach to developmental teaching observation is the expression of a behavioural competence model of reflective practice. In holding up a mirror to practice through observation, the practitioner can see where improvement can be made and receive rewards for “what one does well.” Betts (2004) has argued that this notion of developing “good”

practice through reflection operates on the basis that there is already a model of best practice to be fulfilled so that if the reflected professional persona is “not in line with the model, then practices must be adopted which allow (or ensure) closer resemblance to the desired figure” (p. 242). As such, reflective practices facilitated through teaching observation have a normative function whereby the socialising orientation of the observation process attaches notions of moral “goodness” to the acceptable performance of attitudes and actions as they fit with a shared model of professionalism. As Betts has warned, such an approach, whilst appearing to demonstrate visible results, can be a way of non-engagement, a way of fulfilling external notions of “good” behaviour whilst remaining detached from this performed identity. In configuring teacher development as a building project, it is possible to construct a notion of the teaching and reflecting self that is observable by one’s peers, yet potentially lacking in critical awareness beyond this conformity to a public identity. As Mackenzie, McShane and Wilcox (2007) have suggested,

Performativity and authenticity signify different levels of identity in the conscious experience of the self. The performative self is a fabricated, socially constructed self, created and confined by our respective social and institutional laws and rules. Authenticity refers to an inner self that can recognise performative demands and act knowingly and mindfully in response to them. (p. 42)

In perceiving the matching of the model in the mirror as the appropriate outcome for engagement in teaching observation, the conceptualising of development as building reaffirms the respondents’ expectations of mutuality between practitioner and observer as socialised and socialising professional peers agreeing to participate in a reciprocal performance of their respective professional identities.

The complicity with a performative notion of the professional self and its development in the responses of a number of respondents is put into starker contrast when compared to a potentially more authentic conceptualising of the self. One respondent when asked to explain her perceptions of the observation process expressed a conceptually broader understanding of her professional development. For this respondent, the experience of observation facilitated a development from problem-orientated aims at the beginning of the process linked to a performative conception of professionalism (for example, the identification of “shortcomings”) to a subsequent reconfiguring of her thinking about teaching practice as a fulfilling of a specific teaching role (for example, what it means to be a “clinical teacher”):

“I volunteered for the pilot scheme as I wanted to know for myself how well I was doing as a teacher and what my shortcomings were. The observation process has given me an insight into how best I can fulfil the role of a clinical teacher” (R16).

This shift from notions of acceptable acts of “goodness” as a teacher to a thoughtful awareness and reflective account of the demands of her professional role demonstrates a distinctive alteration of perception of an authentic self within a community of peers. Emerging from this respondent’s engagement in the observation process is a perception of professional development not simply as a cumulative acquisition of peer-approved teaching skills to be performed, but an integrative and transformative new “way of being” (Dall’Alba, 2007, p. 686) as a clinical teacher who operates knowingly within the social values and structures of her professional peers.

Conclusion

The centrality of the professional “self-concept” in the development of teaching practitioners in higher education is widely recognised. The perception held by practitioners of their professional “self” and its relationship to the values, beliefs, and discourses of peers can have profound implications for the ways in which any development is enacted and embedded. As such, within the processes of teaching observation, the professional “self-concept” is intimately allied to the practitioner’s conception of the “peer,” whereby there is no distinction between the one being developed and the one facilitating that development.

In evaluating a scheme of stand-alone developmental teaching observation for experienced academic staff, the identification of participants’ perceptions of pedagogic “jargon” and its relationship to “real” experience, of insider and outsider theories of academic identity, and of models of professionalism as performative fabrication convey fundamental assumptions about the role of the peer in the academic development context. As Palmer (1998) has argued, such abstractions of self and peer within teaching act as mechanisms aimed at foreclosing the possibility of a “live encounter” with the “other” (p. 37). Arguably, such resistance to the “live encounter,” with others or even with dissenting voices within the self, limits the possibility of an alternative view of professional identity as a “way of being.”

A conservative definition of “peer” as socially and intellectually normative has consequences for the defining of the “self-concept” of the practitioner through teaching observation. Fear of exposing practice to alternative values, language, and acts expresses fear of the loss of identity, to “risk losing our sense of self”

(Palmer, 1998, p. 38). As such, failure to explore and challenge participants’ construction of the peer within developmental teaching observation perpetuates the self-protective urge to fabricate a performative understanding of professional identity and its development under the guise of engaging with “real experience.” For teaching observation to contribute to legitimate enhancement of teaching practice, such processes must be underpinned by pluralistic models of professional development that tolerate, and indeed require, critical differences of perspective that challenge rather than affirm the existing professional “self-concept” of experienced practitioners. This paper has suggested that, from an analysis of evaluative questionnaire data, existing traditional models of peer-based teaching development are epistemologically and ontologically limiting, and that these models warrant further qualitative inquiry to appraise the ways in which the identity of the peer is constructed and reinforced within established developmental mechanisms and how the ways in which “peer” is understood profoundly influence the construction of a developing practitioner’s professional “self-concept” within enhancement practices.

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SARANNE WELLER is Lecturer in Higher Education at King's College London, UK and is the Programme Director for the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice for new lecturers. Her research focus is the professional development of academic staff and she is currently completing a study on the discursive practices of post-observation discussion in developmental teaching observation.