

Title: Observation of teaching and learning (OTL) and peer review for professional learning: double down or deviance?

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Session Learning Outcomes

By the end of this session, delegates will be able to:

- Distinguish orthodox approaches to observation of teaching and learning from divergent approaches, applying a new classification model
- Draw conclusions in relation to impact of observer type and observation purpose
- Discuss opportunities and threats in terms of OTL/ peer review as lecturer development tools and as potential metrics for evaluating university-level teaching

Session Outline

When it comes to the TEF, arguing with the means, the covert motives and measuring implements is common, though disputing the overt goal -to improve teaching- is much harder. Logic (and anecdotal evidence) suggests that the current metrics for judging teaching 'excellence' will be supplemented by widening interest in the use of observation of teaching and learning (OTL) (Compton, 2016). OTL is already routinely used for quality assurance (QA) processes (eg. Interview, probation) and as part of quality enhancement (QE) schemes such as HEA fellowship, PGCert HE or in-faculty peer observation schemes. Whilst the former are overtly evaluative and judgemental, the latter are often subject to a core tension between QA and QE aspects (Shortland, 2004). OTL has the power to transform practice and is widely seen to hold the potential to be the most effective mechanism for lecturer development (Brookfield, 1995; Gosling, 2005). At the same time it can be mistrusted, perceived as a threat to academic autonomy and very difficult to sustain in wider communities in HEPs (Sachs and Parsell, 2014).

This session will report on and open for discussion aspects of two stages of my research into OTL use in HE. Firstly, it will report on a completed study of participant perceptions of 'orthodox' observations (observer visits taught session, completes form, feeds back) used on a PGCert HE. Can OTL be 'servant to two masters' (assessment- QA and development -QE)? What distinguishes the peer/mentor observation from the academic developer observation?

The second study (at write up stage) is a series of case studies of 'divergent' approaches to OTL for professional learning in HE. Here the divergence from the orthodoxy is in what is observed, who observes, why the observation occurs and/or how it is conducted. It is interesting to note how there is a sense of reclamation and re-engineering of OTL in FE (O'Leary, 2017) and I am especially interested in whether we (in HE) can learn from the FE experience and one another about positive direction of travel with OTL.

Session Activities and Approximate Timings

Using the online participant interaction and slide sharing tool 'Zeetings' the session will use the two stages of research to frame the sharing of findings and discussion. It is anticipated that each part will take approximately 20 minutes.

Part 1: Study one will focus on the participant 'voice'. Themed extracts from interviews will be interspersed with electronic responses to key questions and scope for discussion on the core OTL tensions:

Indicative key questions:

Who observes and why? (in terms of existing practice and ideal practice)
How do we mitigate against the tendency towards 'individualised ontologies' amongst observers?

Core tensions for discussion:

Given the prevailing resistance, suspicions and anxieties around OTL:
What role does (or should) OTL have in HE? What does/ should the FE experience teach us?

Part 2: Study two will briefly present my exemplified categorisation of divergent approaches to OTL from four HE cases. It will lead to open discussion of two key questions:

Can such examples be seen as complimentary to orthodox OTL or a template for wider implementation?
Whatever shape it takes, should OTL be a part of qualitative evidence of teaching effectiveness? If so, how?

References

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Gosling, D. (2005) Peer Observation of Teaching (SEDA PAPER 118). London: Staff and Development Association (SEDA).

O'Leary, M. (Ed.). (2017). Reclaiming lesson observation: Supporting excellence in teacher learning. Oxon: Routledge.

Sachs, J., & Parsell, M. (Eds.). (2014). Peer review of learning and teaching in higher education: international perspectives(Vol. 9). Springer Science & Business Media.

Shortland, S. (2004). Peer observation: a tool for staff development or compliance? *Journal of further and higher education*, 28(2), 219-228.