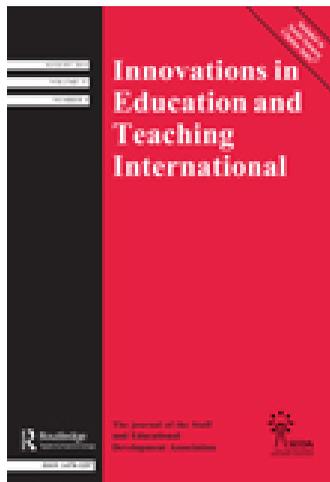


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## Peer observation of teaching: enhancing academic engagement for new participants

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This research aims to uncover key motivations, barriers and outcomes associated with first-time users of peer observation of teaching within an Irish higher level academic context. Following preliminary research, a peer observation process was piloted on five self-selected peer observation faculty pairs involving peer observation training and focused in-depth pre- and post-observation interviews. Key themes which emerged included effective peer relationships, enhanced teaching and academic engagement. It is recommended that a successful peer observation system aimed particularly at novices should be voluntary, involving peer self-selection and mutual trust and collaboration between participants. An effective and tailored peer observation system should also lead to enhanced teaching and learning which is both valued by faculty and formally recognised by university management.

**Keywords:** peer observation; university teaching; teaching quality; academic engagement

### Introduction

The 'professionalisation' of teaching practice in higher education has become central as universities try to respond to an increasingly diverse student population, coupled with issues of standard and quality and growing international competition (Lueddeke, 2003). Consequently, the development of a concerted and clear commitment to maximising the relevance and effectiveness of education and pedagogical techniques is critical. To this end, the importance of a reflective approach to teaching and learning is strongly supported in the literature (e.g. Bell, Miadenovic, & Segara, 2010; Tomkinson, 2002). Peer observation of teaching (POT) has been long upheld and advocated as part of a reflective approach to improve teaching and learning and foster discussion and dissemination of best practice (e.g. Cosh, 1998; Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). Numerous tensions surrounding POT have also been acknowledged in the literature including faculty resistance to change (Knight, 2002), intrusion into the learning environment and control over professional autonomy (Blackwell & McLean, 1996). Furthermore, Lomas and Kinchin (2006) pay particular attention to the cultural complexities embedded within university environments and the sensitivity required to implement a POT successfully. Given these challenges, this research aims to explore in-depth attitudes and perceptions of peer observation as a tool to assess and enhance teaching quality and to

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identify the key motivations, barriers and outcomes particularly perceived by first-time users of peer observation. A unique aspect of this study is the incorporation of a strong Irish educational context where empirical research on POT is scant.

### Peer observation of teaching

Peer observation can be a mutual gift between the observer and the observed where both gain in 'self awareness, perspective, an introduction to new techniques and fresh enthusiasm for their craft' (Austin, Sweet, & Overholt, 1991, p. 216). A key part of an effective reflective approach to teaching and learning includes the facility of a formalised evaluation and mentoring system, which encourages both accountability and educational development (Ramsden, 1992). Herein, a peer observation system plays a central role. Indeed, POT involves exploring the relationship between teaching and learning within the context of such things as content, the nature of the students and their experiences and the temporal and physical characteristics of the setting, where the development and understanding of teaching beyond a purely technical approach might occur (Loughran, 1996). Therefore, POT and mentor support forms part of a holistic approach which aims to facilitate teaching and learning as a process of self-improvement that explicitly recognises the self (Peel, 2005) as well as the social context of teaching and learning, acknowledging the needs of the facilitator and the individual learner in the interaction.

POT represents one of the core ways of enhancing professional teaching practice (Beaty, 1998; Race, 2001), thus formalising the role of teaching within universities. In effect, POT, together with the development of teaching portfolios and the use of formative evaluation processes succeeds in raising the profile and visibility of the scholarship of teaching (Hyland, 2002; MacLaren, 2005) as well as encouraging increased critical self-reflection amongst educators (e.g. Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005; Peel, 2005). A number of different peer observation typologies have been developed including summative peer observation (Hopkins, 1993) which is employed for the purposes of promotion, in addition to formative or developmental peer observation (e.g. Bell, 2002) which results in recommendations for teaching improvement and enhancement. Thirdly, a peer review model is proposed by (Gosling, 2002) where colleagues mutually observe and reflect on each other's teaching in a non-judgmental environment which was deemed most appropriate as an approach to follow for first-time users of POT.

Whilst the benefits of undergoing a POT processes are numerous (Martin & Double, 1998), there is less consensus in the literature as to the appropriate instrument or metrics recommended for use as a framework to undertake a peer observation, particularly considering the different purposes and roles associated with different POT typologies. A number of researchers suggest a 'checklist' of criteria (e.g. Newman, Lown, Jones, Johansson, & Schwartzstein, 2009), others suggest the use of 'rating scales' whilst more advocate a 'written analysis' format, all of which afford both advantages and limitations to the observer and observed (Centre for Teaching Effectiveness, University of Texas, 2010). According to other researchers (e.g. Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004) however, little attention appears to be given to the various complexities involved and protocols required in optimally delivering the POT process. Overall, debate still exists as to POT's role as a managerial vs. collegiate process, an evaluative mechanism vs. a collaborative experience and an imposed vs. voluntary practice.

Within an Irish higher education context, there have been huge changes that affect the provision of higher education including a turbulent economic environment, resource constraints and a changing society. The recent Hunt (2010) report outlines a range of initiatives to improve the quality and effectiveness of Irish higher level teaching. There is no standardised teaching evaluation mechanism across the Irish university sector, with universities operationalising various instruments in assessing teaching quality. Irish educational governmental agencies are prioritising excellence in teaching and learning, with a focus on gathering student feedback through a new national student survey (Higher Education Authority [HEA], 2012). Furthermore, both at an individual university level and national level there has been increased focus on the development of professional programmes for teaching and learning made available to academics (Department of Education and Skills, 2011). Recognised as a key tool in teaching evaluation, third party observations of higher education teaching have also gained momentum in the last decade, however, is still not universally adopted within Irish universities. A recent Irish study identified the key issues facing faculty regarding the use of POT as the decision to participate, selection of observer, how feedback is given and control over the information generated and planned action post-observation (McMahon, Barrett, & O'Neill, 2007). Best practice of POT is therefore dependent on the 'quality of the processes in place and on the practices of those conducting observation and being observed' (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005, p. 213) where peer observation is part of a wider quality agenda. Given that it is a relatively new phenomenon in terms of policy and practice in Ireland, there is a clear need for further research into peer observation processes and delivery in an Irish context. There is also a need to explore the attitudes and perceptions of POT amongst first-time participants and assess their particular needs and the appropriate requirements for successful take-up and adoption.

## Method

This study aimed to identify the key perceptions, motivations, barriers and outcomes related to using peer observation to evaluate teaching quality amongst first-time participants. This study followed an exploratory qualitative approach (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Firstly, preliminary interviews were conducted with selected pedagogical experts and previous POT users to assess the nature and success of POT processes used and the degree of POT adoption within an Irish context. This preliminary research informed the development of a peer observation process which was adapted from Gosling's peer review model (2002) discussed earlier. This approach was selected because of the following inherent attributes which were particularly appropriate for first-time users: voluntary participation, self-selection of peer and collaborative process. The main phase of the research study involved a purposive sample of 10 university lecturers who were first-time users of peer observation. Five separate self-selected peer observation dyads (*participant pairs*) were purposively drawn from a range of disciplines within the university being investigated UL including Science, Nursing, Engineering, Law and Business. As a theoretical rationale to the sample, whilst all participants comprised of POT novices and were also relatively new to academia with teaching experience ranging in length from one to seven years, the range of faculties and disciplines they represented allowed for comparison of differences (Patton, 1990). At the university being

studied, the scholarship of teaching is deeply culturally embedded and championed by the Centre for Teaching and Learning which provides a suite of development and evaluation services. Overall, teaching quality, evidenced in a comprehensive portfolio using a suite of tools including POT, is attributed a significant weighting in terms of promotional criteria although decreases slightly in importance, relative to research, at senior academic levels. Both authors are academics at the university and are committed and active in teaching initiatives and have promoted POT adoption. They are also regular nominees and winners of teaching excellence awards at institutional, regional and national levels.

Each of these participants agreed to have their teaching performance observed by a fellow peer and vice versa, thus acting as both observer and observed. An integral part of the peer observation process and evaluation involved the provision of peer observation training which is advocated in the literature (e.g. Kohut, Burnap, & Yon, 2007) and conducting of pre/post-observation interviews. Participant training involved in-depth explanation of the underlying POT principles and process, step-by-step instruction on using the supporting documentation and peer observation forms and advice on the provision of constructive post-observation feedback. Post-POT, a series of in-depth interviews (normally up to 1.5 h in length) was conducted with each of the five dyad/pairs to explore their experiences, attitudes and behaviours with regard to using peer observation. This methodological approach also facilitated the refinement of the peer observation documentation where, following participants' advice, minor adjustments were made to format, structure and content to optimise usability and enabled a richer more holistic dialogue about the observed teaching session rather than a superficial checklist evaluation. Following Miles and Huberman (1994), interview transcripts were independently coded by both researchers, the themes were subsequently discussed and agreement was reached in terms of any differences in interpretation to maximise the reliability and validity of the qualitative findings. These are presented in the form of key themes in the proceeding section.

## Discussion of findings

### *Effective peer relationships*

The literature highlights that the relationship between peers is key; both must have confidence in each other so that feedback is non-judgemental yet constructive (Gosling, 2002; Shortland, 2010). According to our participants, self-selection of peers by academics undertaking peer observation for the first time appeared to be paramount in encouraging participation as it 'gets the process started and builds confidence' (Participant, Nursing Faculty Dyad) and facilitates initial buy-in and adoption. Some participants viewed such closeness between peers as positive, in that their relationship was strong enough to cope with negative feedback:

We had self-selected each other ..., I had the comfort of knowing that I didn't mind what she said, whether it was good or negative because I had taken it on board that she only meant it in a good way. (Participant, Nursing Faculty Dyad)

Furthermore, several respondents felt that any criticism would be treated confidentially and that they could trust their peer not to disclose negative aspects of the learning observation to others. Conversely, some participants cautioned that if

the relationship between peers was too close, only the positive aspects of the observation might be discussed, and deep criticism or 'hard' issues may be avoided to evade potential confrontation and protect friendship between peers. Hence, similar to other pedagogical tools, POT is subject to cultural circumstances and propensities and, hence, politeness theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) may have been at play for some participants in this study, despite their close relationship, especially in the context of giving and receiving advice and feedback. Whilst each of the faculty was advised on how to provide and receive feedback in the pre-observation training, striking the balance between politeness and openness is clearly a challenge that faces first-time participants. Hence, to overcome this and achieve the full value of peer observation, participants felt an observer who would provide full, impartial, constructive criticism was key, as only focusing on the positive did not yield insights into how their teaching performance could be enhanced:

... the main thing is that I would implicitly trust (my observer) that what she is saying is what she saw and that she is not molly coddling it and I presume that she would be the same with me and that's why we do it ... we know each other very, very well so we are able to talk openly about the various things and not get defensive and that was really the key thing. (Participant, Engineering Faculty Dyad)

Respondents also praised the supporting documentation in enabling them to objectively assess the teaching session (as opposed to their colleague) and substantiate their evaluation with supporting evidence, 'backing everything up with examples' (Participant, Business Faculty, Dyad), thus alleviating the tension between a polite friendly review and a constructive critique. Hence, a structured process involving detailed documentation supported by pre-observation training (Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004, 2005) was instrumental to the success of the peer observation experience for first-time POT participants, in facilitating the exchange of constructive feedback and enabling the development of a positive relationship with their peers.

Following their first experience with POT, all of our participants claimed to be more open to future peer observation initiatives. They were also motivated to gain the insight of academics from 'a different discipline' (Participant, Science Faculty Dyad) and to expose their teaching to experienced faculty or pedagogical experts or 'someone more experienced in teaching' (Participant, Nursing Faculty Dyad). This was also to counteract the potential issue of 'bias' associated with peer observations, particularly when used for summative or judgmental purposes (Hopkins, 1993) such as teaching awards, promotion and competitions where they may be personal and/or departmental pressure to obtain or provide a faculty member with a positive review. Hence, our novices learned from the process that the appropriate selection and management of the peer relationship was paramount to the quality of feedback and usefulness of the POT report from both a developmental and evaluative perspective.

### *Enhancement of teaching*

In regard to the development of teaching, participants emphasised the considerable benefit and value derived from having a 'one-to-one' dedicated session on teaching, coaching and feedback with their peers. Some elaborated that it was more important to gain insight and guidance from peer observation on 'my teaching skills more than my content' (Participant, Nursing Faculty Dyad). For many, particularly those

new to teaching, the peer observation process was useful in terms in boosting confidence and, as one participant stated, giving ‘reassurance and help to develop my teaching’ (Participant Dyad, Nursing). This proved to be particularly important considering the often solitary nature of teaching and how peer observation helps to facilitate discussion and dialogue with peers:

I think just the fact that you are actually discussing your lecturing or your methods because I think people tend to lecture in isolation ... you don’t get much of a chance to go out and discuss. (Participant Dyad, Business Faculty)

Furthermore, others highlighted the benefits of not only being observed but the value of being an observer in terms of providing new insights and reflection on their own teaching:

... I learned from being an observer...from watching others teach and what works well ... it was great for new ideas. (Participant Dyad, Law Faculty)

Evidently, engaging in POT allows new and more experienced lecturers an important mechanism to discuss and seek valuable feedback on teaching methods and techniques with trusted colleagues and along with other formative tools enables them to make the important transition towards becoming confident and effective educators.

Importantly, compared to other sources of evidence of teaching scholarship, some participants viewed feedback from peer observation as particularly informative and valuable. For example, the following participant perceived peer observation as a more meaningful tool in providing insight on her teaching methods as compared to student evaluations:

... You know the student evaluation form that the students fill in, it is, you know, it is very much about satisfaction ... it gives you some things but they [the students] tell you gripes like the desks are too small ... which is absolutely no use to your teaching so it is better to get something that is more specific on the methods that you use ... (Participant, Engineering Faculty Dyad)

The observation above signals the comparative importance of peer observation as a source of insight on teaching quality and the increasing over-reliance by many institutions on student evaluation, often with low completion rates, as a measure of teaching quality. Hence, it is often important for institutions to trust in and value other forms of feedback such as POT also when collating or assessing evidence of teaching quality. The overall view amongst participants was that peer observation could be used not only developmentally but also, when appropriate, as a summative approach to peer observation (e.g. Hopkins, 1993) in seeking promotion or career progression and was being increasingly included in faculty applications as well as recognised and acknowledged by promotion and interview boards in universities.

### *Academic engagement*

A third theme of the study related to fostering academic engagement and creating a culture where POT was perceived as normal practice within the institution. In terms of barriers to academic engagement in POT, being first-time participants, respon-

dents highlighted concerns which they had prior to completing the peer observation process which included feelings of 'nervousness' and the notion of it being a 'judgmental' process. The biggest inhibitor to academic participation and engagement in the POT process was fear of the unknown; prior to embarking in the process, participants had a very limited knowledge as to what to expect from peer observation and where the information captured would reside. Furthermore, teaching was viewed as a very individual and private exercise and revealing their teaching approach to colleagues was a new experience. Some faculty in the study were initially nervous about being peer observed and were fearful of their teaching being scrutinised and 'the biggest step was getting over the fear of being peer reviewed.' (Participant, Science Faculty Dyad).

However, this barrier of fear was alleviated through the promotion of a respectful environment between the participants undertaking peer observation. Participants identified as key motivations for involvement the opportunity to 'open up' their teaching to feedback, as they sought 'affirmation' that their teaching was up to standard:

I think the most beneficial part of it is to do with opening up to a more public audience, your competence in that area – not that you would be intentionally secretive about it but... that is very developmental, that you try to let down any barriers. (Participant, Business Faculty Dyad)

One of the most powerful motivators in the encouragement of a proactive peer observation culture within an academic environment was awareness building of POT. Several participants in the study became positive advocates of the process, informing other colleagues of the merits and usefulness of POT through 'word of mouth and raising awareness among colleagues' (Participant, Nursing Faculty Dyad) and through both formal and informal promotion of POT within their department and faculty.

Conversely, the importance of research productivity amongst faculty and increasing expectations on faculty to increase publication output was perceived as a significant challenge to the scholarship of teaching. Whilst there was recognition of the strong culture of teaching and learning within the participants' university, they emphasised the increasing relative strategic importance on research publications and the consequential challenge in maintaining teaching on a par with research in terms of academic focus and performance. Despite these strategic developments, one participant viewed her participation in peer observation as a positive experience personally but also a signal that the university was prioritising teaching:

I think it [peer observation] is a breath of fresh air because it [the university] is so research driven and everybody is on the research train and the publishing, you know, and teaching sometimes takes the back burner. (Participant Dyad, Nursing Faculty)

Furthermore, some of our participants perceived that there was a resistance to change in general amongst some faculty which mitigated against an institution-wide willingness to participate in teaching evaluation initiatives such as POT:

Like there are two main divisions. There's what I call the younger crowd, like myself and then there is the old school and I think there is a very notable difference between

the two groups in terms of being open to stuff and willing to change and implement change... (Participant, Engineering Faculty Dyad).

To address this resistance to change (Knight, 2002), institutions must capitalise on the positive experience of POT by first-time users and more experienced supportive faculty and employ them as champions of change to promote the value and advantages of POT to others in order to build a POT community across all levels and disciplines. It must be acknowledged that awareness and adoption of POT amongst Irish third-level institutions has recently grown with an increasing acknowledgement amongst faculty and staff of its positive outcomes (McMahon et al., 2007). POT also leads to increased confidence amongst academics in regard to their teaching and facilitates overall good teaching practice in Ireland (Donnelly, 2007). If academics, Irish or otherwise, new or experienced, have positive experiences from the process and can leverage tangible benefits both developmentally as well as, importantly, judgementally, in achieving promotion and career progression, then it is more likely to become normalised for all faculty.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

A number of key conclusions can be drawn from the findings presented above. In regard to developing effective peer relationships, one can conclude that trust and collegiality are central with first-time participants of peer observation programmes working with a trusted colleague where mentoring and support are integral (Ramsden, 1992). Once faculty have become familiar with the process, they are more confident in selecting more objective or expert peers and also become key advocates of the process to first-time and experienced POT participants. As a starting point, institutions should therefore encourage academics to self-select their peers, or provide a 'matchmaking service' for participants. This would reduce perceived barriers to participation by limiting the level of fear and uncertainty inherent in being peer observed. Institutions need to therefore facilitate appropriate POT development and mentoring involving dyads, triads or teams between faculty of different disciplines and levels of experience in order to foster a culture of peer observation within and across universities.

This study highlights that the positive outcomes from POT particularly the enhancement of teaching. Constructive feedback should be non-judgemental and detailed in nature, supported by ample evidence and concrete examples. Participants need therefore to be self-reflective (Peel, 2005), self-aware and self-critical (Cosh, 1998). Peer observers should act in this regard as 'critical friends' (Shortland, 2010) so that rich, constructive and meaningful insights into teaching practice can be communicated in an appropriate manner. In short, institutions need to provide dedicated group or individual training to first-time academics embarking on peer observation in the provision and receiving of feedback and enable them to overcome 'politeness' and exploit peer observation to its full potential.

The research also highlighted the importance of academic engagement in respect to POT and the barriers and motivations to participation, including nervousness and fear regarding the process and judgemental nature of the peer observation. Other key issues included the need to reestablish the importance of the scholarship of teaching relative to research both for developmental and career progression reasons. Motivations included the opportunity to have one's teaching reaffirmed and

constructively reviewed, particularly for new or inexperienced faculty which can ultimately be used as a key source of teaching quality evidence in career progression and teaching awards. Supporting Cosh (1998), there is the need for all educators, both experienced and novice to engage in more active dialogue and practice regarding teaching. Such initiatives are being actively practiced in many teaching-focused institutions where both formal and informal teaching forums and conversations allow academics to share best practice with colleagues. This study has shown that first-time participants held highly positive and favourable attitudes towards peer observation and this should be leveraged and disseminated through appropriate avenues to generate positive word of mouth across institutions.

POT was highly regarded by first-time respondents as a self-development opportunity and a learning experience for both observer and observed. Building upon Gosling (2002), a key recommendation of this research is that a successful peer observation framework for faculty new to the process is based primarily upon a voluntary system, involving peer self-selection and mutual trust and collaboration between participants. It is also a flexible but rigorous process leading to enhanced teaching and learning as evidenced by researchers such as Beaty (1998), Donnelly (2007) and Race (2001) and encourages faculty buy-in and adoption. It is, however, also recognised that in order to normalise the use of POT to all faculty, it needs to be both valued by faculty and formally recognised by university management and systematically included as a meaningful testimony of teaching quality both for developmental and judgemental purposes. This will also further support and promote the validation and scholarship of teaching as a key factor in developing high-quality educators and in assessing overall academic performance and reputation of faculty and institutions as a whole.

### Notes on contributors

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