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ENGIN, Marion

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Marion Engin
TESOL Centre
Department of Education, Childhood and Inclusion
Sheffield Hallam University
Howard Street
Sheffield S1 1WB

Tel. 0114 2253434

marionhengin@gmail.com

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In this Reflection on Practice I argue the case for using the principles of scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) to serve as a framework for evaluating and designing peer observation programmes in higher education contexts. I suggest that for peer observation to be an activity worthy of SoTL, it should be systematic, collaborative, rigorous, peer reviewed, and focused on learning about teaching to improve teaching. Using a set of criteria to critique a current peer observation programme I account for its strengths and weaknesses and suggest a way forward for elevating the status of peer observation.

Keywords: academic development; peer observation; scholarship of teaching and learning

Introduction

In their meta-analysis of the range of activities within academic development, Fraser and Ling (2014) identify six domains of practice. Interestingly, peer review as an activity is assumed under the title *Quality* of Learning and Teaching, which focuses on standards and evaluation and improvement, rather than under the title *Scholarship* of Learning and Teaching, which incorporates activities such as teaching projects and research. Peer observation is often maligned as a box-filling exercise (Chamberlain, D'Artrey and Rowe, 2011) which is top-down and evaluative (Cosh 1999). I argue that by incorporating certain features such as rigour, peer-review, and dissemination, we may place peer observation within the SoTL domain, valorizing it as a systematic, research-based activity which leads to development of teaching and improvement of student learning. The trajectory of my argument firstly deconstructs the terms peer review and peer observation, and then suggests how peer observation, as defined in this paper, can be more closely aligned with the principles of SoTL to promote peer observation as a valuable research activity in its own right. This paper is not a research article, nor is it an evaluation of an intervention, but an attempt to reflect on "the lived difficulty" (Kensington-Miller, Renc-Roe and Morón-García, 2015, p.281) of a professional challenge.

Peer observation

Peer review often refers to a variety of activities colleagues can be involved in to further develop professional practice (Drew and Klopper, 2013; Thomas, Chie, Abraham, Raj and Beh, 2014), and more specifically, as a process of observing a peer teach followed by feedback from the observer (Hendry, Bell and Thomson, 2014). The benefits of peer observation which involve an element of feedback are well-documented and include stronger collegiality and an academic focus on teaching (Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014), more explicit articulation of teaching leading to an improvement in the quality of teaching and learning (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2005), and reassurance for novice teachers (Blackwell, 1996). Despite these benefits, the tension between peer

observation as a summative top-down process used for judgement on performance, or peer observation as a formative bottom-up process for informal development (Peel, 2005) is a fundamental challenge. One criticism from faculty of peer observation programmes in institutional settings is that the purposes are not clear (Byrne, Brown and Challen, 2010), while others question issues such as authority and power (Shortland, 2004), and the complexities of control and data-flow (McMahon, Barrett, O'Neill, 2007). Although management might be explicit about the need for peer observation as part of professional development and appraisal, faculty may still perceive it as an administrative chore (Engin & Priest, 2014a, 2014b).

These challenges can be overcome by adopting a definition of peer observation which removes any top-down, evaluative element. In this paper I define peer observation as observation of teaching, teacher, and or learning by a colleague (Engin & Priest, 2014a, 2014b) without evaluative feedback (Hendry et al, 2014). Such a model of peer observation is "non-judgmental, developmental, collegial, and reflective…mitigating many of the frustrations and challenges" of peer observation (Engin & Priest, 2014a, p. 3). In such a model the onus is on the observer to learn by using the peer's teaching as a lens through which to reflect on his or her own practice. Benefits reported from such a peer observation model include greater collegiality, confidence, learning of teaching techniques, and the development of greater self-reflective skills (Engin and Priest, 2014a; Hendry et al, 2014; Hendry and Oliver, 2012)..

Valorizing peer observation as defined in this paper by recognising it as a part of SoTL may go some way to enhancing the positive impact of peer observation as well as mitigating some of the limitations described above. Through the principles of the scholarship of teaching and learning it is possible to re-brand peer observation as a rigorous process of systematic investigation, examination, and dissemination. Although the research community requires blind peer review, peer observation within a SoTL framework would incorporate rigorous peer review with an emphasis on developing teaching practices. As a result, faculty may see peer observation as a legitimate academic activity and this new perception may go some way to addressing the gap between academic pursuit into research at the expense of teaching (Matthews, Lodge & Bosanquet, 2014).

Features of a SoTL activity

SoTL and academic development overlap in their priorities, and employ a "common language" to talk of enhancing teaching for better student learning (Matthews, Lodge, Bosanquet, 2014, p. 113). Laksov, McGrath & Silen (2010) argue that at the heart of SoTL lies the goal of more effective student learning. Similarly, Leibowitz (2014) points out that academic development is about the "creation of conditions supportive of teaching and learning" (p. 359). The question is then, how can peer observation contribute to better teaching and learning within a SoTL framework?

In his description of SoTL, Shulman (2000) emphasizes the key principles of shared, public knowledge, and building on expertise. "We develop a scholarship of teaching

when our work as teachers becomes public, peer-reviewed and critiqued, and exchanged with other members of our professional communities so they, in turn, can build on our work" (p.50). In other words, the learning and reflection gained from a peer observation would be open to critique and input from colleagues and members of the academic community. There is considerable discussion in the literature on the features or principles of SoTL activities, and this section aims to highlight the commonalities which can inform a framework for evaluation and design. Paulsen (2001) suggests that a SoTL activity should be peer-reviewed, inquiry-based, available to the public, and form the basis of future work. Ochoa (2011) notes also that it is "what has been learned from teaching" (p. 103) that makes a contribution to teaching and SoTL. Elton (2008) links SoTL to continuing professional development (CPD) in that both require teachers to pursue change in their teaching, as well as improvement. He suggests that this change comes about through problem-solving inquiry into teaching and learning in a particular context. Henderson (2009) makes the point that publications are not the only way to achieve dissemination. Sharing may be through other collegial activities such as workshops and learning communities.

A fundamental aspect of SoTL is that it should aim to stimulate change and improvement in teaching through a systematic and intentional focus on the learner (Smith 2008). The UKPSF (2010) states that a required professional value for lecturers achieving formal recognition in higher education is that they "use evidence-informed approaches and the outcomes from research, scholarship and continuing professional development" (p. 3). Peer observation therefore needs to result in an output which is peer-reviewed, disseminated, and situated in the teacher's' professional context.

Peer observation as part of SoTL: A framework

The framework below highlights the features of a SoTL activity with corresponding questions. These questions can be used by academic developers to examine the extent to which an existing peer observation programme meets the features of SoTL, and identify strengths and weaknesses. This evaluation could then support the design and implementation of a programme more aligned with SoTL.

Scholarship of teaching and learning should involve…	Critical questions
Systematic analysis	To what extent is peer observation a systematic process? What is the evidence for this? What are the teachers investigating? What are the focus points for analysis? How are the focus points chosen?
Critical reflection	How do teachers reflect on their observations? (both observer / observee?). Against what criteria? Who decides the criteria? What do they reflect on? (the teaching they observe or their own teaching?)

Peer review	Do peers evaluate the reflections, data, learning points?
	Is there peer review of any write-ups?
	How does the teaching community evaluate the learning from peer observations?
	How is the learning and development scrutinized by peers?
Dissemination and sharing in the public arena	How do teachers share their data and learning with other colleagues?
	How do teachers share their reflections?
	How do teachers share their learning points?
	Do teachers write about their experiences and learning?
	What can others gain from the sharing of information?
Change and impact	Is there any subsequent change in teaching?
	Is there any subsequent change in learning (for the better)?
	How do we measure change?
	Is it reasonable to expect immediate change?
	What is the impact on student learning?
	How do we measure impact?

Table 1: A framework for evaluating peer observations in SoTL

Reflections on the framework – an example

The framework above resulted from reflections on a peer observation the author was involved in establishing and then evaluating at an English-medium university in the United Arab Emirates. It was clear that the programme was fulfilling some of the above aims, and failing in others. On interrogation of the programme according to the above key questions, strengths lay in the systematic analysis of teaching and critical reflection on teaching. Faculty reported on the benefits from reflecting on their own teaching by observing a peer, supporting the notion that peer observation offers a mirror by which faculty can reflect on their own practice (Engin and Priest, 2014a, 2014b). Teachers investigated discipline-specific areas of teaching supported by a structured reflection of their own practices. Although the structured reflection required faculty to consider how they might develop their own teaching as a result of the peer observation, there was no follow-up activity.

Thus the peer observation fulfilled the first two SoTL criteria of systematic analysis and critical reflection. However, the limitation of the programme was in its lack of peer review and dissemination. The reflection pieces were not subject to peer review, questions, or evaluation. There was no opportunity for dissemination of learning points

or reflections. Thus the learning from peer observation was not shared in the public and professional arena.

One recommendation is that academic developers consider ways of disseminating the learning and knowledge gained from peer observation. This involves making the learning and collegial work more public. This could be through faculty blogs in which faculty write about what they have learned from observations, mini-conferences in which faculty share their reflections and changes to practice on the basis of peer observations, workshops which focus on observation and reflection techniques, and more dialogue on how peer observations have enhanced the teaching of both observers and observes.

Conclusion

In this Reflection on Practice I have attempted to show that by examining peer observation in the light of SoTL principles we may promote a more rigorous peer observation programme which aims to disseminate learning, stimulate change, and result in more effective student learning. I have provided practical suggestions of how academic developers may evaluate and design a peer observation which adheres to the features of SoTL, thus raising its profile as a valuable research activity. As Leibowitz (2014) points out, the aim of academic development is not only the learning of students, but also the learning of academics. Matthews et al (2014) highlight the need for early career academics to engage more with their teaching through SoTL activities, and a rigorous peer observation programme may be one way to do this.

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