PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: AN ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH

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WHAT WERE THE MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PROJECT?

The major achievements were as follows:

- Enthusiastic engagement of 28 teachers in two parallel online focus groups. Teachers were drawn from 12 different departments throughout London and other parts of the UK and represented many different disciplines including education, medicine, veterinary science, public policy and others. 26 of these teachers were active in contributing a total of 130 postings resulting in a rich and scholarly exchange. The focus groups allowed us to:
  
  o map experience of peer observation
  
  o highlight the potential and challenges of implementing peer observation in online settings
  
  o identify the tensions inherent in the practice of peer observation
  
  o identify some of the characteristics of “good” online teaching
  
  o discuss alternative models of “peer observation” based on collaborative sense-making, which informed the design and implementation of a programme of peer observation within our MSc in International Primary Health Care.

- Establishment of an online Special Interest Group, comprising 12 of the original focus group members, plus a further five members. This allowed further discussion, exchange of resources, and dissemination of our preliminary analysis of our focus groups and our own Unit’s experience of implementing peer observation.

- Implementation of “Peer-to-peer Reflection on Pedagogical Practice” (PROPP) meetings amongst tutors of the MSc in International Primary Health Care. These meetings were based on the principles of an action learning set. Individual tutors brought to the group an example of their teaching (for example: feedback they had prepared for a student, a transcript of a virtual seminar, or marks they had awarded for a student’s work) and used this as a basis for discussion, with other tutors supporting reflection and challenging assumptions. Four face-to-face PROPP meetings and one asynchronous online “meeting” were held. These were successful in opening up discussion about teaching practices and using real (though not real time) examples of tutoring as a basis for reflection and action. We made several changes to our teaching activities as a result of these meetings (for example - introduction of a new cover sheet for students to submit with their assignments, in a format which encourages students to be more actively involved in their feedback). Although we already had a culture of peer review of “work in progress” within our team, the PROPP meetings have allowed us to “close the learning loop” by encouraging us to reflect back on completed teaching episodes with a focus on pedagogy. In our PROPP meetings we have explored the following:
  
  o How do we help our students to write critically? (using a transcript of a virtual seminar)
• How do we assess our students? (using two student assignments)
• Exploring principles of good feedback practice (using an example of tutor feedback)
• Marking assignments (blind marking of an assignment by all tutors and discussion about the processes involved)

• Development and ongoing collaboration with the University of East Anglia Action Research Group. This brought together a multidisciplinary group of eight action researchers from different departments to share learning on this research approach.

• Development of a suggested approach to building a “portfolio of evidence” which might be submitted to the QAA within an institutional audit report as a way of demonstrating an effective PROPP programme. It is anticipated that this may be useful to the Centre for Distance Education and to course designers and teachers who are considering incorporating a programme such as PROPP into online and distance education courses (see Appendix 1).

**WERE THE OBJECTIVES YOU SET OUT TO ACHIEVE MET?**

Situating the project within an action research framework made the definition of clear objectives beyond the early stages difficult (and indeed contrary to the iterative nature of the action research process). However we drew up the following list of objectives to guide our initial inquiry:

• Establish a network of teachers interested in implementing or participating in online peer observation of teaching (a Special Interest Group) and identify the current role of peer observation in online courses represented by this network.

• Implement a programme of peer observation amongst tutors of the MSc in International Primary Health Care as a pilot study.

• Identify the potential and challenges of the online environment with respect to peer observation.

• Evaluate the role of online peer observation as a means of facilitating reflective teaching practice.

• Draw generalisable lessons about the use of peer observation in professional development of online teachers and in the quality improvement of online courses.

• Facilitate ongoing collaboration of participating teachers.

• Disseminate lessons learned throughout the University of London and more widely in the academic community.

We believe that we have been successful in achieving all of these objectives. One aspect of the project which was particularly successful was the collaborative effort, not only amongst tutors of our own MSc programme but from many disciplines and departments,
WHAT OBSTACLES HAVE YOU ENCOUNTERED IN YOUR PROJECT?

I did not encounter any insurmountable obstacles but did face some challenges, the main one being that “peer observation” is not a subject which teachers necessarily feel enthusiastic about. Indeed, early discussion in the focus group highlighted that peer observation is a process shrouded in anxiety, even amongst experienced teachers. This felt discouraging and led me to doubt whether I could be successful in implementing a programme at all. However, what also came out of the same discussion was a great enthusiasm amongst teachers for processes which allow teachers to reflect together on their teaching practices, with a focus on “collective sense-making” rather than “teaching as performance”. So what at first seemed like an obstacle proved to be one of the most important findings of our project and led to the development of a model of “peer observation” which incorporates a conceptualisation of learning as a social practice – learning with and from each other in dialogue. This was an exploratory project, deliberately set within a research framework which allowed us to refine our approach according to the result of successive rounds of reflection. We did not know what peer observation would “look like” at the outset but have remained true to our action research approach. The result has been a successful implementation of PROPP; a realisation that the online environment allows us to be more creative in our approach to peer observation, and a very successful collaborative effort by tutors.

The literature on peer observation in online settings is sparse, which meant I had little to inform the approach to the research. At one level this was frustrating, at another level it was liberating.

At a practical level, the nature of this project was one of parallel research and action, relying at all stages on the enthusiastic involvement of many other people. Although this was one of its great successes, the rate of progress within the project was slower than I had hoped (I hoped we would be able to hold eight PROPP meetings rather than five). However, any kind of innovative activity takes time and I suspect my expectations were unrealistic. I found conducting even a small research project within the time constraints of the award very challenging. A specific challenge within the PROPP meetings was keeping the discussion focussed on the teaching. As one tutor commented “it is easy to go off on a tangent so that it’s the students that become problematised rather than our teaching!”

USEFULNESS OF CONTACTS WITHIN THE CENTRE FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION AND HOW THE CENTRE MIGHT FURTHER SUPPORT AWARD HOLDERS

Brian Sayer and Judith Collier were both helpful in identifying teachers from other parts of the External Programme who they thought might be interested in taking part. Brian also offered advice in the Steering Group. I spent one day in the CDE library and found some useful literature there.

The CDE conference was a very useful opportunity to hear about some of the other work going on in different departments and also to meet some of my project participants face-to-face. Apart from this my main contact has been with Caroline Daly (another award holder), who participated in the focus groups and Special Interest Group, and who invited Jill Russell and I to take part in a meeting of teachers at the Institute of Education. Caroline and Jill are now collaborating on a further CDE funded project, developing methods for eliciting e-learner narratives within a framework of embedded evaluation. I have had no other contact with award holders, so have been unable to offer them any useful feedback on their research (or vice versa). A relatively informal meeting of award holders, say, three times a year would be a great way of sharing experience, inviting constructive criticism and feeling a greater sense of involvement with the Centre. This might also be an opportunity to identify potential areas for collaboration in future. In my project I was well supported by two colleagues and also had regular contact with the UEA Action Research Group. An opportunity to meet with other
researchers in e-learning may have offered different insights. Online discussion was an effective means of collaboration within my project, and may be a possible alternative approach.

RESEARCH RESULTS

WHAT EDUCATIONAL ISSUES DID THE PROJECT ADDRESS AND WHICH STUDENT OR OTHER GROUPS BENEFITED FROM THE PROJECT?

Many educational issues were addressed throughout the project. Some issues were discussed within the focus groups and Special Interest Groups. Some of these have already been listed above. Other examples included:

- The tension between peer observation as “quality assurance” and peer observation as staff development or “quality enhancement”
- The unique features of online teaching and learning and how this can be harnessed in peer observation
- A theoretical discussion around “social theories of learning”

The PROPP meetings involved explicit discussion of different areas of teaching (see above) and in each case an example of a tutor’s teaching acted as the springboard for discussion. Full details of our meetings are available in the main project report. There have been many positive outcomes from these meetings. The process has been valued by tutors and there have been several practical outcomes also, including:

- Improving the clarity of objectives for a virtual seminar
- Designing new learning activities for a virtual seminar
- Removing ambiguities from an assignment task
- Redesigning assignment cover sheet so that students are invited to ask for specific feedback on chosen areas
- Exploration of methods to keep student-specific logs of feedback provided to allow greater continuity
- Asking students to develop “action points” based on feedback provided
- Refining our marking scheme to include more detailed descriptors of “good” and “poor” essays for incorporation in the student manual

It is too early to judge the effect of these changes, as many of them are now being piloted on our 2006 intake of students. We hope that maintaining curiosity about our teaching methods will ultimately benefit our students.
The findings and recommendations in the full project report, in particular the guidance on developing a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate effectiveness of a PROPP programme (Appendix 1) are of potential benefit to all involved in online teaching and are aimed ultimately at benefits for students.

**HOW HAS THE WORK BUILT UPON CURRENT WORK IN THE FIELD OF DISTANCE EDUCATION?**

Literature on peer observation within online education is sparse, so this project was, by nature, exploratory. However there is much interest in the role of reflection in teaching practice and on the “new” pedagogies which online teaching can explore. This project has provided a link between these two areas. There is a large literature on peer observation in face-to-face contexts which we have used to inform our work. Insights gained through our research led us to draw a contrast between the “Quality Assurance” model which has traditionally informed many peer observation programmes, and the “Quality Enhancement” model on which PROPP is based. We suggest that building a “portfolio of evidence,” paying attention to certain key principles of an effective PROPP programme may be a valuable contribution to the institutional audit report required by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in relation to staff development activities.

**HOW DID YOU EVALUATE THE PROJECT?**

Evaluation of the project included the following:

- Personal reflections recorded in a research journal throughout the year
- Field notes of observations (for example relating to the degree of collaboration and depth of discussion) and informal comments (for example those arising immediately after our PROPP meetings)
- Inviting all participants in the focus groups to offer feedback on the process, what they had learned and how they valued the online focus group as a method of collecting research data
- Inviting members of the Special Interest Group to comment on their experience
- Sending a copy of the draft project report to all focus group members, partly as a way of respondent validation and partly to invite feedback for incorporation into the final version of the report
- Asking the six tutors of the MSc programme to spend 10 – 15 minutes providing open-ended comments on their experience of the PROPP meetings by e-mail

The findings of this evaluation have been incorporated into the full project report. The nature of action research is such that it cannot be judged in terms of the size of change achieved nor the immediate implementation of solutions, but should be judged on its own terms, specifically: whether the work is participatory; whether it is aimed at change; and whether it involves movement between reflection, action and evaluation. I hope that I have been able to convey the extent to which it has been successful in each of these ways. What has been particularly satisfying is the richness and depth of discussion with colleagues at each stage and the amount of attention which has been paid to the pedagogical aspects of online teaching and learning. This is described in detail in the full project report.
HOW HAVE YOU DISSEMINATED THE RESULTS OF THE PROJECT THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSITY AND MORE WIDELY?

Collaboration and dissemination has been an integral feature of the research throughout. The findings of the project have been shared with others as the project evolved, through the online Special Interest Group and the UEA action research group, for example. In total 35 teachers participated in the online discussions including teachers from the University of London External Programme and the wider academic community. Six tutors from the Open Learning Unit at UCL participated actively in the PROPP meetings.

In addition three workshops have been held during 2006 at: the Centre for Distance Education Conference; the Society for Academic Primary Care Annual Scientific Meeting; a UCL Teaching and Learning Network meeting. In each case a short presentation informing participants about the progress of the project was used as a springboard for discussion and workshop activities.

The work of the UEA Action Research group has also been disseminated at two conferences in 2006 – the UK Community Psychology conference and the Collaborative Action Research Network conference. We hope to prepare a publication on inter-professional learning.

I participated in an online course delivered by the University of Hull called “Sharing European Perspectives on E-learning” and was able to share details of the project with course members from many other departments. Three of these participants joined the online Special Interest Group.

The final project report has been circulated to 55 people including all members of the focus groups and Special Interest Groups, nine people who requested a report at the workshops, and others who have shown interest in the project as it has progressed.

A shorter report is also being prepared with a view to publication in a peer reviewed journal.

A NON-TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The aim of this project was to study the implementation of peer observation of teaching amongst tutors of a web-based MSc course. In face-to-face contexts, peer observation usually involves one teacher observing another teacher in the classroom (a colleague, or “peer”) with the purpose of providing constructive feedback on the teaching process.

We used an “action research” approach. This means that the research activity goes on alongside the implementation of new actions which are intended to bring improvement (in this case, improvement to our online teaching).

We used two online focus groups (discussion groups) involving 28 invited teachers to map teachers’ previous experience of peer observation from both face-to-face teaching and online teaching and to share their insights on this process. Analysis of the discussion helped us to develop and pilot a novel approach to peer observation within our team of six tutors - teachers of an online MSc in International Primary Health Care at University College London. This pilot has allowed us to look back on examples of our teaching in detail. As a result we have made several changes to our teaching approach which we are now trying out with our new intake of students.
In addition we have run an ongoing online e-mail discussion group (a Special Interest Group) to discuss peer observation and share information, and have worked with a group of action researchers from different professional groups to share our learning on this particular kind of research.

SIGNATURES

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APPENDIX 1

Developing a portfolio of evidence to demonstrate an effective PROPP programme

Our experiences in this project have provided support for a model of “peer observation” which places a focus on:

- learning as a social practice (rather than teaching as performance)
- discussion (rather than documentation)
- collaboration between teachers and across disciplines
- a flexible context-sensitive approach (rather than inflexible, non-negotiable “standards”)
- seeking to establish links between teaching and research, through reflective practice

We have called our particular approach “Peer-to-peer Reflection on Pedagogical Practice” or PROPP.

Institutions choosing to adopt PROPP (or some other innovative approach to peer observation) as an example of a quality enhancement activity may wish to consider the following aspects for inclusion in a “portfolio of evidence” to demonstrate effectiveness of such a programme. We suggest that attention to each of the following areas in such a portfolio may be a valuable contribution to the institutional audit report required by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) in relation to staff development activities. The examples provided as possible evidence are suggestions provided for guidance only.

1. **Sanctioned protected time** is available for all members of teaching staff to engage in the PROPP programme if they wish.

   Evidence for this may include:
   
   a. A programme of PROPP meetings held within the previous academic year.
   
   b. A commitment at senior level to a regular meeting e.g. once or twice a term – such a meeting may be face-to-face or virtual, for example through use of an online discussion forum.
   
   c. PROPP meetings held during usual working hours not in teachers’ own time.

2. **A culture of enquiry and reflection** in which critical discourse around teaching is valued and encouraged.

   Evidence for this may include:
   
   a. Opportunities for co-tutoring of modules which encourage dialogue around teaching methods and co-facilitation of online discussion.
b. Other examples of peer review, for example in selection of course texts, design of learning activities and development of course materials.

c. An online “tutors only” discussion forum, in which tutors can approach others in the tutor team for advice, sharing teaching problems or celebrating successes.

d. A “buddy system” in which tutors are paired up to provide mutual support on pedagogical issues.

e. An active programme of educational research on aspects of e-learning or distance learning.

3. **Changes to tutoring practices or course design resulting from engagement in PROPP**

Evidence for this may include:

a. Revision to learning objectives for a module or virtual seminar.

b. Redesign of a learning activity.

c. A new approach to feedback or assessment.

d. Experimentation with new teaching media or technology

It is important to recognise that not all PROPP meetings will necessarily result in tangible outcomes such as those listed above. Other “outcomes” of reflection on practice include less tangible aspects such as endorsement of teaching done well or increased tutor confidence, for example. Discussion of the impact of PROPP can be included within the wider staff development and appraisal process (see Section 8).

4. **A collaborative approach** which recognises that although reflection may begin alone, its true potential is reached only by seeking different perspectives.

Evidence for this may include:

a. Face-to-face or online “meetings”.

b. Involvement in PROPP of teachers from different disciplines or different departments.

c. Dissemination of learning arising from PROPP beyond the immediate tutor team.

d. Other opportunities for staff development and learning both within and beyond the context of the particular course on which a teacher is teaching.

5. **Ownership of PROPP by teachers and course directors participating in it**

Evidence for this may include:
a. Involvement of teachers and course directors in the design of the PROPP process and in discussions about its development over time.

b. Teachers involved in PROPP set their own agenda for meetings and discuss topics which are of direct relevance to them.

c. Attendance at PROPP activities (either face-to-face or virtually) is voluntary.

6. **PROPP process based on real teaching examples**

Evidence for this is likely to include a record of the *kinds* of teaching materials (not the actual examples) on which PROPP meetings have been based. For example: transcripts of virtual discussion; tutor feedback; students’ responses to learning activities; “significant events” arising during teaching activities.

7. **Appropriate attention to student confidentiality**

If PROPP requires that a student’s work is shared beyond the usual teacher or teaching team, teachers must respect student’s confidentiality and should remove identifiers from a student’s work if appropriate, or approach a student to seek permission to share the work in this context. If the PROPP process remains within a regular teaching team known to all students, then an explanation of the PROPP process in the students’ manual may suffice. It is reasonable that students should expect their teachers to engage in professional development activities.

Evidence for this may include:

a. A sample “Consent” form which students can complete to give permission for their work to be shared in this way.

b. Extract from the student manual explaining the PROPP process.

8. **Senior level commitment to the PROPP process within a wider programme of staff development and appraisal**

PROPP is just one example of a staff development activity and staff should have access to a wide range of personal development opportunities alongside PROPP. All staff should take part in a regular system of appraisal in which personal development opportunities and learning needs can be discussed.

Where other models of Peer Observation exist within institutions (often developed with face-to-face teaching in mind) participating in PROPP should be acceptable as an *alternative* not as an “add-on” to a process which is ill-suited to the needs of online or distance education. If there are serious concerns about the standard of teaching by an individual teacher, separate systems must be in place to investigate these concerns, as this is not the purpose of PROPP.