

# Peer Observation of Teaching

David Gosling

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**Staff and Educational Development Association Ltd**

John Foster House, 36 Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PF

**Tel: +44 (0)20 7380 6767 Fax: +44 (0)20 7387 2655**

**E-mail [office@seda.ac.uk](mailto:office@seda.ac.uk) [www.seda.ac.uk](http://www.seda.ac.uk)**

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# Case Study 3: Enhancing self-reflection through writing

Carol McGuinness<sup>i</sup> and Chris Gibbons<sup>ii</sup>  
Queen's University Belfast

## Institutional context

This is not a case study of how a peer observation of teaching scheme is organised in a particular institution or department. Rather, it is a description of a small-scale research and development study investigating methods for increasing reflection in a peer observation of teaching cycle. The main purpose of the study is to help those who are currently engaged in peer observation schemes within their own institutions to get the most from their participation in terms of professional development.

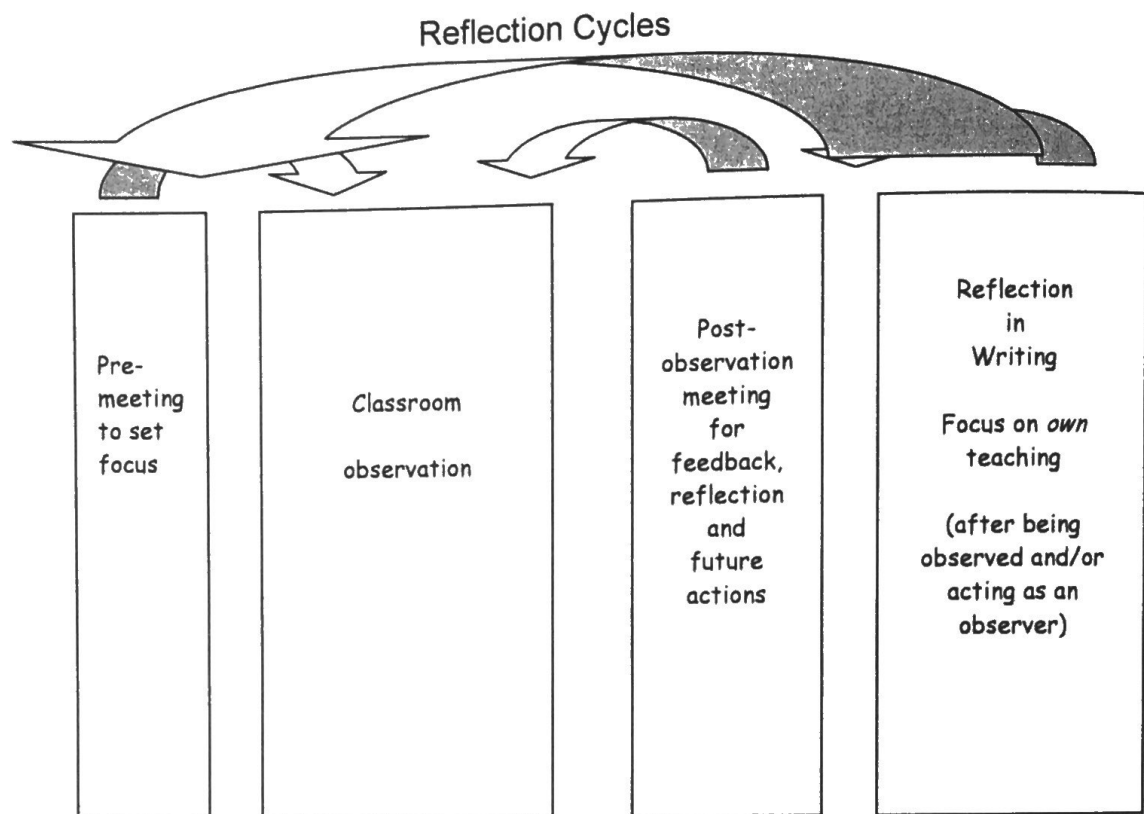
POT is time consuming. Previous critiques and the results of our own survey of peer review practices in UK psychology departments indicate that it is often carried out in a rather mechanical fashion, to meet external demands (for example, QAA Subject Review), or meeting probationary criteria, as part of a teaching in higher education course, rather than as a professional development activity for its own sake. From our own practice, and from talking with colleagues, we know that the experience of POT can become very routine through repeated participation and can lead to feelings of diminishing returns in terms of professional development. For these reasons we consider that the processes and experiences of participating in peer observation of teaching needs further research if it is to fully realise its potential for professional development.

## Rationale

The self-reflective practitioner is the dominant viewpoint on the kind of learning required in professional practice. In addition, reflective writing is emerging as an important new form of literacy for student learning in higher education (exemplified through learning journals and logs, reflective pieces, etc). We wanted to see if we could enhance self-reflection related to POT through writing. For these reasons we have re-examined the stages and components of POT (see Figure 1) and have identified reflection as a crucial component that is often short-circuited.

The usual set-up for a POT scheme involves lecturers pairing up and observing one another teaching in classroom settings (mostly lectures, but also tutorials, laboratories, and supervisions). Three stages are normally identified: a pre-meeting where the purposes and the focus of the observation are discussed and identified; the observation itself (with some agreed method of recording for the observer); and the post-meeting for giving feedback, prompting reflection and deciding on future action. We have added a fourth stage, called reflection-in-writing to create opportunities for more considered self-reflection after the post-observation meeting. For the purposes of the project, we wanted to examine what kinds of descriptions, reflections and meanings emerged in the writing and what they reveal about peer observation as a professional development experience.

Figure 1 A four-stage POT cycle to include reflection-in-writing



## Procedure

We asked colleagues, locally in our own university and nationally through LTSN Psychology, to participate in the project. We designed a "tool" – essentially a booklet (available in hardcopy and electronic forms) - to be used as part of colleagues' regular POT activity. The booklet consists of 10 pages, describing what is involved in the project, rehearsing the 3 stages in a POT cycle, and then inviting participants to write reflective pieces on what they have learned about their own teaching as a result of (1) being observed and the feedback they received; (2) observing another and using that observation as a stimulus to reflect on their own teaching. Essentially, each person is asked to produce two pieces of reflective writing. (In the development of the tool, we also asked colleagues to comment on features of the layout, the length of the booklet and the

amount of time spent on the task - we made modifications based on this feedback).

## Outcomes

Table 1 illustrates some examples of the kinds of writing we are collecting and analysing. For illustration, we are using writings from just two colleagues (20+ colleagues are now participating in the study).

## Table 1 Focus of reflective writing after peer observation

### Example 1 Focus on linking teaching method and student learning

Context: Two-hour tutorial with 20 students (after being observed)

"On the whole the session went well. The opening ice-breaker and use of short activities intermittently helped to involve students and provide respites from teacher talk/exposition. Aim to maintain this balance of activities....."

".....the use of the two minute pauses (that turned into ten minutes!) to stop and take questions worked well. It allowed students to voice their observations and in so doing to test their understanding, and it worked well when I was asked a question to open it up to others to see how they might help with answering the question....."

"Moving around the class and working from the OHP, using video clips and the hand-out added small but important variation to my teaching style because the variation helped to sustain concentration."

### Example 2 Focus on performance

Context: Two hour lecture (with 10 minute break) to 150 students (after being observed)

"Peer observer commented on my strengths. I moved around and made good use of hand movements and eye contact. I wasn't afraid to use pauses."

"I asked about the PowerPoint presentation itself and he replied that the overall session was well structured and 'packed' with information and points, the slides were clear and very readable."

"He did agree that I rushed at the end and commented that towards the end I was flagging from covering so exhaustively so much information."

"I found the post-observation meeting useful. I felt reassured about my slides being informative and not vague.... The suggested improvements were useful and doable. I will try to incorporate these strategies into my lectures."

### Example 3 Focus on conceptions of teaching and learning

Context: Talking about his own teaching after observing a colleague's two hour lecture

"So, whilst the lecturer's role is to help students learn, the best they can do (in a lecture) is to offer good explanations of relevant materials, both in terms of the topic and the types of learning (e.g., description, evaluation, analysis, etc) they expect the students to demonstrate, rather than pack into a class all the information or nearly all the information they (the students) need about the content and the nuances of the studies and theories.

Arguably more important still is if the lecturer is able to leave the students wanting more...."

## Case Study 3: Enhancing self-reflection through writing

The examples show that the focus for reflection can vary depending on the context (lecture, tutorial), the experience of the person, and even the kinds of prompts that are used to initiate the writing or the discussion (see below).

Example 1 is from an experienced lecturer commenting on running a two hour tutorial with about 20 students. The lecturer has used varied methods of interaction and teaching techniques with the students over two hours. What is very evident from the writing is the clear understanding of the anticipated relationship between the teaching method and student learning. Each method he used – the ice-breaker, the pauses for questions, reflecting the question back to the group, moving around, using video and handouts – are all directly linked to some aspect of student learning.

Example 2 is quite different both in the context (a big lecture) and in what the person has focused on in the reflective piece. This person is relatively inexperienced and is clearly pre-occupied with mastering the basic techniques of standard lecturing – managing information load, pace, clarity of slides, body and eye movements. There is no explicit comment on student learning – though much is implied. This person also comments on the need for reassurance and that the suggestions made by the observer were ‘do-able’.

Example 3 is from a lecturer who has just been observing a colleague and is commenting in general about his beliefs on what good teaching is in a lecturing context. This piece reveals something of the person’s conception of student learning in a lecturing context, what is possible and what is likely to be achieved. This piece of writing was a response to observing the colleague in Example 2 who was clearly struggling with the issue of ‘amount of information’.

### Implications

What sense can we make of these examples and how can we use them to broaden the

scope and range of what is discussed and reflected on in either face-to-face discussions or in writing, remembering that the purpose is professional development?

Here are some first thoughts on these questions.

- That the focus for reflection can reveal not only what happened in the teaching session but something of the conception of teaching and learning that is currently dominant (e.g., performance, transmission, explanation, interactivity).
- That participation in the processes of observation will almost inevitably lead to a focus on what is observable – on technique and method – rather than on goals, intentions, and understandings.
- That questions and prompts for reflection in writing (or for discussion in post observation meetings) can inadvertently bias the discussion towards methods, improvements and performance. In an earlier version of our tool, we used a large number of prompts that asked “what worked?”, “what would you DO differently?” “what needs to be improved?”. We discovered that even prompts and questions for reflections carried inherent conceptions of teaching and learning. In later versions of the work we have deliberately designed reflective prompts to widen the focus of issues to be reflected upon (e.g., “In what ways did the session illustrate what you consider good teaching to be?” “How did you achieve your objectives in terms of what you wanted students to learn?”).

<sup>i</sup> The project is part of on-going work on peer review of teaching supported by a National Teaching Fellowship awarded to the first author in July 2000 and, specifically, by a mini-project awarded by LTSN Psychology in 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> Chris Gibbons has provided on-going research assistance to the project.