Scousers, traffic lights and the 'red' bits of Peer Observation of Teaching

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Introduction

Imagine peer observing one of your colleagues making a remark about "light-fingered Liverpudlians" while teaching. How would you react? Would you refer to it in your feedback? Would you treat it in the same way as an overcrowded PowerPoint slide? This paper proposes a framework for classifying levels of 'difficulty' in providing feedback to colleagues on their teaching. Based on our experiences of running a series of workshops on peer observation of teaching (POT) across our University, the paper shows how tackling the 'hard' bits of POT can either be a trap for the unwary, or a valuable key for helping to unlock reflective practice.

Traffic lights and POT

Peer observation of teaching can lead to individual and collective improvements in teaching (Brown, 1993; Bell, 2001; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). Gosling (2002) offers a useful definition of 'peer review' as adopted by Leeds Met as one where teachers observe each other and engage in 'non-judgemental' constructive feedback (Gosling, 2002, p. 5). Although Gosling does not define 'non-judgemental', it is set in contrast to the 'evaluation model' where the observer makes a teaching quality assessment (Gosling, 2002, p. 5). Nevertheless, for many POT can be a challenging experience (Bell, 2001; Gosling, 2002). Peel (2005) for example describes POT as "both confirming and threatening, at once undesirable yet essential, challenging and enlightening" (Peel, 2005, p. 489). Consequently, to be effective, POT is critically dependent on sensitive and supportive feedback (Gosling, 2002).

This paper focuses on the observers' perspective of POT. In conducting POT workshops, we found that there is a consensus on areas of teaching on which it is relatively easy to provide feedback, and other areas that are more difficult. To investigate this further, we developed a workshop activity that involved participants' brainstorming areas of teaching practice and then classifying the points raised in terms of the degree of difficulty for the observer in providing feedback. The activity incorporated a 'traffic light' classification system, summarised in Table 1 together with some of the typical points raised under each colour.

Table 1: POT traffic light feedback classification

Classification	Description	Workshop examples
Green	Areas that are easy to provide feedback on	Tutor's handwriting PowerPoint issues Room layout
Amber	Areas that may raise some difficulties in providing feedback	Personal gestures/mannerisms Too much content Suitability of teaching materials
Red	Areas that are difficult to provide feedback on	Strong accent/difficulty in understanding language Poor subject knowledge base Interaction with students

What was striking was that over several workshops the types of issues raised and their classification were remarkably consistent.

Conceptualising the 'red' bits

Reflecting on this, we were concerned that feedback might not be given on 'red' flag areas, despite the fact that these issues may have the biggest impact on teaching and student learning. We therefore deconstructed the traffic light classification and a tentative framework for conceptualising the degree of difficulty in providing feedback on POT is summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Classifying POT feedback

		Aspects of the teacher	
		Professional	Personal
Aspects of the teaching	Technical	Quadrant 1 (Green)	Quadrant 2 (Amber)
	Pedagogical	Quadrant 3 (Amber)	Quadrant 4 (Red)

Table 2 provides a classification of feedback issues across two dimensions. The columns correspond to aspects of the teacher. The 'professional' column corresponds to the way the teacher interacts with students and relates to such matters as clarity of expression, audibility etc. The 'personal' matters are connected with teaching personality and include enthusiasm and passion for the subject. The rows correspond to the way the teaching is done. The 'technical' issues often associated with the teaching process and delivery methods could include, for example, PowerPoint design (Bell, 2001), or room layout. 'Pedagogical' issues refer to the way the information is structured, or the basis on which the teaching takes place. This could include an explicit focus on student activities and interactive learning strategies (Bell, 2001).

The 'red' bits and reflective practice

Implicit in this analysis is the tendency when providing constructive feedback to concentrate on identifying strengths and the 'easier' green and amber areas (McMahon et al, 2007). While this can be useful and helpful, particularly for staff who are relatively new to teaching (Bell, 2001), it also has its dangers. First, it can be superficial and amount to 'telling people how to teach' rather than helping them to develop their own solutions (Bell, 2001; Peel, 2005). This can lead to a defensive reaction and a resistance to future suggestions (Cosh, 1999). More importantly it may lead to a disillusionment with POT as a quality enhancement strategy and therefore a failure to embed it into institutional culture (Cosh, 1999).

What the traffic light classification helps us to think about in providing POT feedback is the need for a sensible balance between all three areas. If we really want to improve teaching and the student learning experience, we may need to actively seek out and promote reflection on weaker areas (McMahon et al, 2007), no matter how 'red' those areas might be. An effective teacher is able to conduct an internal "dialogue of thinking and doing" in order to become more skilled (Schön, 1987, p. 31). Schön (1987) argues that effective reflection can be powerfully stimulated by recognising the mismatch between what he called 'theories-in-practice' and 'espoused theories' (Bell, 2001; Peel, 2005). In this sense, being the observer can provide better opportunities for reflection on our own assumptions than being observed. A sensitive and 'reflective dialogue' around some of the implicit assumptions in the 'red' areas of our teaching can help to stimulate effective reflective practice, leading to improved teaching (Peel, 2005).

Of course, providing feedback in the 'red' area is inherently difficult and sensitive on a number of levels. In the first instance, the University policy is premised on the idea that the observed is 'in control' of the POT process. As observers, we should only provide feedback on areas on which the observed has asked for it. This can be difficult when the observer feels that there *should* be some dialogue, and yet has only been asked to address the easier green and amber topic areas. Secondly, it can often be difficult to avoid being judgemental, and, as Brookfield (1987) has pointed out, inappropriate feedback in the red areas can be "psychological dynamite" (Brookfield, 1987, p. 30). As teachers, we all know how easy it is to feel de-skilled and discouraged when feedback differs from our own view of our teaching effectiveness (Bell, 2001; Brookfield, 1987). However,

that should not be an excuse for avoiding giving more challenging 'red' feedback, especially when it has been specifically requested. Nicholls (2001) for example argues that "perturbance is an essential ingredient to activate reflective learning" (Nicholls, 2001, p. 118). Consequently, while it is important that we as observers respect individual dignity, we should also ensure that "sufficiently hard and challenging questions are asked" to prompt a reflective scrutiny of habitual assumptions (Brookfield, 1987, p. 72). An honest but sensitive approach to the 'red' areas can also help to promote a community of practice. In common with Schuck et al (2008), for example, we have found that working together on the POT project as an often critical and challenging group of like-minded and empathetic colleagues has been an occasionally bruising but ultimately powerful and constructive learning experience.

Conclusion

The evidence from our workshops points to a consensus on the relative difficulty of providing POT feedback. The traffic light system has highlighted the problems that colleagues may encounter in providing POT feedback. In giving feedback it can be too easy to focus on the 'easier' green and amber issues and we may draw back from addressing the more difficult 'red' issues. Our analysis suggests that while it is important that the observed person remains 'in control', it is also important for observers to provide balanced feedback and to address sensitively the 'red' areas of practice as well as the easier 'green' and 'amber' parts. We strongly believe that incorporating some red in the 'feedback palette' can be critical in unlocking reflective practice and so allowing POT to fulfil its purpose of promoting teaching quality enhancement.

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