

Peer observation of on-line teaching in a distance learning environment

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Abstract

The introduction of a new VLE at the University of Lincoln was an opportunity to pilot an extension of the University's peer observation of teaching scheme into an on-line environment, and to consider alternative methods of staff development in order to fully exploit the affordances of the VLE. This paper reports on a small research project into that pilot which found that online peer observation had the potential to be a very powerful development tool. It was largely welcomed by staff involved in the project and has led to more sophisticated exploitation of the VLE by participants, based on a mutually defined conception of teaching quality.

Introduction

There is an extensive literature arguing that peer observation of on-line teaching is an effective methodology for staff development (Gosling, 2009). However it presents particular problems in distance and open-learning environments that rely heavily on technology to deliver learning, since it requires access to, and understanding of teaching in the environment that is being observed. This paper reports on a small scale project, involving a team of 8 staff, including one of the researchers, (Esther Penney) to introduce peer observation in this kind of environment.

Context

The research took place at one of the University of Lincoln's campuses at Holbeach in South East Lincolnshire. Educational provision at Holbeach caters for the needs of the local food industry through both further and higher education courses. All students are part-time and attend either day-release, or distance learning modes of study. Short courses to support the food industry are also offered. There is a heavy reliance on technology to deliver content to remote students and provide opportunities for them to interact with tutors.

In 2007, the University replaced its existing in-house VLE, with Blackboard, a commercial product. Holbeach was chosen as one of the pilot sites for this initiative. An evaluation conducted by one of the authors (Julian Beckton) found evidence of inconsistency in providing material, and low levels of exploitation of all the functionalities offered by Blackboard. The nature of the provision at Holbeach rendered it difficult to provide traditional forms of training through workshops, so in order to promote consistent practice in terms of electronic delivery and to colleagues' skill set with respect to Blackboard, Esther Penney successfully applied for educational development funding to extend the University's existing Peer Observation Scheme to Blackboard.

Literature Review

A criticism of peer observation is that it intrudes into the practice of colleagues, and threatens academic freedom (Lomas & Nicholls, 2005) in so far as the observer holds an element of power over the observee. (Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker, 2006). The Holbeach campus offers further education provision and is thus subject to the OFSTED inspection regime, a mechanism of a type widely criticised in the literature as being overly prescriptive and leading to a rather sterile 'game-playing' approach (Newton, 2002).

A strategic aim of the University of Lincoln is to create a "culture of transparency and openness in which teaching staff are encouraged to pioneer innovative activities in teaching and learning" (University of Lincoln, 2007). The researchers wanted to stress that the aim of peer observation was to identify and share good practice in the use of the new VLE rather than impose externally defined models of teaching. There is

evidence that this approach encourages the development of confidence in teaching (Bell, 2001), the sharing of teaching practices (D'Andrea, 2002), and encourages reflection on teaching (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). Yet the conventional model of peer observation involves the observer and observee sitting in a classroom. Our concern was to introduce it to an on-line environment.

Peer observation of on line teaching may benefit both observers and observed as relatively few teachers have much experience of on-line learning. There are distinct differences between the online environment and the classroom environment (Bennett & Barp, 2008). First, there are things that will be missing in an on-line environment; such as the non verbal aspects of the communication inherent in teaching. Secondly, the range of functionality of a VLE such as Blackboard may present problems for the observer. How can an observer offer support for a learning tool that they are not familiar with? Thirdly, the design of an online environment is bound to influence learners. At Lincoln, Blackboard provides a default environment, which is completely adaptable by tutors, and we were interested to see the extent to which they would redesign it. Technology has an inherent tendency to mandate particular working practices, (Cornford & Pollock, 2003) so redesign would indicate some attempt by tutors' to assert control over the environment.

Another study into peer observation of online teaching noted a theme of the teacher emerging as the personal face of a remote impersonal organisation (Swinglehurst, Russell, & Greenhalgh, 2008). This stresses the importance of three types of presence, social cognitive and teaching (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Social presence is concerned with the social support of students in an online environment, welcoming

them, and acknowledging their contribution, cognitive presence is concerned with the disciplinary content, or subject expertise, and teaching presence, is concerned with the guiding of students through the discipline, correcting misconceptions, and so forth. All three presences are required for the engendering of trust between students and teachers. Many of the students at Holbeach rarely visit the campus, accessing learning content via employers' networks. There already existed a culture of using a VLE although with little or no use made of discussion boards, chat rooms, or electronic submission of assignments. However, rather than imposing a set of normative practices, our intention was to create a shared experience of technological enhancement through peer observation.

Methodology

Our principal research question was whether peer observation was an appropriate development environment for staff teaching distance learning courses. We decided on a qualitative approach because, first, we felt that staff would be more inclined to share their experience of on-line peer observation in a non-threatening atmosphere.

Secondly, we wanted to make it very clear that this was different from the OFSTED observation methodology familiar to Holbeach staff in their FE roles. Thirdly, given the small numbers and large number of unknown variables involved in the study, a quantitative approach would not be justifiable. Nevertheless, it was important to get empirical evidence of how staff reacted to the experience of colleagues commenting on their on-line work.

To mitigate a concern that few staff had experience of using Blackboard, one of the authors (Julian Beckton) ran a training course in Blackboard for participants, who then became observers. Each participant then identified a Blackboard site for a course

that they were teaching and enrolled an observer on to the site. The observers reviewed the site, completed the standard peer observation forms, which had been amended to allow identification of the Blackboard site and returned them to the participants. All the participants in the project were then interviewed. A number of themes emerged from these interviews and these are reported on below.

Some thought was given to the matter of confidentiality and data protection with regard to students' contributions to discussion group, but the nature of the provision at Holbeach is that all the staff teach all the students at some point in their careers, and in any case already have access to all the sites, so the research would make no difference to the existing situation. However, it was agreed that no student contribution would be used in this or any other research that appeared outside the university.

Findings

Initially some of the participants were sceptical about the value of on-line teaching.

I found it very difficult to do for science and engineering teaching, because my experience is that the best way to do that type of teaching is by taking students by the hand to develop ideas and concepts...A further problem is that you cannot do practicals and leg work. I think it is more or less essential as science is an integral part -I haven't seen people using a pasteuriser and run it on-line"
(Participant A).

I'd point out that any initiatives upon wider use of Blackboard "good practices" needs to bear in mind that a tutor can already have many other draws upon their time/availability " (Participant H).

It is not as good as contact teaching. Therefore I suggest that distance learners do not have the same experiences as those who attend learning sessions. (Participant I)

Others though were positive about the potential of on-line teaching and identified specific advantages.

I feel it makes the content more friendly. Students are able to see that mistakes can be made are able to work logically through the examples. (Participant B).

It is a great way to reach a lot of students in a manner which fits in with the working schedule of the students. (Participant H).

I think it is a good platform to use to teach and to reach distance learners. I also think it can be used to supplement class-room teaching. (Participant I).

Thirdly there was some evidence that the concept of peer observation was not unwelcome and mitigated the reluctance to engage with on-line learning. Participants tended to underrate their own abilities.

"I would prefer not to have to use it, and the frustration is that I am not a competent or confident user" (Participant I).

"It was better than I had hoped for as I thought I was rubbish. I never thought about how to do it. No training or advice. (Participant A).

Participant A's perception that there was "no training or advice" is curious, as the roll out of Blackboard was accompanied by the delivery of workshops on all campuses, and the production of a comprehensive range of support materials, all of which was, and is freely available. Supportive peer observation may be a better approach to learning technology training. The responses to a question where participants were asked about their initial reaction to the idea tend to support this.

"I would welcome the opportunity to bring my Blackboard site in line with what other tutors are doing, improve the quality of the materials, and improve the learning experience for distance learners (Participant B).

"Not an issue (I) thought it was a good idea and would be helpful in future planning of modules to disseminate good practice. A very useful exercise and should be put in the yearly plan with other peer observations" (Participant D).

"I feel that information shared between all people on site can only lead to a better service to students" (Participant G).

"My first reaction was to be a little concerned as I felt that my site wasn't very good...However I then became relaxed as peer observation is supposedly

supportive and I could gain new ideas and knowledge and I hoped to gain support to improve my Bb site" (Participant I).

Discussion

The scepticism from some participants about the introduction of Blackboard may be a combination of the concerns about the power relationships identified by Hatzipanagos and Lygo-Baker (2006), and an awareness of some of the limitations of on-line teaching. The comments about having “many other draws upon my time” and “I would prefer not to have to use it” suggest a lack of enthusiasm for on-line learning, although staff did appear to acknowledge that it is an effective way of delivering content to remote students. There is also awareness of the limitations of technology, as exemplified by the comment about not being able to run a pasteuriser on line, or it not being as good as contact teaching. This scepticism, coupled with Cornford and Pollock’s (2003) observations that technology tends to mandate changes in working practice does pose something of a risk that a new technology may be quietly abandoned if it is not supported. Even if it is not abandoned, the likely pattern of acceptance is that it will be used in relatively unchallenging ways.

The data provided evidence that peer observation did promote best practice in designing a site, supporting Barp and Bennett’s (2008) finding that there are fundamental, invisible differences in on-line teaching environments. Most participants highlighted the communicative potential of the technology, praising the use of announcements, or the provision of staff contact details. Further, nearly all the respondents suggested ways to improve on-line communication. A common criticism was that the staff "contact details" folder was empty, in particular that it did not

indicate when staff were available, reflecting the frustration of students who have made long journeys to visit the campus only to find staff out in the field. The use of the "Announcements" feature was also thought useful to draw attention to new material, and to the pedagogical significance of that material. Where discussion boards were being used there was some criticism from observers that staff who had set them up were not responding to issues raised in them by students.

It seems superfluous to point out that the major difference between teaching in an on-line environment and teaching in a classroom is the environment itself, but there is no doubt that online environments do require different approaches. For example because the on-line environment requires that a course be laid out in full, it is necessary to give some thought to how students will access it. Many of the observers, who were themselves inexperienced, picked up on the design features, providing evidence that they were giving some thought to the way an on-line site might work. For example, "The work is sub-divided into weeks, which allows the students to participate in weekly directed learning" (participant A), or "under (the) learning materials button, the learning materials are set out clearly with appropriate headings (Participant F).

Some observers picked up on what they considered poor design. "Consider adding a date to the topic session to allow students to plan their work load" (Participant D), or "confusion because front sheets and assessment briefs are under learning material section instead of "Assignments" section. (Participant E).

Design in on line environments involves more than the way a course site is laid out. Technology provides affordances, or opportunities to do things in different ways that conventional teaching and learning environments do not. Some observers noted

approvingly that these were being taken advantage of. "Good to see a search button included - very helpful to students" (Participant C) and "progression through the work is controlled through 'reviewed release' of specific extra materials e.g. exercises. Therefore the student completes one session before access is allowed to the next (set of) materials" (participant D). In contrast a couple of observers picked up technical errors where in one case "There is a superfluous button that leads to the same set of resources". (Participant H) and in another "consider deleting one of the menu buttons as there is a duplication of staff details and information."

The approach taken mitigates the power imbalance that is inherent in peer observation because the sense of what constitutes quality is not externally derived, but comes from the practitioners themselves. Our research suggests that the mutual support of peer observation has potential to promote better practice than the model used by OFSTED, based on the assurance of an externally determined model of quality. This may be damaging to innovative uses of a VLE, because it creates a reluctance to try doing something different. As (Gosling, 2005) pointed out, it is very difficult to find a consensus on what constitutes good teaching in HE. In this case peer observation supports a locally determined concept of quality, derived from the experience of those delivering academic programmes, and thus more acceptable to participants because they are defining the concept placing them in a stronger position to support colleagues in achieving standards.

The Holbeach team appeared to have developed a conception of teaching quality based on communicating both intellectual content and administrative information to students, thus providing adequate, although not overwhelming levels of information.

Few sites presented students with long lists of hyperlinks to web sites. Those that did were well annotated, and when the researchers checked them, the links were all live. There was also an emphasis on accessibility and helpfulness, sites being praised for highlighting important concepts, and providing times where staff would be available, although it was surprising to see relatively little use being made of the interactive affordances of the VLE, such as discussion group facilities, wikis and blogs. This may be accounted for by the fact that the previous VLE did not offer a great deal of support for these features, so there was little experience among the participants of working in this way, something that is supported by the failure of staff to respond to student problems posted on the discussion groups. Clearly, there is some work to be done on introducing the concept of “presence” discussed earlier into the consciousness of staff. One of the drawbacks of peer observation as a staff development method is that it is not always easy to introduce new concepts, such as “presence” into the praxis of a homogeneous group of staff. In spite of the limited use of the interactive affordances of the VLE, there was, nevertheless, evidence of a strong desire to be helpful to students, for example in the critique of sites that did not provide help buttons, or staff contact details.

There are some limitations to our research. Holbeach is a small campus with a mutually supportive team of staff. The approach to peer observation on-line teaching that we took may be more intimidating on a larger campus. Secondly, Blackboard was a new product, replacing a service that did not meet the needs of the Holbeach staff, so there may have been a more positive attitude to it from the start. We therefore propose to repeat the project next year at Holbeach, but also to extend it to a much larger Campus, with more traditional provision. If the positive findings from this first

exercise are repeated elsewhere there would be a strong case for this approach to be formally incorporated into the University's peer observation scheme.

Conclusions

A problem for educational developers is that it is often extremely difficult for them to reach significant numbers of colleagues, rendering development rather superficial.

While peer observation is a well established way of addressing this issue our findings suggest that it may be more effective in a distance learning environment. The ability of observees to choose their own observer may go some way to mitigate worries about the effectiveness of workshops.

Secondly, there appeared to be no technical obstacles to overcome in extending the concept of peer observation to the on-line environment. This may be due to the fact that the University's original scheme was designed adaptable to different environments. In the case of Blackboard it was simply a matter of enrolling the observer in the site, with a status that rendered them invisible to students. Even with these caveats there seems to be little to prevent the pilot scheme being extended to other parts of the university, or indeed to other universities.

A final finding of our research is that notions of quality may be more valued by staff if they perceive themselves as generating them themselves through the kind of mutual support that peer observation can offer, rather than having them imposed upon by outside bodies, such as OFSTED or the Quality Assurance Agency. That is not to say that no challenges remain. We found little evidence of rapid, or significant innovation,

but innovation is not necessarily synonymous with improvement. “Innovation” is also a highly value loaded term and not necessarily always beneficial. (D'Andrea and Gosling, 2005:139). While there is a speculative element to our conclusions, given the small-scale nature of our research, and the relatively close-knit team that participated in it, the question of how far peer-observation of an on-line environment can improve quality is an issue that merits further investigation given the extensive criticism of quality assurance mechanisms in the literature.

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