

Red Guides
Paper 61

The Peer Support Scheme

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Introduction

The quality of teaching and the impact upon the student experience has always been a matter of importance to teachers in Higher Education (HE). Often a great deal of excellent work goes on within and beyond the classroom with little opportunity to share good practice. For a number of years there has been an increasing emphasis on evidence-based practice, standards and benchmarking which requires teaching to be reviewed with the same underlying values as research, Peer Observation of Teaching (POT) was one means introduced to achieve this. Peer Observation of Teaching has become one of the most frequently used processes for professional development within UK HE institutions. Much of the literature surrounding POT is positive but there has been recognition that there are certain factors which can inhibit the full realisation of such schemes. Following research conducted by Northumbria University on its own POT arrangements, the University Learning and Teaching Committee (ULT) set up a task group to review the arrangements for Peer Observation, set up in 2008, in the light of best practice in the sector. As a result of this task group, Peer Observation arrangements have now been altered including a change of title to the Peer Support Scheme. This guide will outline both the literature and primary research data which informed the task group, explain the significant difference between the two schemes, as well as provide information on the operational aspects of the Peer Support Scheme. This includes the use of case studies, albeit fictional, to illustrate how the potential benefits of Peer Support can be maximised.

Literature Views

Peer observation of teaching is one of the most frequently used processes for professional development within UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and has been enthusiastically reported in much of the associated literature (Murphy and Cleveland, 1995; Smith, 1998; Bell, 2001; Martin and Double, 1998 and Keig, 2000). The impetus for HEIs to adopt POT came in the 1990s and was driven by the Teaching Quality Assessment methodology (QAA Subject Review, 1997). The desired outcome was for POT to become embedded in systems for quality enhancement and quality review processes.

Gebhard (1999) concisely defined POT as being:

“Non-judgemental description of classroom events that can be analyzed and given interpretation.”

In traditional models, POT involves one academic being observed while teaching by a colleague, in the role of a ‘critical friend’ (Lomas and Kinchin, 2006). Other literature considers POT in terms of:

- The concept of the ‘reflective practitioner’ (Schön 1987, p.31) *“a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skilled”*;
- ‘critical friends’ working collegially to improve practice (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988 as cited in Bell, 2002);
- identity as a professional teacher operating in the changing context of higher education (Taylor, 1999);
- as a tool to enhance teaching practice which helps one understand themselves as a learner (Daly et al., 2004);
- enabling change for the better (Peel, 2005).

On reporting upon Peer Observation in Australia, Bell (2002) neatly summarises the strengths as being:

- a supportive and constructive, practical, collegial activity;
- motivating and giving affirmation to all those involved;
- developing awareness that 'problems' in teaching are shared by others and that solutions can be found with others;
- providing new ideas and skills;
- building awareness of the value of, and skills in, critical reflection and reflective practice;
- stimulating discussion about teaching and learning within departments;
- promoting self-assessment;
- benefitting the observer by providing insights and ideas;
- supporting continual improvement;
- reassuring highly self-critical teachers;
- implementing changes based on evidence;
- a potential significant turning point.

The concept of enhancement featured significantly in Crutchley's (2006) survey where nearly 90% of respondents indicated that the process had enhanced their personal and professional practice, either individually or as part of a group. Shortland (2001) also found that the use of classroom observation methodologies widened the scope of peer observation to the benefit of observer and observee through the feedback process. Identification of 'good practice' teaching techniques enabled change and modification to teaching practices, to the benefit of teaching quality.

While, as mentioned above, there have been enthusiastic reports of POT in the literature, certain factors have also been identified which inhibit the full realisation of the potential of POT. Bell (2002) noted how POT tends to focus on face to face classroom teaching behaviours and that the presence of an observer or video recorder may affect the dynamics in a small class.

Cosh (1998) argued that observees may view the process as inherently judgemental and threatening and, in consequence, may become defensive and resistant to suggestions for improving practice. On the other hand, Bingham and Ottewill (2001) recognise that the assessment of peers might be too self-congratulatory – the ‘mutually supportive club’ (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004 p.502).

Gosling (2002) comments that observations between colleagues in the same subject area tend to focus on course content rather than learning processes. Keig (2000) also refers to the fact that the POT process ignores the fact that students' learning experiences depend on a blend of tutor-led, tutor-directed and student-directed learning activities. As Gosling (2002) comments, the very use of the term ‘observation’ tends to focus on the ‘performance’ element in learning and teaching to the detriment of the less observable elements.

Other authors argue that POT is more concerned with institutional imperatives than individual development (Smith and Bath, 2003; Shortland, 2004). Fleming et al (2004) found that peer observation was the ‘thorniest’ issue in their Teaching Development Group model of professional development. Much concern was expressed by academic staff, leading Fleming et al to suggest, among other things, that a clear distinction and an explicit separation be made between ‘appraisal’ and the development element of peer observation.

Staff views on previous POT scheme

Staff views on Northumbria's Peer Observation arrangements were collated via questionnaire (n = 101) and interviews (n = 22) from participants in all academic schools in a 2007 research project.

Generally, peer observation was perceived as having a supportive purpose/function in that it was viewed as encouraging fellow staff members in what they are doing; sharing ideas and good practice. Some interviewees referred to the concept of 'reflective practitioner' (Schon 1987), seeing POT as an opportunity not only for new staff to learn and develop but for more experienced staff to reflect on what they were doing and on their own professionalism.

However, several interviewees when asked about the purpose of POT focussed on its quality control purpose although this was viewed in terms of service delivery i.e. customers in this case being students and POT being a way of assuring student experience

Apart from telling you what you did well - which is nice to hear! - is a quality thing, a way of being able to demonstrate you are actually giving the students a decent experience

Enhancement. It enhances the student experience. It enhances, enables us to share, good practice. It enhances our ability as teachers

POT was also noted as being a mechanism in creating an increased collegiate atmosphere, particularly stemming from the experience of acting in the role as observer.

You are always looking to the person at the next desk who is doing a similar role...I can see things done in a session and think, 'I never thought about trying that before'. So that is filed away. ...You can say 'I really liked the way you did this. It is

something I will try in my own teaching, in the right circumstances'. Although you are assessing a peer, we can learn from each other. It is not an assessor: student relationship it is more a collegiate relationship.

I learn more (in the way of new ideas) from seeing how other people teach than from being observed.

I found watching someone else useful and informative – gave me ideas about learning activities and preference by students based on the observation and discussion

Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond's (2004) study also noted that a number of lecturers commented on how much they got out of the process in the observer role and how they regarded observation as a useful learning tool. Respondents to the Northumbria survey considered that POT had increased their knowledge in areas including: approaches to teaching, presentation style/skills, how to facilitate a non-responsive group, group dynamics, managing large groups, questioning techniques and the use of anecdotal stories from practice. These areas mainly concentrate on process-based classroom activity.

Several interviewees considered the potential benefits of using an observer from outside of their subject discipline:

If you are worried about internal politics, sometimes you might prefer somebody from outside because it is more distanced.

I could have a colleague from a different branch of the profession who would actually be looking at the teaching at his level of understanding. From that perspective it would be 'How am I performing in the classroom, was the information I was putting across clear, logical, concise?' Did the students look like they were engaging in the process?

One person had actually undertaken this form of observation and noted what they had learned from this approach:

Sometimes someone who is teaching the same students can offer their insight for those students. Say [another School] and the way they were teaching, they did not give the students quite as much information. They prefer students to write stuff down. I tend to give them everything. I thought 'Well there is a benefit to doing it their way, to get the students to write things down and engage them'. I don't always agree with them but I see things from a different point of view.

Another interviewee pointed out that, if somebody from a different discipline could understand what the observee was talking about, the chances were that the students would do too and POT could be a useful way to norm reference. A further interviewee made a more specific comment which recognised that “*if you are particularly versed in a subject then you start to develop your own shorthand and you can start dropping into abbreviations which... students [may be encountering] for the first time*”

Indeed, a number of people commented that in undertaking observations they found themselves putting themselves in the students' shoes.

It is quite strange... Superficially I was checking that the content was all there but it was more seeing how the students were engaged with the learning... you start looking at the body language, the time they spend with individual groups, parity...

You get in the habit of almost being a student, start to enjoy and watch the lesson and learn from it. You have to remind yourself, 'hang on I am not here to learn I am here to watch!'

However, it was suggested by some interviewees that cross-disciplinary POT was probably more appropriate with more experienced staff. For staff starting their teaching career it was felt that they were more likely to be focussing more on content rather than delivery and clarity in getting their message over.

Some staff in Blackmore's (2005) study perceived team teaching and mentoring to be alternatives to POT and a number of respondents to the Northumbria study shared this view. Several interviewees pointed out that in their disciplines, where there was team teaching or at least more collaborative and cooperative working, there was an opportunity for a 'melting pot' of different ideas.

When staff were asked what were the critical success factors in a peer-based scheme, an overwhelming number of interviewees said they wanted an observer they felt they could trust.

Somebody who does not have an axe to grind, teaches from the same point of view I have, same sort of priorities. Someone I trust enough to just be able to teach as I normally teach without having to make a special effort. Someone who is going to actually make suggestions.

Other qualities involved empathy, honesty and having an ability to give constructive feedback, sense of security that what is happening is a positive process. Several interviewees mentioned the 'praise sandwich' concept of feedback in which the observer starts on the positives, then introduces the negatives but ends with a positive. Along with the identification of any weaknesses, there should be an element of 'what can we do to give you support or help?'

Given that a number of observers felt the process of observation had resulted in self learning, one other aspect explored with interviewees was whether or not further dissemination would be worthwhile. A number of

interviewees commented that they did, in fact, share some of the outcomes. In some instances this would be done formally:

There are certain things I have learned from POT. Now that I have learned that I can see a lot of other people making the same mistakes – or at least not benefiting from it in the same way. I have thought that would be quite useful to pass on. We have a process in the department of having posters, discussions and so on.

Additionally, several interviewees commented that ideally School managers need to know about good practice encountered or conversely staff development needs. For this reason it would be useful for the management team to have some feedback from observational events. While there were staff development sessions and training sessions in which to hear about good practice, one interviewee commented that School-based sharing of good practice appeared to happen less often. Another interviewee supported this view:

We have so many meetings per week. They are intended at improving how our teaching, looks from outside...We don't talk about how to teach, giving examples, invite good teachers in etc.

Another interviewee suggested more time was allocated to looking at, and discussing, teaching materials. In addition, there was a consciousness that teaching was changing dramatically and that POT was still very much focussed on what happens inside the classroom. More and more teaching was recognised as being e-learning based and indeed one school had already recognised this and the School's POT policy had introduced peer review of e-learning materials.

One of the most frequently mentioned obstacles to making the most of the developmental opportunities afforded

through POT was lack of time to undertake the process, a point also found in Crutchley's (2006) study.

Main limiting factor = time. Not always possible to get mutually convenient sessions due to timetabling constraints. Also lack of time to meet to discuss feedback....and how are any problems/difficulties handled/managed & how receptive is colleague...?

Why is Peer Support Different

Peel (2005) says that it is

“vital that HEIs are explicit about what POT is intended to achieve, responsible about how it is resourced, and articulate clearly how staff and students may engage with and benefit from the process.”

Summarising both the literature and the views collected from Northumbria Staff. The drivers for the design of a new scheme included ensuring:

- that a level of personal autonomy is built into the process;
- activities beyond the classroom environment are accounted for
- that the process will be viewed as making a difference to professional practice;
- full opportunities are provided to take time out and reflect on practice with a colleague;
- the importance of awareness raising activities linked to good practice are identified within the review process

Based on this evidence, the task group felt there were three key principles to be reflected within the new scheme. It should:

1. Reinforce the mutual support function of a peer-based scheme and its separation from processes for management of performance. The group considered that both types of process will work more effectively if clearly delineated.
2. Make explicit that both (or all) parties should benefit from the interaction; it is not a one-way process where 'observer' reviews the activity of 'observed' but a two (or more) way process for sharing ideas, a safe but critical vehicle for creative thinking around teaching and learning.
3. Recognise that the professional role of the lecturer is far wider than can be covered by classroom observation and includes other areas that can be priorities for support, for example curriculum development, assessment and feedback practice, production of distance learning materials, use of blackboard communication tools, student support, pedagogic innovation.

Therefore to signal these vital changes Peer Observation of Teaching should be given a more appropriate nomenclature and become the **Peer Support Scheme**.

The group also wished to affirm and emphasise that the purpose of a University-wide scheme is to facilitate continual improvement to learning and teaching practice through recognition, sharing and development of good practice. Therefore the group proposed maintenance of arrangements for:

- Confidentiality and relationship to appraisal.
- Local management.
- Inclusion in staff workload.

As identified by a number of staff, there was a perceived assurance element particularly in terms of student experience. As one interviewee said:

Why don't we ask these students what they think rather than have someone who might be qualified, but probably isn't, to observe someone elsewhat we want to do is find out what the market thinks of the product.

Given this, the group discussed whether feedback from students should be brought into the peer support scheme.

This was something which the group concluded that, while it was vital that student feedback was always collected and responded to, student feedback processes were distinct and should remain so. However, staff would always have the option to use student feedback as a resource in the peer support scheme. Furthermore, to strengthen the feedback process, the group proposed that sessions on making good use of student feedback and course representation to be built into the staff development programme.

Operational Aspects of Peer Support

The Peer Support Scheme, following consultation with UCU, was approved by ULT in April 2009.

For the individual...

All academic staff (0.5 FTE and above) are required to engage annually in peer support, both as supporter and supportee. The time required for participating in both roles should be included as part of the staff workload. Early in the academic year, each member of academic staff will be asked to identify a theme for their peer support for the year. While possible themes may have been suggested through appraisal or through School enhancement activity, it is a key principle that the choice of theme is **fully** the

responsibility of the staff member. For example, themes may be framed as:

- ‘Good practice’ - the staff member has an activity they consider suitable for more general dissemination which they would like to showcase and receive a view on
- ‘a problem’ - the staff member has something they wish to work through with a colleague, e.g. how best to deliver or assess a new topic, how to make effective use of online tools etc.
- ‘an innovation’ - the staff member is trying something new and would like an opinion on it.

A Peer Support Record Form (Appendix 1) should be completed at the end of the support process. This confirms that the process has taken place and gives outline information on the theme of the support. It also provides space for any points that both parties agree they wish to bring to the attention of staff in their Division (or equivalent) such as exemplars of good practice that can be shared or requests for staff development sessions on particular topics of mutual interest.

Confidentiality

All outcomes of peer support are confidential to supporter and supportee. Peer Support is entirely separate from any processes for management of performance.

It is also separate from the appraisal process, all that is required is confirmation of your participation in the scheme. Themes from peer support may be suggested in appraisal and the appraisee may wish to feed its outcomes into their appraisal, but these are **optional** (e.g. to support requests for individual staff development).

An optional Peer Support Participants Form (Appendix 2) is also available. This is to facilitate the process where

required and should remain entirely confidential between the participants.

For the School...

Responsibility for ensuring the implementation of the peer support scheme rests with the Dean, although operational responsibility will normally be devolved to the Head of Subject Group/Division or equivalent.

Subject Groups/Divisions should have mechanisms for matching supportees with supporters, ensuring consent and mutual respect and trust. (It is desirable to avoid extensive use of 'closed pairs' so that good practice and ideas are shared widely. It may often be good practice to create support groups or, to cross disciplinary and School boundaries).

Schools should have mechanisms for reporting on the implementation of the scheme and on good practice shared through it. Subject Groups/Divisions should set up mechanisms for the sharing of good practice exemplars and the meeting of staff development needs identified through this process.

Schools may introduce local variations consistent with these principles into the peer support scheme. For example, PSRB requirements may necessitate changes to its frequency or require that classroom observation is included as a peer support session.

Fictional Case Studies

Example 1: "good practice"

Kyle McLeod has introduced a new series of seminars into his module where every third week students are asked to sign up to a problem surgery rather than have the usual seminar session. Feedback from students has been very positive about this approach and he wonders whether this practice could be possibly adopted by other tutors within his subject area.

Judith Davies a colleague teaching within the same school (but a different subject area) met with Kyle to discuss this approach. Kyle was able to present Judith with the module questionnaire forms where a number of students had expressed as part of the qualitative comments their general approval of being provided with the opportunity to discuss issues on a one-to-one basis. Although Judith was impressed by the approach she was keen to find out whether all students had signed up to the surgeries. Kyle by examining his records noted that around 5 students from his cohort of 50 had not engaged with the surgeries. As a consequence Kyle decided to ensure that in the future he would at regular intervals check the records and contact the students by email and pass on an appointment time to them rather than relying on them to sign up and would then monitor this approach. Judith suggested to Kyle to present his findings at a school staff development event.

Example 2: “a problem”

Andrew Park has designed a series of Blackboard quizzes for his students to use as formative assessment activities on his module. However, student engagement with these has been low and he would like advice on how this could be improved.

Andrew who teaches chemistry had recently participated in the CPD elearning module. He was aware that a previous participant (from outside of his school) had done some pedagogic research on computer aided assessment and opted for this person to become the observer on the peer support scheme. Amir Abdul, teaching statistics, looked at Andrew's module site and made the following suggestions. Firstly, that an individual quiz should be created to directly relate to a teaching session. As part of the feedback features of the quizzes, that students could be directed to additional resources such as references to set texts, other websites etc and finally he made the suggestion that a small proportion of the summative module mark be given

over to the participation in these quizzes. After following these recommendations Andrew noticed a significant increase in participation as well as a marked improvement in the student feedback he received for the module.

Example 3: “an innovation”

Xue Yan would like to introduce into her module’s seminar series sessions which involve students in constructing a poster collage which examines the perceptions associated with the professional roles within Law. She is proposing that in the first seminar session students will be provided with magazines, newspapers and web access in order to collect images for the poster. In week 4, students will be asked to present these posters as part of a mini conference where prizes are to be awarded by students acting as peer reviewers to the event.

Xue Yan was a relatively new member of staff and made a request for two observers in this academic year, i.e. a colleague from her own school and an additional colleague from the Post Graduate Teaching Programme she had recently undertaken. Both observers felt what she had suggested was innovative. Her subject colleague recommended that she could probably provide more focus by suggesting to each of the groups which of the roles they should explore rather than giving free reign, as well as giving her useful tips on booking an IT Lab through timetabling. The PG tutor passed on to her some useful literature references as well as passing on a name of a colleague from the Centre of Excellence who had experience in organising student conferences.

Conclusion

The above examples provide just a few illustrations of how Peer Support can be used by academic staff for their own benefit. It is important to stress that, now that Peer Support is Northumbria University policy, you are entitled to support

of this nature and that the effectiveness of the scheme will depend on the creative ways in which individuals make use of this entitlement. Of course, a great deal of informal support is already provided between colleagues and this scheme can never replace that; it is rather intended to extend that informal support, to broaden it out to wider networks and to ensure that none are excluded.

If, as Northumbria University staff, you need additional advice on the operation of Peer Support, following discussions in your subject group/division or with its head, then you should contact one of the learning and teaching advisers working within the Learning and Teaching Academy.

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Appendix 1: Record Form

Peer Support Scheme: form recording participation in the scheme.

This form should be returned to Head of Subject Group/Division (or their nominee) to confirm participation in Peer Support

Name(s) of Staff Member(s) 'receiving' support	
Name(s) of Staff Member(s) 'providing' support (and their Division /School / Department if different from that of support recipient)	
Date(s) of support activity	
Type of activity covered by the support (e.g. classroom practice, curriculum planning, assessment and feedback practice, development of online and distance learning materials)	
Theme of support (e.g. was good practice being demonstrated and discussed; was a learning and teaching problem or innovation being explored)	

Optional comments – by agreement of both (all) participants

Exemplars of good practice identified that participants agree should be shared more widely within the subject group or beyond

Staff development need or activity that participants feel would be of general interest to members of the subject group or School

Any other comments

Appendix 2: Participants' Form

Peer Support Scheme: Participants' Form

Use of this form is optional, to facilitate peer support where appropriate, and it should remain entirely confidential to the participants

Comment on clarity in relation to the aims/objectives/rationale/ of the activity/materials

--

Does the activity/material account for a variety of learning styles within the the student body

--

How does the pace and delivery methods used within the activity facilitate student learning

--

How does this activity clearly link with overall learning outcomes (module/programme)

--

How effective was this activity in facilitating student learning or Describe evidence which illustrates the level of effectiveness of this activity in facilitating student learning

--

Describe how the activity could be developed to further facilitate student learning

--