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# Viewing our practice through a different lens: A reflection on participating in a reciprocal peer review process

Katherine Turner – Information Services Librarian

Laurence Morris – Academic Librarian

Leeds Beckett University

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Information literacy instruction and teaching is among the increasing variety of roles which librarians undertake (Vassilakaki & Moniarou-Papaconstantinou, 2015). However, as teaching development is a missing component in the majority of library courses, many in the profession learn skills when in post (Levene & Frank, 1993; Alabi & Weare, 2014). Apart from learning by doing, approaches to in- job development can include training programmes, short courses and a range of other methods including colleague shadowing, professional reading, speaking at library conferences and peer observation of teaching (Bewick & Corral, 2010). In this article we concentrate on peer observation, which is a popular development tool (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008), explore its use in libraries, and reflect on our personal experience of participating in a reciprocal peer observation arrangement newly introduced to our team which has responsibility for Information Literacy skills teaching.

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## Peer observation as a development tool

Watching a colleague's practice is a useful teacher development activity and it adds benefits to other development activities through enabling insightful understanding (Bell & Mladenovic, 2008; Thomson, et al., 2015). Teaching can sometimes feel like a lonely undertaking, and normal feedback methods such as student evaluations are not always effective for development, as students may lack appropriate professional perspective (Middleton, 2002; Sinkinson, 2011; Ozek, et al., 2012). Peer observation can help address this issue, by providing a useful vehicle for sharing knowledge with colleagues (Middleton, 2002), and addressing specific teaching challenges (Middleton, 2002; Thomson, et al., 2015). However, this is dependent on how it is used in organisations, as over-emphasising processes and/or use in formal evaluation mechanisms can be detrimental (Thomson, et al., 2015). Where effective, it serves as a useful mechanism for structured critical observations which encourage professionals to undertake self-reflection (Ozek, et al., 2012).

## Use of peer observations in libraries

While there is evidence of librarians using informal reciprocal arrangements for teaching development in the 1990s (Levene & Frank, 1993), peer observation is more often found in traditional HE teaching areas than in university libraries (Middleton, 2002; Snaveley & Dewald, 2011). Here, it is a more recent phenomenon, with many librarians unfamiliar with it, although it has featured at professional conferences (Alabi, et al., 2012). A number of libraries in the UK, Europe and the USA have introduced the activity, and articles have been written about these experiences, which were generally felt to be useful (Middleton, 2002; Samson & McCrea, 2008; Castle, 2009; Snaveley & Dewald, 2011; Alabi, et al., 2012; Ozek, et al., 2012). Samson & McCrea describe it as an 'exemplary mechanism' which can benefit librarians who may have little formal teacher training (2008, p. 61), with teacher development activities important as the librarian role moves away from user instruction and towards developing higher order skills and becoming more involved in educational

and tutorial activities (Bewick & Corral, 2010; Ozek, et al., 2012).

Specifically, participating in peer observation arrangements can improve teaching, increase professional confidence and develop collegiate environments (Alabi, et al., 2012; Levene & Frank, 1993; Samson & McCrea, 2008). Formative, confidential arrangements are viewed as better for teacher development (Castle, 2009) and once any initial reservations are allayed, the main issue with reciprocal arrangements appears to be down to colleagues' time pressures (Ozek, et al., 2012). These observations were, in general, supported by our own experiences.

### **Experience of peer observation at Leeds Beckett University Library**

The Academic Support team within the library at Leeds Beckett University supports students across the University with Digital and Information Literacy skills development. The majority of colleagues in the team have teaching responsibilities, whether this is Academic Librarians supporting specific subjects, or Information Services Librarians providing teaching support and delivering generic sessions. At the start of the second semester of the 2017-18 academic year, a programme of informal observation to develop teaching practice was introduced across the team, meaning that we would have the opportunity to get formative peer feedback on our teaching practice. We were divided into observation pairs and guidance on the purpose of the scheme was circulated (Leeds Beckett University Centre for Learning & Teaching, 2017). With responsibility for arrangements left to the observation pairs, what follows is a general reflection on the experience of one pairing, omitting only the confidential findings specific to individual practice.

We were not completely unfamiliar with teaching observation and had experience of ad-hoc instances of observing a colleague's practice, being observed, or both. However, these instances had been closer to a shadowing arrangement, so that a less experienced colleague could see a session delivered by a colleague with wider teaching experience in preparation for delivering their own sessions and, where necessary, build confidence. Such occasions were more of a 'how-to' exercise than a critically reflective approach,

and reciprocal feedback was not an integral part of the process.

Consequently, it was the structured element of the process which made the new arrangement more appealing, as we had an opportunity to observe, be observed and share our professional understanding with our colleagues in an informal, mutually beneficial way. Having a colleague appraise what we were doing well and what we could develop, could potentially be very useful for professional development, although there was, perhaps, some initial trepidation at the notion of them being there as a critic – itself a trigger for reflection on the enduring efficacy of long-established personal teaching practices.

In this context we benefitted from having worked together for several years, and having previously discussed emotive development issues in a professional learning set, meaning that a helpful degree of mutual trust already existed. That potential exists for pairings – for example, involving strong personalities, or new colleagues – to exacerbate workplace stress, should be considered when constructing peer observation exercises. Ultimately, though, the exercise was a chance to share our professional understanding to benefit a colleague's practice, which, as Levene & Frank (1993) note, contributes to supporting colleague communities.

### **Some practicalities**

During an initial discussion, we considered the guidelines we had read on the scheme and agreed ground rules such as confidentiality (Leeds Beckett University Centre for Learning & Teaching, 2017) before discussing the potential dates and sequence of the reciprocal observations. There is generally less digital literacy tuition in Semester 2, so there were some scheduling issues to be overcome due to respective workloads and calendars, consistent with experiences in other libraries where peer review mechanisms have been used (Middleton, 2002; Alabi, et al., 2012; Ozek, et al., 2012). We were able to resolve these issues and agree a timetable, although the process was something we had to make time for. Equally, we were keen to ensure that representative sessions were observed, where observation would be of most use, rather than instances where tuition is limited by time or other known practical constraints.

Next, we moved on to the first pre-sessional discussion in our designated roles as 'teacher' and 'reviewer', in which we discussed, as Castle (2009) recommends, the scope of the session and any specifics of practice the teacher wanted the observer to note, a process which was repeated a few weeks later when we switched roles.

During each of the reviewed sessions, the practicalities of the observation were essentially the same; in line with recommended practice (Castle, 2009; Leeds Beckett University Centre for Learning & Teaching, 2017) the observer was introduced to session attendees, including any attending academics, and a brief explanation of peer observation was given, with the assurance that it was only the facilitator and not the attendees being observed. The observer then selected a convenient vantage point in the room where they could easily observe the facilitator to critically review the teaching and make any relevant notes while remaining 'outside' the session. Unfortunately, practical issues of classroom space and layout meant this was not as achievable in one of our observed sessions, but the observer, while seated with the attendees in this case, tried to ensure that they still took a passive role in the session. Reviewer feedback was given in a follow-up meeting held shortly after each session.

### **Reflections on being observed**

This is the part of the process which we expected to be of most benefit to individual practice. As noted above, this was the chance to get a view from a trusted informed colleague an objective sense of the efficacy of our teaching. Context on the session was given to the observer during the pre-sessional meeting and during the class, after the initial introductions, the facilitator taught as normal. It was somewhat difficult to completely ignore the additional presence at the start of the session, which may have added to some initial performance nerves, although after a short time, the presence of the observer was mostly forgotten, allowing a more natural flow to establish. On the other hand, the presence of the observer meant we more mindful of elements of our practice we had asked the observer to note and this would promote further reflection following the session which would, in turn, be useful to inform the feedback discussion.

### **Reflections on being the observer**

Taking on the role of observer allows a different perspective of a teaching session, through remaining detached from, while still focussed on, proceedings. Guidelines for reciprocal observation note it is important for the reviewer to attend the whole of the session to comprehend effectiveness (Leeds Beckett University Centre for Learning & Teaching, 2017). During our reciprocal observations, the reviewer was present for the entirety of the session, and using the details of the class (course, level etc.) supplied during the pre-sessional discussion, could apply their own knowledge to gauge the expected digital literacy skills level of the group and observe how the facilitator assessed actual knowledge and how they drew on this to develop learning. There was also ample opportunity to observe areas the facilitator had specified during the pre-sessional meeting, and to notice particular strengths and areas for development which would inform the feedback discussion. Being the observer was not as easy as it first appeared, however as it required an effort to be objective to critically assess a colleague's teaching. It was also a relatively unfamiliar role, in contrast with the familiar teaching activities we were performing, but one which would presumably, as with most things, become easier with practice.

### **Feedback and reflecting on results of the observation**

The reciprocal scheme was designed to be flexible and allow differences at a local level, but feedback was emphasised as an important part of the structure of the process to promote the discussion of observed good practice and suggested areas of development (Leeds Beckett University Centre for Learning & Teaching, 2017). We chose to have an informal discussion following each of the observed sessions to exchange immediate observations and wider reflections but as these discussions were time constrained due to other commitments, the more in-depth review meeting took place a few days to a week following each session. Here, we had the opportunity to share and discuss the observer's notes and clarify any points of understanding, allowing subsequent opportunities for further reflection by the facilitator as required to further continued development of practice. This was

useful as, outside of normal performance development channels, we rarely have the opportunity to get formative feedback in professional spheres and seeing our own practice through another lens can prompt useful self-reflection and may also boost confidence.

Perhaps less explicit in the process was the opportunity afforded for self-reflection when we were occupying the observer role. In fact, the act of observing, as well as requiring us to observe the specifics of our colleague's practice, enabled us to notice commonalities and differences in our respective teaching approaches which were often surprisingly illuminating. As Sparks (1986, p. 223, quoted in Bell & Mladenovic, 2008, p. 739) says, this can be 'a powerful learning experience'. Any previous experiences of shadowing colleagues' teaching sessions in a more novice role did not have comparable benefits to those gained from those using our pedagogical understanding to be a critical observer. Unfortunately, perceiving this as an added benefit during the observation exercise – rather than as a key learning point from the start – may have resulted in some lost opportunities for reflection.

Finally, one unexpected, tangential benefit of the process was the extent to which it acted as advocacy for the professional skills of library staff to academics, highlighting the degree of pedagogical reflection which goes into the delivery of even a 'standard' tuition session. In one instance, an academic member of staff actually asked what level of involvement library staff had with Advance HE's standards and qualifications, subsequently asking for our input with her own professional development. In essence, the peer observation process had publically reaffirmed the librarian's role as a tutor rather than simply a trainer.

### **Conclusion**

Reciprocal peer observation has been demonstrated in the literature as a useful tool for teacher development through providing opportunities for self-reflection and sharing peer knowledge. It has proved beneficial to librarians with teaching responsibilities in a number of libraries in various parts of the western world where it has improved colleague environments. We have written here on the experience of it as a new development initiative within our team in the

library at Leeds Beckett University, from the perspective of one of the reciprocal observation pairs, reflecting on the process and benefits of participation. There were some initial issues with timing of the scheme and fitting the extra elements of the reciprocal observations into workloads, however, the results of doing so were worthwhile and the overall process was beneficial. It provided informative peer comments on our teaching practice, which promoted self-reflection to improve learning. Potentially of more value, however, was the insight gained when acting in the role of observer and reflecting on differences in teaching approaches, and this is a part of the process which we could more consciously reflect upon in future, as well as extending our peer observation to support non-standard teaching sessions.

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