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# Peer observation and information skills teaching: feel the fear and do it anyway!

The introduction of peer observation at the University of East London



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## INTRODUCTION

Whilst acting-up as academic services and skills manager in the summer of 2007, I was charged by the director of library and learning services at UEL (University of East London) with introducing peer observation within service. Peer observation of teaching was already in place in various schools of the university, but it was an entirely new practice for us.

As subject librarians, we are involved in the learning and teaching process, but our activities and interactions don't always receive the attention of more traditionally recognised staff/student contact such as lectures and seminars. Information skills sessions seemed a natural starting place for the introduction of peer observation since the sessions are structured, time-limited and easy to observe. As a library service committed to playing a key part in enabling a high-quality student experience, we saw peer observation as one way we could develop as teachers and thereby provide a better teaching experience for our students.

## PEER OBSERVATION IN THE UNIVERSITY

I decided that I should have an initial discussion with the director of learning and teaching at UEL to obtain the necessary policy documents and to discover how the schools were currently implementing peer observation. The conversations I had with her, both verbally and via e-mail, were both helpful and illuminating.

She provided me with the university's policy statement on peer observation, which begins:

*'Peer Observation is part of our commitment to enhancement of Learning and Teaching. It provides for self reflection and improvement with the aid of support and advice from peers acting in the capacity of a critical friend.'*

She was keen to stress that the bulk of the document was meant simply as a guideline for peer observation and that the concept of a 'critical friend' encapsulated the spirit of the process. Schools had adopted the process with varying degrees of rigour and enthusiasm, but she was concerned that, on occasion, the reasons behind the practice – meant as a developmental process – had become 'lost' to a tick-box exercise where colleagues weren't necessarily being viewed in their envisaged role as critical friend and partner. This was a useful warning to me as to the sensitivity surrounding the introduction of a colleague into your classroom.

The policy states that peer observation should take place a minimum of once each semester for academic staff and twice a year for support staff. How this happens is left to the discretion of the school/service. The director encourages staff to develop a peer observation process that works for them, so long as the chosen method is used constructively and consistently across each school/service, and a peer observation proforma is used to guide reflection on teaching practice.

Whilst we could have created our own proforma had we so wished, included in the policy guidelines were examples of two proformas as developed by two schools of the university. The first of these had three sections: context and duration of observation; evidence; and strengths and targets for development. It seemed to me to be a bit 'blunt' and unfocussed for our purposes. I preferred instead the second proforma, as derived from that used in the business school. This one had a checklist for different aspects of the teaching session: introduction; planning and organisation; methods/approach; delivery and pace; content; use of learning resources; and summary. Faced with a situation that was new to us all, I felt we would appreciate a checklist of areas to comment on; as we developed in skill and confidence, so we could begin to take our lead from 'the observed' as to those particular areas of their practice where they would welcome feedback.

## CONCERNS ABOUT OBSERVATION

Armed with my new-found knowledge of the policy's intentions and of university-wide practice (and potential areas of difficulty), I began to consider how to introduce this initiative to the subject librarian team. Even though the process had been given to me to progress as a 'required' development rather than one which was up for debate, I truly believed it could act as a useful aid to development. However, I also understood that it might be something that would cause anxiety amongst some members of the team.

In June 2007, I chaired a subject librarian meeting and told tale of this new and exciting thing which was afoot. Colleagues believed the 'new' bit; it was the 'exciting' that I needed to work on! Several people looked immediately worried, and, when analysed, the concerns seemed to fall into the three primary reasons for hesitation that Mento and Giampetro-Meyer identify when discussing higher education faculty:

*'Firstly, many of us question the context in which peer evaluation would take place. We wonder about the spirit and attitude surrounding peer evaluation. Second, most professors wonder about the content of the evaluation. We want to know what our peers will be observing ... Third, many of us want to know more about the process. How will our peers respond to us and give us feedback? What will the department expect us to do after we receive the feedback?'*<sup>1</sup>

Several reassurances could be given immediately: that feedback would be confidential, shared only between the observed and the observer, with a copy passed to the academic services and skills manager, who has a remit for directing and co-ordinating the activities of the team (not to the individuals' line-managers); that the process and resulting feedback were entirely unconnected to the PDR (annual appraisal scheme); that training would be given beforehand; that we would – where feasible – be able to select our own observers and that this person could be either another subject librarian or an academic colleague if preferred; that the process was formative rather than summative; that the observed could choose the session/s they wanted their observer to attend.

Other reassurances were simply beliefs on my part, which I truly hoped I would be proved right about: that we could all learn from each other; that we all knew how to provide sensitive feedback to students in a classroom situation and this same sensitivity would extend to the feedback

we gave colleagues; that we would not be sitting in judgement of each other; that the experience would prove a positive one.

I was keen to engage with the process for several reasons. Firstly, as Samson and McCrea rightly point out:

*'Library instruction has a unique place in undergraduate and graduate education, yet academic librarians often begin or extend their participation in an instruction program with little teaching experience and/or training.'*<sup>2</sup>

Most of us have 'learnt on the job', with the majority of us having actually observed very few – if any! – information skills sessions prior to finding ourselves in front of a group of expectant students! Our practice is therefore often developed the hard way, with our knowledge of the learning and teaching process developing in tandem with our delivery (rather than being used to inform the delivery in the first place). Whilst experience counts for a lot and usually brings us to a place where we feel reasonably happy with various aspects of our teaching, I for one certainly felt that exposure to another person's ways of doing things would be a useful and motivating experience. Secondly, teaching can often feel quite a lonely activity, and from previous experience of team-teaching I knew that having another 'adult' in the classroom felt quite nice! Thirdly, engaging with peer observation would raise the profile of the library service within the university.

Whilst peer observation has the potential to provide a supportive environment in which to improve our skills, it is important to allow that people will be concerned, apprehensive and quite possibly scared. Ample time should be set aside to answer questions and address concerns, and bringing in staff from schools and services with an existing knowledge and experience of peer observation is an essential part of this preparatory period.

In July 2007, the academic services and skills manager returned to work and made arrangements for a peer observation training session to be run by UEL's staff-development manager. After an instructive two-hour session in August of last year, we were ready to put what we had learnt into practice!

I asked a colleague whom I trusted, and who I felt would provide me with honest and considered feedback, if she would be willing to act as my observer. She agreed and, as she was also happy for me to observe *her* teaching, we became a 'peer pair'. The peer observation agenda had been somewhat sidelined by the craziness that is Semester A, so by the time we came to plan our observations, it was the beginning of Semester B (February 2008). On reflection, I feel this was no bad thing for our first round of peer observation. There is already an amount of pressure surrounding the sheer volume of information skills delivery at UEL between September and November, and including peer observation in with this would have done little to alleviate the anxiety that some colleagues were already feeling.

It was decided that my colleague would observe a 90-minute induction and information skills session that I was due to give to a group of Masters students in mid-February. I chose this session because it was fairly typical of those sessions I provide for taught postgraduates and also because, like most other subject librarians, we were trying to get two sessions observed at a stage in the academic year when teaching engagements were still plentiful.

We met before the session to agree certain boundaries and for me to explain various things about the session. This pre-session meeting covered:

- who the students were and whether or not I had taught them before (on this occasion, I had not)
- the type of session I would be leading (combined induction and information skills for Semester B starters)
- how I would introduce my observer to the class (as a colleague who had come to observe me, not them!)
- how I would like my observer to behave (sit unobtrusively towards the back of the class and play no part in the session regardless of what happened)
- any problems that I anticipated / areas I would like my observer to concentrate on (none anticipated and, as this was the first observation, a general overview would be fine)
- when I would receive feedback (briefly immediately after the session, and then more fully on the completed proforma which

would be sent for comment and agreement within a week of the teaching session).

And so the information skills session was observed, and within five minutes I had all but forgotten that my colleague was in the class! I don't believe that the session I led was any different from the one I would have delivered had she not been there. As with all activities which demand your absolute attention, so teaching focusses you on the students you have in front of you and on the activity in hand. It was only as I was finishing up that I remembered that my teaching was about to be commented on!

Our peer observation training had given us some useful pointers regarding feedback: start the de-brief by asking the tutor how they felt the session went then give a few minutes of immediate feedback, emphasising the positive and never giving more than three bits of 'bad' feedback. Sound advice.

After this initial observation, I went on to observe my colleague during a 60-minute information skills session for some first-year undergraduates and during a 90-minute session that she led for a small group of dissertation-level students. She observed me teaching the final session (of three) that I had delivered to students on a first-year undergraduate skills module. We continued with the same pre-session agreements and arrangements we had previously put in place.

The experience proved to be a positive one for us both. Guided by the question 'What is good teaching?', the answer we arrived at was that 'good teaching' can be many different things and can be achieved in many different ways. People teach differently, but 'difference' isn't a barrier to learning; in fact it is quite the opposite. We know that people learn in different ways and that different activities are suited to different learning styles. When done properly, peer observation can give librarians confidence in their way of doing things and can give the observer some good ideas to implement in their own practice.

Perhaps the most unexpected result of peer observation is that the observer gets as much out of the process as the person being observed.

#### **EVALUATION OF OUR EXPERIENCE**

I have now changed jobs so can't say for sure that the process of peer observation isn't now receiving closer evaluation. However, at my time of

leaving UEL, I felt that more attention could have been given to how we as a team felt the process had gone, how we felt the process could be improved and how/if we would like to extend our 'peering' to other subject librarian activities. Whilst those colleagues I spoke to about their experience of peer observation seemed happy with the ways things had gone, this may not have been the case for *all* colleagues. A meeting convened after all librarians had been observed twice could have acted as a forum for pooling our thoughts, refining the process and deciding future directions.

### SOME REFLECTIONS

When introducing quality measures such as peer observation, it strikes me that wording plays a vital role in projecting the correct intention of peer activities. Words to be avoided at all costs include 'appraisal', 'scrutiny', 'judged', 'evaluated'. Words to be encouraged include 'partnership', 'skill development', 'effective teaching' and 'reflective practice'. I would also argue for 'the observer' and the 'observed' in preference to 'the reviewer' and 'the reviewed'. Indeed, I think Cardiff University sums the process up nicely by describing it as 'Peer-assisted Reflection of Learning and Teaching' (PRLT).<sup>3</sup>

Whilst a structured approach needs to be taken to peer observation, the process itself should not become part of the annual performance appraisal structure. In order to stay true to the spirit of the venture, it seems vital to me that it should be used for developmental purposes only. Using the process solely for the on-going development of the skills of the observer and the observed will improve 'buy-in', lessen suspicion that it is 'yet another management tool' designed to uncover poor performance and lead to the desired end result: the modification and improvement of our teaching practice.

As long as control over the process resides with the teaching librarian – choosing their own observer, deciding which sessions the observer should attend, negotiating those areas they would like the observer to concentrate on – my hopes for the future of peer observation remain high. Ideas for future development might include: adapting the feedback form; looking at other areas which could lend themselves to peer-review – teaching materials, enquiry desk services and so on; and maybe even incorporating student feedback into the process, through use of evaluation forms completed at the end of the teaching session.

### CONCLUSION

The quality of our teaching should form part of a general 'quality audit' of our library provision and should be formally, frequently and systematically reviewed via processes such as peer observation. Equally important is that 'teaching quality' should be considered before, during and after each and every information skills session we deliver.

To stop reflecting on practice, and to fail to consider that we can learn from colleagues, is detrimental to development – both our own and the library services'. Peer observation has taught me that subject librarians at UEL use different methods, styles and techniques to deliver information skills sessions but that no one way is the way, no one librarian is the best teacher. Some things work, some things don't, some things simply require 'tweaking' to work better. Having a 'critical friend' pop by and give helpful suggestions and comments can aid continual improvement, increase confidence and re-invigorate the whole teaching process.

### REFERENCES

- 1 A.J. Mento and A. Giampetro-Meyer, 'Peer observation of teaching as a true developmental opportunity', *College teaching*, 48 (1), 2000, pp 28–31
- 2 S. Samson and D.E. McCrea, 'Using peer review to foster good teaching', *Reference services review*, 36 (1), 2008, pp 61–70
- 3 C. Jackson, 'Peer-assisted reflection on learning and teaching: the INSRV framework' (draft 2.0, September 2007), available at <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/insrvstaff/projectandworking/infoliteracy/strategies/PRLT%20Framework.doc> [accessed 17 November 2008]