

From Peer To Peer: Issues About Observers In Peer Observation Of Teaching

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Abstract: Higher education teaching and learning in Europe faces challenging times and deep changes, largely due to many reforms originated by the so-called Bologna process (Moore et al, 2008; Leite, 2007; Vieira, 2005). The objective of this paper is to present the results of a training + research project that was proposed by a Teaching and Learning Lab set up jointly by the Faculty of Educational Sciences (FPCEUP) and the Faculty of Engineering (FEUP) at the University of Porto. Its underlying strategy aims to improve the quality of teaching and the quality of learning, and at the same time to capture information about teaching and learning practices used within the university.

Higher education teaching and learning in Europe faces challenging times and deep changes, largely due to many reforms originated by the so-called Bologna process (Moore et al, 2008; Leite, 2007; Vieira, 2005). The objective of this paper is to present the results of a training + research project that was proposed by a Teaching and Learning Lab (TLL) set up jointly by the Faculty of Educational Sciences (FPCEUP) and the Faculty of Engineering (FEUP) at the University of Porto. Its underlying strategy aims to improve the quality of teaching and the quality of learning, and at the same time to capture information about teaching and learning practices used within the university. Specifically, this paper wants to argue the idea that POT is an opportunity to improve observers' professional development. Research data comes from 31 observation forms and could allow us to conclude that experiment gave an opportunity to reflect upon teachers' one practices as a result from observing peers.

Our training scheme follows the peer observation model presented by Gosling (2002), whose proposed solution differs from evaluation or developmental models (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Cosh, 1998). According to Gosling (2008, p. 5), on a peer-observation model, teachers observe each other with one clear objective – to discuss their teaching activities through self- and group-reflective exercises. Bell defines POT as a “Collaborative, development activity in which professionals offer mutual support by observing each other teach; explaining and discussing what was observed; sharing ideas about teaching; gathering student feedback on teaching effectiveness; reflecting on understandings, feelings, actions and feedback and trying out new ideas” (Bell 2005, p. 3, in Bell and Mladenovic 2008, p. 736). POT in this sense is ideally a “continuous process of transforming personal meaning” (Peel 2005, p. 489), which ensures consolidated transformations in the participants' perspectives on teaching and learning, instead of just small changes in specific aspects of their performance. One main feature of our model is that it offers a symmetric distribution of power between the observer and the one being observed; it focus the observation on teacher performance, on the class, and on the learning content, and is followed by constructive, non-judgemental feedback.

The training + research instrument used in our TLL was inspired on similar work done at other universities (Leicester, Nottingham, Southampton, Queens at Belfast, Imperial College at London), and includes three stages: prior, during, and post observation. At prior-observation the observers obtain information about all relevant facts / data using documents and through an interview with their colleague that will be observed. The post-observation stage is related to the constructive feedback and reflective discussion. During observation a regular class is attended by the observers, who use an observation grid adapted from the model used at Southampton University. The observation scheme requires that all observers be observed as well, and also that each team member observes one class at FEUP and another class at FPCEUP.

A total number of 40 observation sessions were organised during the first semester of 2009 / 10, divided equally between FEUP and FPCEUP. The results that will be presented are based on these 40 observation grids, which were analysed with the objective of improving our knowledge about the teaching and learning practices at these two University of Porto schools.

The organisational model underlying this training + research project was based on teams with four elements, two from Educational Sciences (FPCEUP) and two from Engineering (FEUP). The observation grid was adapted from the model used at the Southampton University, and comprises three sections. The first section covers class-related

topics, namely "organisation", "presentation", "class mood", "content", and "awareness and flexibility". The second section asks the observer to compare the observed class with his/her own classes, offering the observer four leading questions addressing observation subjects that were not covered by the closed response items: 1) What was most striking? 2) What questions would I like to ask to the teacher? 3) What similarities / differences were found in relation to my own lecturing practice? 4) Can I make any recommendations? Finally, the third section covers the post-observation reflective discussion.

Are those two sections that are presented now as an exercise to highlight observers' concerns rather observed teachers' practices. Only 9 out of the 40 observation forms that were collected did not contain any qualitative information. This information was correlated to the School variable only when it was considered meaningful. All data content analysis was done using the N-VIVO 8 package, and the information was grouped into the following emergent categories: Negative aspects; Positive aspects; Technical aspects; Pedagogical aspects; Wider questions; Suggestions.

N-VIVO 8 offers source coding features that were used to associate the observation forms to categories, and reference coding, which in our case correspond to phrases or expressions representing an assertive proposition.

Results

The negative aspects were subsequently divided into three groups, relating to students, to teachers, and to organizational aspects. Likewise, the positive aspects were analyzed according to their dependency upon climate issues, upon the teacher's work, and upon the work done by the students. Finally, the recommendations made by the observers were grouped in two main types, relating to the specific teacher under observation, and to teachers in general (at institutional level).

Main results (which we have not enough space to present) show that those issues centred on intentional teacher actions achieve the highest scores, both in positive and negative aspects. Negative aspects related to organizational categories were, related to classroom management. Those referring students' inattentive behavior achieve the highest scores of negative aspects. Also negative were classes centred on teacher's presentation. On the opposite and referred as positive aspects were the opportunities for interaction with the students and promoting their participation. As an interpretation it can be said that there is a relation between negative issues connected with students' behavior and classes centred on teachers' presentation as it seems to be a relation between teachers' interactive behaviour and students' participation in class. This interpretation is reinforced by wider questions that concern observers – how to evolve students in the classroom is the huge challenge. In a wider approach we may conclude that experiment gave teachers an opportunity to reflect upon their practices as a result from observing peers. Future publications will include expanded results and discussion.

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