

A review of the peer observation process

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INTRODUCTION

Context

For our Action Research project, Cecile and Becky set out to review the college's Peer Observation process which was introduced in 1995 as part of the college's own quality assurance system. In fact, we opened a Pandora's Box!

Our project has sought to establish whether the College's Peer Observation process, the aim of which was to improve teaching and disseminate good practice, adds meaningfully to teachers' professional development. We also aimed to highlight improvements that would bring the process in line with established good practice elsewhere.

Peer observation was introduced in the college in 1997 by the Vice-Principal who was in charge of implementing a 'Quality Assurance' process. The purpose of Peer Observation was to provide a means of self-assessment, to promote development and to disseminate good practice amongst teachers. Peer observations were designed to differ from Assessed Lesson Observations (ALOs) which were meant to find evidence of quality teaching and which were graded. However, when Performance Related Pay was introduced, in 2001, the practice of ALOs increased as PRP applications required the support of a graded lesson to the detriment of peer observations. Gradually, peer observation practice arguably became a 'tick in the box' exercise for some, and lost its value as a professional development tool. The objective of our action research project was to see whether the practice of peer observation within the College could be rekindled.

Background

Our starting point was to go back to basics and to establish a clear understanding of what peer observation stands for. We quickly realised that everyone we asked, whether in an interview situation or in passing, seemed to have their own definition of a peer observation and their own views as to the purpose of peer observations. We looked through a plethora of publications relevant to the subject and selected the following definition of peer observation to be our starting point:

'A collaborative and reciprocal process whereby one peer observes another's teaching and provides supportive and constructive feedback. Its underlying rationale is to encourage professional development in teaching and learning through critical reflection, by both observer and observee'.
(Lublin, 2002).

We then endeavoured to define the purpose of the process:

Peer observation of teaching allows both peer observer and observee to:

- Develop their own reflective practice
- Share good teaching practices
- Gain new ideas about teaching
- Enhance their own teaching skills
- Improve students' quality of the learning experience

(www.prodait.org)

To further our understanding of the process we sought feedback from the college's teaching staff. The responses enabled us to gather teachers' perception of the process and to establish whether it achieved its objectives. The current practice within the college is as follows:

- ALOs and peer observations are carried out in each faculty on alternative years (e.g. teachers peer observe each other every two years);
- The peer observation process and pairing of teachers is initiated by the Faculty Director although teachers have the possibility to express a preference in terms of level (e.g. AS or A2) and subject taught;
- Teachers in pairs are observing in a reciprocal arrangement and feeding back to each other using a standardised peer observation records form;
- A copy of the feedback form is forwarded to both the Head of department and the Faculty Director.

METHODS USED

Staff survey

We carried out a survey amongst the college's teaching staff to gather feedback from as many teachers from the college as possible on their experience of the peer observation process, in observee and/or observer roles. We devised a questionnaire which we piloted amongst a focus group of Faculty Directors. The final version was a 9 question long survey which enabled us to collect both quantitative and qualitative data on teaching staff's current perception of the peer observation process (see appendix). The questionnaire was then administered on-line across the College using Quia (www.quia.com). 182 out of the 236 teachers employed in the college completed the survey which represents a 77% participation rate. These responses provided us with an accurate picture of how the peer observation process is perceived currently amongst teachers in the College, and invaluable suggestions of how to improve it.

Interviews

Throughout our project we had meetings with key members of staff: Vice Principal, Faculty Directors and a critical friend to discuss our findings and our proposals. Their feedback enabled us to develop and shape our recommendations.

Visit to Havering Sixth Form College

As part of our research we contacted Havering Sixth Form College in order to benefit from their previous research in this area and to discuss the outcomes of the alternative professional development methods that they have pioneered. We used their experience as a case study for our research project. The main two teachers involved in quality assurance at Havering Sixth Form College, Sue Bannocks and Leo Cole, agreed to be interviewed on cameras. The film of the interview was showed during our presentation when we disseminated our findings to our peers and other practitioners in the area at an annual event in which action research is disseminated (and is a Hampshire Partnership of Colleges Common Inset day).

FINDINGS

Internal survey results

Our research has shown that our teachers, in general, value the peer observation process but their feedback has highlighted possible flaws in its current design.

How many times were teachers *observed by a peer* last year?

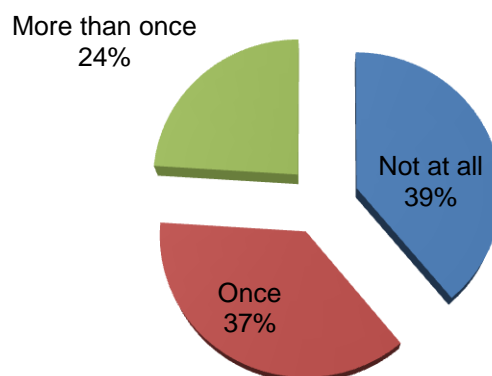


Figure 1

How many times did teachers *peer observe a colleague* last year?

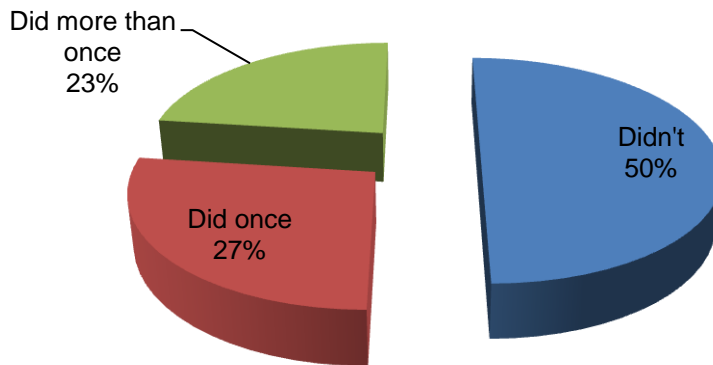


Figure 2

Has your involvement in peer observation helped you develop professionally as teacher?

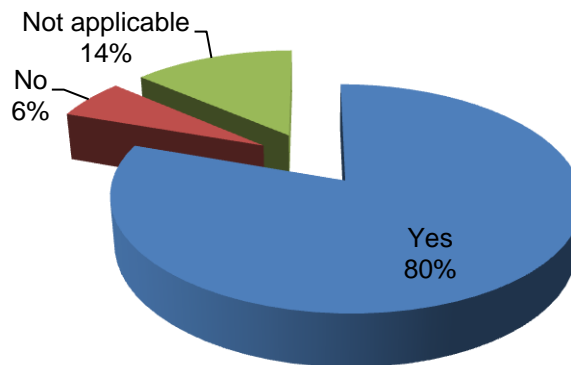


Figure 3

These results show that peer observation, as a reciprocal arrangement, is not practiced on a consistent basis throughout the college (see Figures 1 & 2) but those who have participated have gained from it professionally (see figure 3).

Excerpts from staff comments on how Peer observation has helped them develop professionally as teachers:

- *'I was given advice with Physics experiments that were new to me when I joined the college'*
- *'It offered an opportunity to reflect on my own teaching style'*
- *'It has given me the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of other curriculum areas'*
- *'It has helped me to develop my feedback techniques'*
- *'Offers an opportunity to compare teaching across disciplines'*

The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from teachers show that peer observation is much respected as a procedure and a teaching improvement tool and that many staff benefit from it (see Figure 3 and above excerpts).

'As it presently operates, the peer observation process is a useful tool for developing me as a teacher'

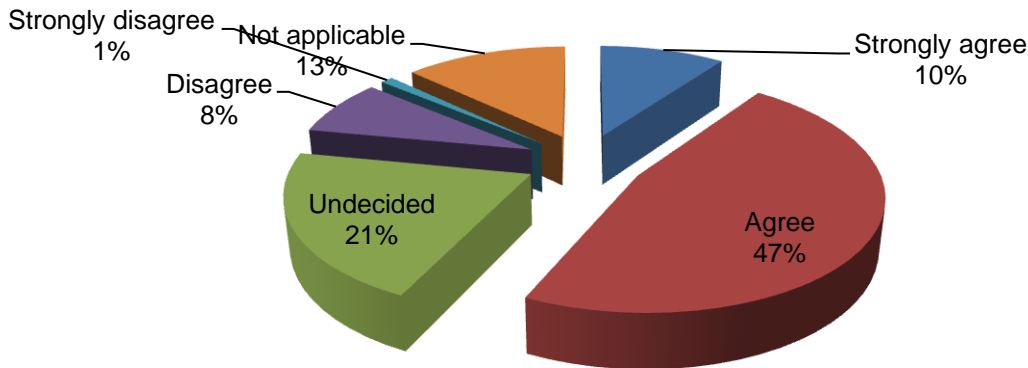


Figure 4

Answers to this question demonstrate that, although teachers value peer observation as a developmental tool, the way it is currently administrated in the college needs to be improved (see Figure 4).

Visit of Havering Sixth Form College

Our research was not only based on the college's current peer observation process but on practices in other schools and colleges. This has led us to explore a range of innovative teaching development methods. For example: ***teaching triangles*** or '***trios***', ***learning walks***, ***collective practices***, ***learner voices*** and ***coaching*** are all currently used at Havering Sixth Form College.

- ***Teaching triangles*** or ***trios***
This is where three teachers from linked departments such as Accounting, Business and Economics observe each other, and provide ideas as to how lessons can be improved. Two teachers observe the remaining teacher and then swap roles until all have been observed and feedback has been jointly provided in a Discussion Forum' after each lesson.
- ***Learning walks***
This innovation allowed all teachers, with notice and time to prepare, to open up their lessons to all. For one week, teachers could walk in and out lessons of their choice and take away an aspect that they could use in their own teaching to make an outstanding lesson.
- ***Collaborative practices & Coaching***
Staff teaching the same course do not often have the opportunity to observe each other. Yet each is likely to learn from watching a colleague teach the same topic, often with the same resources, but in a different way. Staff at Havering Sixth Form College found collaborative practices within a coaching framework to be a particularly useful method to improve their teaching. Statistically they discovered that time spent on collaborative practices created lessons which were more indicative of lessons which would be judged as outstanding.

Figure 7 shows some possible peer coaching activities, adapted from Pam Robbins's version:

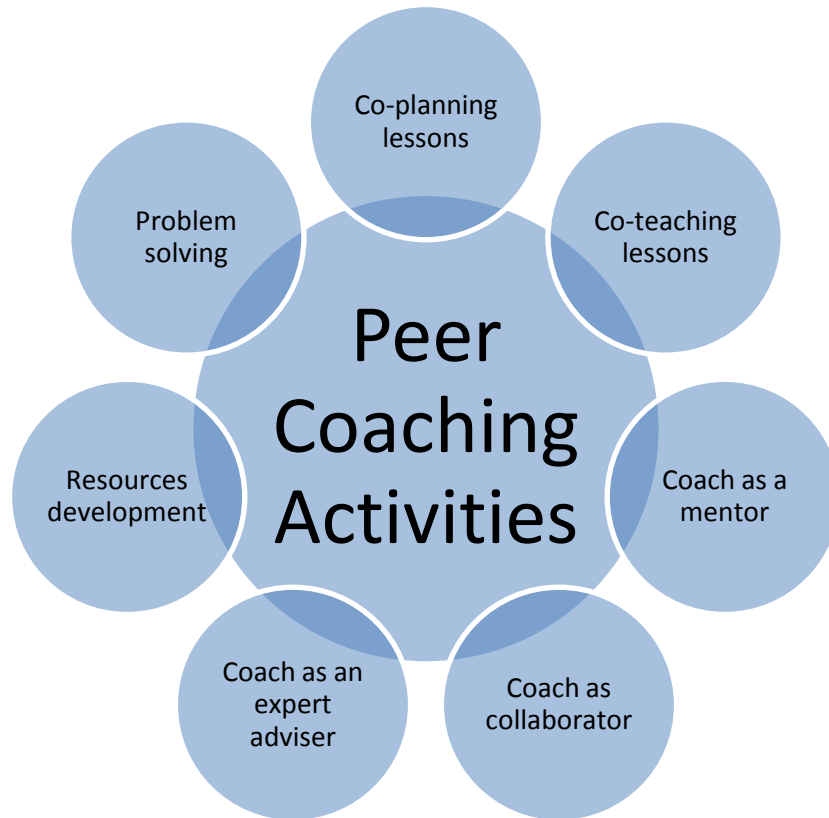


Figure 7

Havering Sixth Form College have been part of the Subject Learning Coaching programme since 2005. Sue Bannock described this approach as a 'non-directive' approach where 'the teacher is coached to find his/her own solutions.' She quoted Joyce and Showers who claimed that '*...the one who is observing is the one who is learning...*' and this ethos had been embraced by staff at Havering.

Current research seems to point towards observations in a peer coaching framework as a way forward. It is a nice euphemistic twist in the name which makes the process feel more inclusive and less judgmental but it is in practice, a more collaborative process where the intention is to share the craft of teaching.

Peer coaching should:

- Have a teacher specified focus, confidential to that pair/group
- Involve professional sharing without judgment
- The observer should not necessarily be senior to the person being observed as issues of inequality can undermine the process; this depends on the level of trust between the pair/group.

Pam Robbins claimed that coaching implies that one person in the collaborative relationship has a different status. An important point is whether to have 'peer' mentors (where the observer is the expert and not at the same level) or whether the peer should be a 'coach' – i.e. a trusted person, whether at a higher level in the hierarchy or not. Sizer (1995) argued that teachers, in reality, stay the same rank whether they are starting out as young NQT's or in their final year before retirement. They have the same classroom space, number of students and requirements. But do they? It depends who reads the observation reports, and what is done with those reports as to whether there is a hierarchy, implicit or explicit in the relationship between observee and observer.

Peer coaching is as individual and unique as the people who engage in it. Generally, two or more colleagues work together on it. There tends to be a pre-conference observation and a post-conference. It has nothing to do with evaluation, it is not intended to 'fix' teachers and could be an opportunity for teachers to take risks and try something new with the assistance of a self-selected coach that the teacher trusts. It could be reflective, it could be reciprocal. Joyce and Showers suggest it greatly assists 'skill transfer.' Shulman (1991) added that it could involve teachers 'sharing a narrative' sharing stories about teaching experiences. Caro (1991) suggested 'Talk walking' where this narrative could happen but introducing exercise to 'enable thinking and privacy' to occur. Indeed, Hargreaves (1989) warned that if teachers just go through the motions of skill transfer, it could turn into an unreflective process. Tolhurst (2006) provided an effective solution when she stated that a good coach will need a 'high level of competence in effective questioning, active listening and rapport-building' which are the 'building blocks of coaching'. Teachers are well practised at such skills but not all teachers may feel that they can be a coach without training.

DISCUSSION

Based on our findings and our collaboration with the Havering Sixth Form College we were able to put forward some ideas on how to improve the current peer observation process within the college.

Our overarching objective was to turn the process into an **informal, supportive** and **unthreatening** experience.

'The process of observing a colleague should be a supportive and unthreatening experience.'
(Ramsden, 1992)

In this sense, it was important to separate and differentiate a peer observation from an Assessed Lesson Observation (ALO).

Using the model created by the LTSN Generic Centre (2002), it is possible to represent the current framework of purposes and processes of Peer observation within the college (see Figure 5).

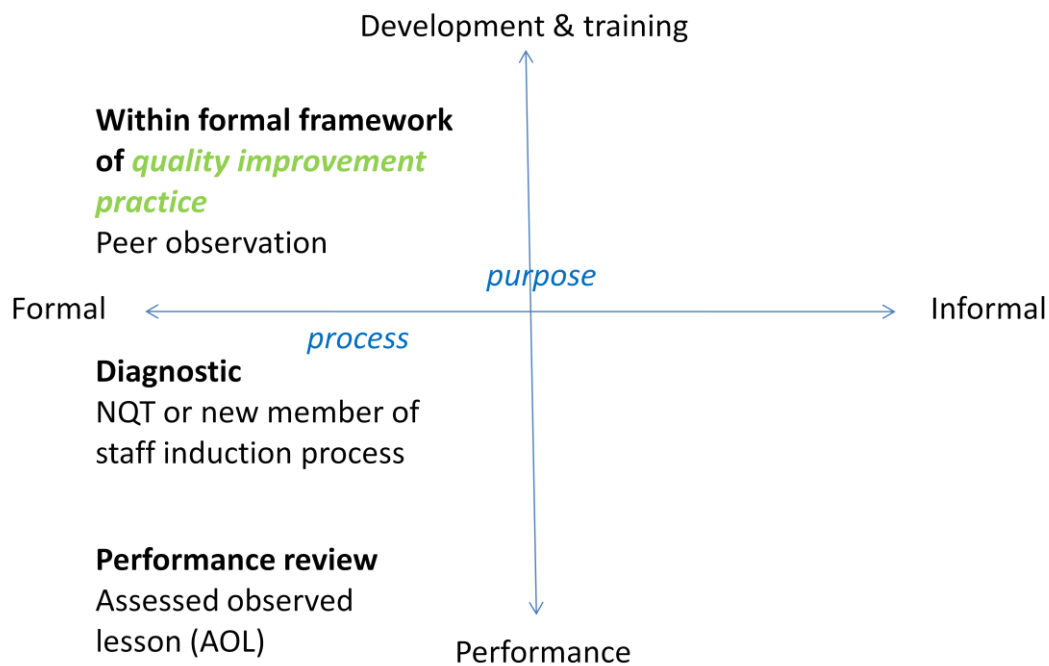


Figure 5

Our recommendations will endeavour to make the process of Peer observation more informal and with a greater emphasis on development and training for its purpose (see Figure 6).

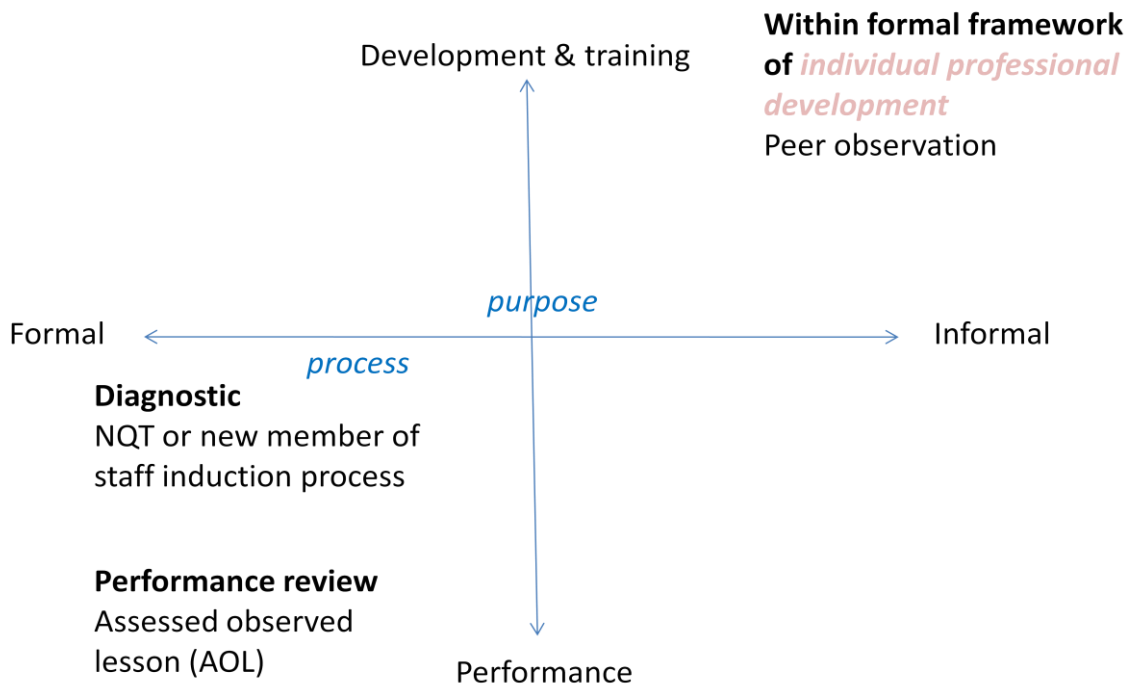


Figure 6

Figures 5 and 6 represent a significant shift towards a more *informal process* and a *purpose of development & training* rather than performance.

For this to happen, the Peer observation process needs to be reviewed. Our main recommendations follow; some of which form more questions about the process:

- **Choice of pairing**

Feedback from teachers has shown that some observations within the same curriculum area can be useful: a teacher can learn from observing another teach a familiar topic in a different way. Similarly, a teacher can learn about teaching techniques from observing a colleague from a different curriculum area. However, some randomly assigned 'pairing' works and some pairings are seemingly not as effective. To benefit from the process teachers should be paired according to a specific development need that they both agree on. Furthermore, if a teacher is paired with someone senior in the hierarchy there could be an issue of inequality and lack of impartiality and the process could be perceived by the observee as 'judgemental' rather than 'developmental': '*... it is important for a fully successful peer review model that staff are regarded as genuine peers, in which there is real mutuality and respect for each of the participants as equal, whatever their status in the establishment...*' (Keig and Waggonner, 1995). Therefore we suggest that teachers should choose whom they want to be paired with and that the choice should be based on the focus of the observation.

- **Initial meeting**

All our research emphasises the need to have a pre-observation meeting to decide on the purpose of the observation e.g. new ways of teaching a specific topic, methods of using questioning during a lesson, classroom management, use of IT within the lesson, use of games, etc. This meeting is vital to the process as it underpins the purpose of the exercise and states what each teacher wants to gain from the exercise. It also establishes a rapport between the teachers and facilitates the idea of collaboration and support.

"The key thing is making sure that you have a pre-meeting with the colleague you are going to observe. Make sure it is not too long before the session takes place. This helps to relieve their pre-observation nerves, clarifies a shared view of your perceived expectations of the sessions and allows the observed person to ask you to 'watch out' for any particular areas they would like some extra specific feedback on." (Sue Smith, Leeds Metropolitan University, Teacher Fellow).

The need to conduct such a meeting prior an observation should be part of the peer observation process and be included in the training given to teachers. Although such meetings happen in some pairings, and were deemed by staff involved to be useful, it seems that time constraints and not knowing the other member of staff can impede this process. In some pairings, the pre-observation meeting simply did not take place.

- **Feedback**

The survey that we carried out highlighted the fact that some teachers do not receive feedback. One staff member stated:

'My biggest disappointment with any peer observation I have been part of, is that there often is no feedback from the person who observed me – which I think is more important than observing the lesson itself' (anonymous response to our survey)

Some teachers feel do not feel confident giving in providing feedback and some teachers found the feedback to be of little use. These views were also often expressed in our secondary research. For example, according to Cosh, 1998:

'None of us is qualified to make judgements on the teaching of our peers...'. His recommendation therefore is that '... staff can be given some training in how to give constructive feedback to maximise the benefits of peer observations since this is a demanding skill.'

Indeed, training would provide teachers with some knowledge of and confidence to provide feedback to a peer.

According to Keig & Waggoner, 1995:

'... it is important for the observer to try to observe and record what happens and not rely on memory and interpretation without any evidence...'

We recommend that there are different methods that can be employed to deal with this. We can continue to employ the present system whereby the observer fills in a form to record his/her thoughts and evidence to ensure a meaningful feedback takes place. However, the form should be kept as simple as possible and should be different from the ALO feedback form: any form of judgemental comments should be removed (e.g. 'strengths' and 'weaknesses' should not appear on the peer observation form).

Currently a copy of the form is forwarded to the Head of Department and the Faculty Director. It is important that a record of the process should be kept so that some form of 'quality control' can take place as to whether the process does lead to 'professional development' or not. Recording the outcome of peer observations can also enable college wide dissemination of good practice. For example, Faculty of Directors could communicate to the rest of the faculty examples of good practices or innovation which might have been highlighted in peer observation records. However it is important to recognise the need for confidentiality when discussing the outcome of peer observations:

'... an important precondition for achieving an 'orientation towards understanding' is the ensure that confidentiality is guaranteed. Any information that can be used outside the context of the observer and observed should be aggregated and anonymised before it is discussed for example in departmental seminars...' (Habermas, 1984).

- **Peer coaching**

Another feedback method, 'Peer Coaching' could reform the current process and make it less bureaucratic and feel less intrusive. Director of Faculty, Simon Reigh has been an outstanding help to us during this research. He considered further ideas for reforms with us, after the initial ideas that he and fellow Director Mike Collis had implemented across their faculties. Simon agreed with Cecile and Becky that despite benefits of the system of peer observations as they stand, their infrequent use is 'not making the most of the time or the rich experience that staff can bring'. He feels that there should be a 'stronger purpose' and 'a stronger focus' to peer observations and this can be created in the framework of a new system that we all discussed, 'peer coaching'. This scheme, as well as being more euphemistic by name would be far more 'user friendly'. It is suggested that:

1. A peer coaching system could and should be purely voluntary;
2. It would be entirely separate from quality assurance procedures (for example, appraisal and assessed lesson observations);
3. It would be confidential (there is no reason why a line manager needs to see a report if under a coaching framework).

This system would provide a soothing and helpful solution to teachers such as respondent X who wrote of peer observations in our survey:

'...often they are imposed and dreaded; you just want to go on with your lessons without being watched.'

It seemed that this person was not gaining much but feelings of fear from the present system. The coaching system would allow a rapport to develop between observee and observer, it would be voluntary and separate from quality assurance procedures and it could be confidential. Critics would surely highlight that a member of staff could 'get out of' undertaking a peer coaching observation under the peer coaching scheme. However, if the system were introduced carefully, over time and if the respondent was helped to feel secure in planning lessons collaboratively and observing another staff member of their choice and to assist the staff member with learning and teaching aspect that they would like to take a risk with trying out for the first time or to team teach or to rehearse for example, questioning techniques, with

the safety net of another teacher coaching them, it could be far more useful to the teacher and in time, to assist lessons to continue to be outstanding. In addition, another teacher stated in our survey:

'I have always valued observing other members of my own department which I think can get overlooked as peer observations since I have been at this College, have involved observing another subject in the faculty. While I see the value in this, I do not personally find it as useful. It felt a bit like a test. I passed, so I was happy – didn't consider much after that.'

This respondent would also benefit greatly from the suggested peer coaching system as she/he would be permitted to choose who would be his/her coach. Even though this person was happy to 'pass the test,' it is indicative of how peer observations are perceived i.e. as an examination where a judgement will be given, rather than a genuinely helpful observation method that this staff member had identified would be more beneficial for the department.

It would appear that staff in the main, were arguing for peer observees and observers to be paired up to clarify understanding and improved skills via observing a specific need. Random pairing to view faculty members and subject areas deemed to be utterly disparate by staff were not liked or found useful, by all.

CONCLUSIONS

- We advise that moving from the current system of Peer Observations to observations within a framework of Peer Coaching would be highly beneficial to the College as it fits in with Personalised Learning and Teaching for students, could assist NQT's greatly, and those who are new to roles. It could also provide more CPD opportunities, a structured model for improving teaching conversations and could enable staff to set their own goals. Finally, the Learner Voice (LSIS 2009) could be implemented via this process as identified students could help to observe lessons, and provide feedback also.
- No matter how hard we try as observers, we interpret and comment on what we see as an 'innovation' or a 'weakness' or 'strength', so learning cannot be abstracted from our own interpretation and evaluation. So, moving towards a model which should be non-judgmental, distinct from schemes which are linked to promotion or for inspection purposes.
- Via Peer Coaching, all staff should have the space to try out new skills, to develop as practitioners and thus be able to create collaboratively outstanding lessons.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to our hosts at Havering Sixth Form College, Sue Bannocks and Leo Cole and the students who kindly filmed our interview. Thanks also to our critical friend, Rebecca Rhodes, who gave us confidence to carry out this project and provided us with invaluable feedback and ideas. Thanks to Simon Reigh for introducing us to the concept of Peer Coaching and for taking the time to capture his thoughts on video. And finally, many thanks to the Vice-Principal, Simon Jarvis for his assistance and to all staff at The Sixth Form College Farnborough who have participated so valuably to this process.

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APPENDIX

Questionnaire

1. How many times were you observed in the 2008-09 academic year? (Peer observation(s) only)
 - 0
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - More than 3

2. How many times were you the observer in the 2008-09 academic year? (Peer observation(s) only)
 - 0
 - 1
 - 2
 - 3
 - More than 3

3. Who organised your peer observation(s)? (Select as many boxes that apply)
 - Curriculum Manager
 - Head of Faculty
 - I did it myself
 - Mentor (for NQTs)
 - Not applicable

4. Did (any of) your peer observation(s) arise directly from an identified personal development need? (Select one option only)
 - Yes
 - No
 - Don't know

5. How has your involvement in peer observation helped you develop professionally as a teacher? (Select as many options that apply)
 - It has improved my classroom management
 - It has improved lesson planning
 - It has improved my teaching of the skills that students need for their exams
 - It has helped me develop activities in my lessons
 - It has helped me with group work management
 - It has helped me with checking learning during my lessons
 - It has helped me develop my feedback technique
 - It has helped me to introduce some form of 'stretch & challenge' in my teaching
 - It has helped me with equality & diversity in the classroom
 - It has not helped me develop professionally as a teacher
 - Not applicable
 - Other

6. If you answered 'Other' in the previous question please specify here

7. How would you describe the feedback that you received after your peer observation? (select one option only)

- Informative
- Developmental
- Judgmental
- Don't know
- Not applicable
- Other

8. If you answered 'Other' in the previous question please specify here

9. How would you rate your overall experience of the peer observation process as an observee? (Select one box only)

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative
- Other

10. If you answered 'Other' in the previous question please specify here

11. How would you rate your overall experience of the peer observation process as an observer? (Select one box only)

- Positive
- Neutral
- Negative
- Other

12. If you answered 'Other' in the previous question please specify here

13. Please state your main reason if you did not take part in any peer observation during the 2008-09 year

- Not applicable
- I did not have sufficient time
- I did not see the point
- I was due to participate but the observation was cancelled and not rescheduled
- Nobody asked me
- Other

14. If you answered 'Other' in the previous question please state your reason here

15. Please show the extent of your agreement or disagreement with the following statement: '*As it presently operates, the peer observation process at the College is a useful tool for developing me as a teacher.*' (Select one box only)

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Undecided
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not applicable

16. Please note any additional comments about the peer observation process in the box below

Thank you for the time you have taken to complete this questionnaire.