Peer observation of teaching: Barriers to successful implementation

Dr Susan R. Robinson
Research Fellow
Centre for Regional Engagement
University of South Australia

Abstract
For those new to the concept, the prospect of Peer Observation of Teaching (POT) can create anxiety. Much of this anxiety reflects lack of hard information regarding the nature of POT. This paper draws upon a growing literature on the topic, including the findings of four recent ALTC projects, plus the author’s experience of performing classroom visits for three UK institutions, to describe some of the forms that a Peer Observation program might take. The paper argues that many common anxieties surrounding the prospect of POT are unfounded, provided sound procedures and protocols are put in place by an institution. Observation of teaching provides the instructor with real opportunities for professional development and for this reason, the case is made here for preferring class visitors who are non-subject specialists over those drawn from one’s own School or discipline.

Introduction
Academics do not accept peer review of their teaching in the way they accept peer review of their research (Martin and Double, 1998:162). However supportive the atmosphere in which the observation and resulting feedback takes place, many academics express anxiety at having their teaching scrutinized by colleagues. This may reflect the fact that relatively few academics at Australian universities have experienced the activities and processes surrounding peer observation of teaching (Harris, Farrell et al 2008:10). In fact, many long-serving academics may never have had a colleague attend a class or informally look over teaching materials (Peer Review of Teaching in Australian Higher Education: A Handbook, p.16 Hereafter A Handbook). For some instructors, these anxieties are not alleviated by experiencing the process of peer observation (Swinglehurst, Russell, & Greenhalgh 2008: 386).

The apprehension academics feel at the thought of peer observation reflects a variety of hidden concerns. This paper provides a brief description of the process of peer observation, before going on to identify and consider the legitimacy of some of these concerns.

What is peer observation?
Peer observation of teaching (POT) involves academic colleagues giving and receiving feedback on the effectiveness of teaching practices for promoting student learning (A Handbook, p.5). Whereas the term ‘peer review’ encompasses evaluation both of classroom performance and non-classroom curriculum activity, ‘peer observation’ describes the activity of visiting and commenting upon a taught session with a view to both improving the student learning experience, and providing professional development for teaching staff.

POT could take place across a range of teaching environments. These include such teacher-led sessions as lectures and seminars, where the tutor is clearly ‘performing’, as well as student-led activities where
the role of the tutor is less overt: including tutorials, supervisions, studio work, and online instruction (Gosling, 2002:3).

**Why engage in peer observation?**
The traditional source of information on teaching effectiveness is student course satisfaction surveys. These offer at best a partial view of what goes on in the classroom. Whilst many students may be experts in learning, relatively few are experts in teaching. Some important measures of teaching effectiveness - e.g. whether a teacher is making useful connections to prior learning within the curriculum - are beyond the judgement of students to make and would be best judged by colleagues (Cohen & McKeachie, 1980: 153). In the eyes of some, student evaluations are an unreliable indicator, since student ratings may allow extraneous personality factors to overwhelm the true quality of instruction (Friedrich & Michalak 1983: 146). For all of these reasons, peer observation offers a useful supplement to the student perspective on classroom delivery (Trujillo et al. 2009:1).

From the point of view of the individual whose teaching is observed, peer observation might serve as a tool for personal professional development; or to gather evidence of teaching excellence to support an application for promotion. Introducing POT into Graduate Certificate of Teaching programs helps young academic staff develop as teaching practitioners. The existence of a program of peer review within a department or institution signals a commitment to maintaining and raising teaching standards.

Research shows that peer observers gain similar benefits to those enjoyed by observees. Many participants have found the process of observing more enjoyable, and more beneficial, than the process of being observed (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2004; Costello et al. 2001:449). This is may be because, whereas the classroom observer who takes away ‘tips and tricks’ of the teacher’s craft decides the relevance of these techniques to her own teaching, an observee is likely to dismiss as irrelevant at least some of the criticisms that she receives. For those university lecturers who lack formal training in the craft of teaching, the opportunity to analyse and discuss the performance of others leads to greater levels of self-awareness as a teacher (Martin & Double 1998:162).

**Models of POT**
Gosling (2002) identifies 3 models of POT:

1. **Evaluation** model (feeding into promotion prospects)
2. **Developmental** model
3. **Peer Review** model: teachers observe each other, discuss and mutually reflect in a non-judgmental environment.

Broadly speaking, peer observation schemes are used for either *formative* purposes (as a tool of staff development); or else they are *summative* in intent (i.e. used to make judgments upon teaching performance) (Peel 2005:492, 494). Gosling’s first model is summative, while models 2 and 3 are formative in intent. A good example of model 3 is the Peer Observation Partnerships described in Bell (2005). Peer observation undertaken primarily for developmental purposes can contain evaluative elements, whilst judgmental schemes might also afford participants the opportunity to develop and learn (*A Handbook*, p.13). Some programs may consciously combine elements of both. In Graduate Certificate of Teaching programs candidates may receive the benefit of formative peer feedback before undergoing a summative assessment.
Understanding the Peer Observation Process

Whether it is conducted for formative or summative purposes, peer observation comprises a simple, three-stage process:

1. A **pre-observation meeting** where the participants discuss the process. This preliminary meeting allows the observer to gain an understanding of the session to be observed.
2. The **observation** or actual classroom visit.
3. A **post-observation** meeting where there is debriefing, plus reflection by both parties on what has taken place.

Where POT is summative and forms part of a formal program, further administrative steps are involved: before the pre-observation meeting (notification of the upcoming observation to both participants) and after the post-observation meeting (production of a written report, and dissemination of findings to the department or program, perhaps with a view to identifying staff development needs).

Topics discussed at the **pre-observation meeting** should include: the lesson plan for the session; the key learning objectives (in the UniSA context, this would involve considering the graduate qualities being developed across the session and the course as a whole); the teaching approaches or methods to be adopted; and the context of the teaching (room, timetable, the status and history of the student group). Participants would also negotiate the role of the observer in the session; how the students will be informed of the upcoming visit; and aspects of teaching that the observee would like to receive feedback upon (Gosling 2000). In cases where it is not possible to meet up before the observation, contact by email or phone may replace the pre-observation meeting (Gosling, 2000).

During the **classroom visit**, it is important to keep the behaviour of participants as natural as possible to ensure that what the observer witnesses is representative of the instructor’s teaching practice. For this reason, Gosling (2000) recommends that the observer sit where they are not in the overt line of vision for the instructor or the group, but where they can see both instructor and group.

In the ideal case, the **post-observation** feedback meeting takes place as soon as possible after the observation meeting whilst events are still fresh in both participants’ minds (Martin & Double, 1998:164; Bell, 2005:28). Ideally, no more than a week should elapse between the meetings (Gosling, 2000). Observer and observee share a joint responsibility to keep the feedback focused and constructive (Gosling, 2000; Bell, 2005:27-31). A good feedback session will allow the instructor the opportunity to self-diagnose any possible weaknesses in their own teaching performance. Wherever possible, assessors should strive to be supportive and positive in their feedback and comments. To this end, Bell (2005:29-30) recommends the use of open-ended questions. The tenor of comments should be “The activity at the start of the class seemed to engage the students very well. Why do you think that was?” inviting comment and mutual reflection upon what took place in the classroom.

Any **written report** that is generated should evidence evaluations by describing particular events in the classroom (Gosling, 2000). Rather than stating “The instructor encouraged students to draw upon their prior learning”, a good report will state ‘The instructor posed a series of questions which encouraged students to relate the topic in hand to their prior understanding of the issues.”
Common concerns regarding peer observation

Time
For already busy academics, the investment of time required for POT might seem a commitment too far (Costello et al. 2010: 450). Siddiqui et al. (2007: 298) recommend spending 45-60 minutes on each of the pre- and post-observation meetings. Opinions vary regarding how long the observer should spend in the classroom. Whereas attending a full session can be onerous for a lesson of many hours, failure to attend all of the session can offer a distorted judgment of teaching effectiveness. Most commentators suggest that observers attend at least the first full hour of instruction. A written report of the observation will also consume at least two hours of an academic’s time.

To make the demands of POT realistic, it is generally not ideal to ask an academic to conduct more than two peer observations in a year. Peer Observation trios voluntarily working together to observe and be observed twice during the year (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2004: 494), offer a way of containing the time committed to POT.

Observer Bias
Some academics might fear that POT might lead to ‘unfair’ teaching evaluations. We trust our peers to behave in a professional manner, and to display the virtue of fair-mindedness in viewing the work of their colleagues. However, research suggests some areas in which bias might creep in to class observation reports.

Quinlan (2002:1046) tracked colleagues reading and assessing a teaching portfolio. She discovered that academics were likely to compare the teacher’s practices to their own experiences, that of their colleagues, and to a vision of what is typical, normal or traditional in teaching the area. In other words, those regarding themselves to be good teachers may treat their own practice as a benchmark against which to judge the performance of others.

The existence of differing conceptions of what constitutes effective teaching could be a source of observer bias. Pratt et al. (1998, 2005) have identified 5 teaching perspectives, or unconscious philosophies underlying teaching:

1. **Transmission** – Effective Delivery of Content
2. **Apprenticeship** – Socializing students into new behavioural norms and professional ways of working.
3. **Developmental** – Planning and conducting teaching from the learner’s point of view.
4. **Nurturing** – Teaching involves the heart as much as the head.
5. **Social Reform** – Effective teaching seeks to change social structures in substantive ways.

Each perspective on teaching can be viewed as an interrelated set of beliefs, intentions and actions that form a ‘lens’ through which educators see their work (Courneya et al. 2007: 70). A teacher who adopts the ‘transmission’ perspective on teaching would unconsciously favour lecturing as a form of classroom delivery, whereas a ‘nurturer’ or a ‘developer’ would favour a more student-centred approach to learning. Whilst teachers embrace elements of all perspectives in their practice, most teachers have been found to favour one ‘dominant’ teaching perspective over the rest. Courneya et al. discovered that peer observers were likely to evaluate positively the performance of those teachers whose dominant teaching perspective resembled their own, and disvalue performances by teachers whose dominant
One important lesson of the Courneya et al. study concerns the need to train peer observers for their role. Courneya et al. found that once subjects were trained in identifying teaching perspectives, some staff offered more favourable assessments of teachers embracing alternative dominant perspectives. Training staff in identifying teaching perspectives also gave the study participants descriptors for what they saw in the classroom, a vocabulary they might use in communicating with observees (Courneya et al. 2007: 76). An instructor’s dominant teaching perspective may be strongly influenced by her own learning style, and this suggests that another useful vocabulary would be available to those peer observers who were made familiar with theory of learning styles. Use of a pro-forma for written reports would help lay out the criteria upon which an evaluation is based. This would simultaneously help observers communicate with observees, and ease observees’ fears of unfair evaluation.

The recent ALTC project, ‘Peer Review of Teaching for Promotion Purposes’ recommends that applicants for promotion should have their teaching observed by a two-person team, comprising one discipline-specific peer reviewer (ideally drawn from the same broad discipline area as the applicant) and one staff member well-credentialed and experienced in learning and teaching (http://www.adelaide.edu.au/clpd/peerreview/). The research reviewed in this section suggests that some training in matters of learning and teaching would be appropriate for all would-be peer observers. Given such training, it would not be necessary to rely upon subject specialists where observation was not for promotion purposes. Using non-subject specialists as peer observers might prove an advantage, as lack of knowledge of the subject content would allow peer observers to focus their attention upon style of delivery and the way this impacts upon student learning.

Conclusion
The key consideration when sending observers into the classroom is they bring to their task an understanding of the sensitivities involved in the process of class visitation, and some knowledge of the variety of learning styles and teaching perspectives encountered in teaching practice. Given adequate institutional preparation in generating pro-forma feedback sheets, training observers and creating protocols governing the visitation process, POT can be a rewarding experience for all participants concerned.
Bibliography


*Peer Review of Teaching in Australian Higher Education: A handbook to support institutions in developing and embedding effective policies and practices* [referred to here as A Handbook] [http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/prot.html](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/prot.html)


