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Exploring the role of peer observation of teaching in facilitating cross-institutional professional conversations about teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how cross-institutional Peer Observation of Teaching (PoT) provided a structured opportunity for professional conversations by which observers and observees shared and developed their perspectives on teaching experience and skills. Such professional conversations offer opportunities for both parties to gain a perspective on practices that may have been taken for granted. Participants from three Higher Education institutions engaged in cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional PoT, followed by facilitated reflective conversations. This paper captures the factors for success that enabled continuing conversations on teaching and learning and highlights the value of supporting such conversations outside formal, uni-institutional peer observation programmes.

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Introduction

Professional conversations about teaching and learning can support the development of teaching practice in Higher Education (Ashgar & Pilkington, 2018; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). Professional dialogue is noted as a space for professional learning where professionals listen carefully (ibid) and can invoke reflection and thinking about practice. A mainstay of academic development work is community building (Gibbs, 2013; McCormack & Kennelly, 2011) and designing opportunities that enable professional dialogue to share, discuss, and reflect on practice.

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Peer Observation of Teaching (PoT) that specifically supports a peer review and collegial approach can be a valuable tool to scaffold professional dialogue about, and reflection on, practice. Many PoT schemes occur within the context of the same institution; therefore, it is worth exploring cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary PoT as an approach to foster and facilitate professional conversations and reflections.

This article explores PoT as a model to structure cross-institutional conversations about teaching and learning. Our research explored how to foster effective professional conversations in a cross-institutional PoT scheme. The methodology involved a longitudinal reflective process, commencing with the pilot peer observation process and culminating in a facilitated exploratory discussion. The findings discussed here provide insights into the conditions perceived as conducive to the nurturing of cross-institutional professional conversations about teaching and learning, and as well as how peer observation can contribute to the creation of safe and sustained professional dialogue.

Literature review

Taking time out for professional dialogue is advocated as a means for professional learning and reflection on practice (Ashgar & Pilkington, 2018; Haigh, 2006; Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). Schuck et al. (2008, p. 217) note that ‘sustained professional learning requires prolonged engagement in professional conversations’. Thus, in academic development, a priority of our work is to scaffold such dialogue and to create space for ongoing conversations about professional teaching practice (Gibbs, 2013).

PoT is a formally recognised activity that can provide a structure for dialogue about professional practice. Gosling (2002) identified three possible purposes for PoT: An Evaluation model, a Development model, and a Peer review model. The developmental and peer review models encourage collegiality, trust, and mutual respect aiming to foster reflection and critical discussion on what good teaching constitutes (Yiend et al., 2014) whilst the evaluation model is often equated with performance appraisal (McMahon et al., 2007). The approach described in the current paper is underpinned by Gosling’s Peer Review model. This is a reciprocal model, based on an equal and dialogic approach, whereby teachers observe each other’s’ practice based around a set of mutually agreed issues or parameters and then engage in discussion and reflection about teaching. This approach has demonstrated potential benefits for both observers and observees. Reported benefits for observees include learning from feedback provided by the observer (Hendry & Oliver, 2012) and gaining reassurance and confidence in one’s abilities as an educator (Donnelly, 2007; Whipp & Pengelley, 2017). Observers report benefits derived from learning about new teaching and learning strategies and being prompted to test these in their own practice (Hendry & Oliver, 2012), and from comparing and contrasting the observees’ context with their own (Tenenberg, 2016). Through observing others practice, observers learn about and reflect on their own practice (Sullivan et al., 2012). More generally, such approaches to PoT can contribute to the development of collegiality among colleagues, with teaching seen as a topic for communal discourse (Whipp & Pengelley, 2017).

Tenenberg (2016) argues that PoT is best applied in the context of a single discipline, arguing that it is essential that the observee has an understanding of the disciplinary

context, the material being taught, and the signature pedagogies of the discipline. However, for Torres et al. (2017, p. 824) “it can be precisely this disciplinary focus that sometimes hinders deep reflection about teaching practices”. Cross-disciplinary PoT pairings can move participants away from a primary focus on the disciplinary context and on the material being taught, and towards a focus on the teaching approaches employed and on the students’ engagement with them. Furthermore, cross-disciplinary PoT can facilitate exposure to pedagogical approaches outside those traditionally employed within one’s home discipline and can allow for a more collaborative and equitable relationship in the PoT pairing (Torres et al., 2017). Although much of the literature is focused on PoT in the context of a single institution, reports of cross-institutional approaches to PoT are beginning to emerge in the literature, particularly in online contexts. Advantages include the removal of issues of power and facilitating the unbundling of teaching from context (Walker & Forbes, 2018).

A key aspect of PoT is its role in encouraging critical self-reflection (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Peel, 2005). As Gosling (2002, p. 38) explains

The spirit of collaborative peer observation is not that the peer claims expertise in observation but rather he or she is a colleague who operates in good faith to assist the teacher being observed to reflect on and consider teaching problems as interesting professional issues about which all teachers should be curious.

Kenny et al. (2014), implementing a peer review model of PoT, reported that the opportunity for reflection in a collective manner facilitated an appreciation of collegial professional development. The role of participants in peer observation as constructive, critical friends is thus key to supporting both reflection and effective dialogue between participants (Carroll & O’Loughlin, 2014). Effort needs to be expended in creating the structures and environments in which such reflection and dialogue can flourish. McCormack and Kennelly (2011) reported that three factors – connection, engagement, and safety – facilitate the creation of ‘conversation communities’ (pp. 528). The cross-institutional PoT scheme described, thus offered a strategy for peer-professional discussion, joint problem solving, and opportunity for engagement in learning partnerships offering occasions of reflection on teaching practices. Next, we describe the context and phases of this scheme.

Context

In 2017, three Higher Education Institutions initiated a collaborative cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional scheme of PoT. PoT had previously been implemented in each of the participating higher education institutions. To this end, academic developers from the three institutions collaboratively proposed that a cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary approach to PoT might be piloted.

Our PoT process was underpinned by Gosling’s (2002) peer review model. Participation was sought from academics who had engaged in PoT and/or other academic development opportunities in their respective institutions. Ten volunteers participated and engaged in initial workshops on peer observation, reflective practice and feedback approaches. The volunteers were from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, which included education, business, computer science, pharmacy, geography,

economics, management, and health informatics. Large-group teaching was a common teaching context for the participants; thus the large lecture format became the common focus of both observations and professional conversations between peer dyads. Reflective templates were provided for participants to submit a written reflection on their experience and learning.

A subsequent evaluation (Crehan et al., 2017) explored this PoT scheme and hoped that the output would lead to enhancement of teaching and learning in large group lecture settings, while fostering reflection on practice. Evaluation findings highlighted the perceived benefits of academics viewing their teaching practice through a different lens, particularly in the cross-institutional context. Furthermore, there was an appetite for future cross-institutional cross-disciplinary observation of teaching schemes.

By 2020, while no further formal work had progressed in this area, anecdotally, the facilitating academic developers were aware that conversations had continued among participants in the subsequent years, and thus sought to explore the continuing 'back-stage' conversations. Furthermore, an agreed conclusion of the previous evaluation was the need to continue to consider how cross-institutional peer observation of teaching can encourage reflection and dialogue about teaching in higher education and help in moving from teaching as a solitary practice towards an opportunity to learn from peers. Moreover, as noted previously, Schuck et al. (2008, p. 217) point out that 'sustained professional learning requires prolonged engagement in professional conversations', we therefore wanted to consider how best to foster the conditions for longitudinal conversations about teaching practice. This paper discusses the findings of this research and highlights the factors for success that enabled continuing conversations on teaching and learning and the value of supporting such conversations cross-institutionally.

Method

Early in 2020, a convening discussion took place between the academic developers and the participants to discuss revisiting the cross-institutional PoT scheme. All agreed that this was a key opportunity to provide a structured format to reflect on past and on-going conversations between the peer dyads. During this discussion, the participatory nature of this exploration was acknowledged, thereby the participants became co-researchers in the exploration of the continuing reflective conversations.

A structured format for exploring the original peer observation scheme was agreed. Participants undertook to revisit their initial individual reflections and consider how they had evolved and developed in the intervening period. A reflection template was provided which could be used to guide those reflections. Peer dyads, who had previously acted as peer observers in the pilot scheme, met to discuss and document ongoing conversations using the reflections from the template. The participants then came together with the academic developers for a facilitated reflective discussion. It is worth noting that these steps in the process were undertaken shortly after the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the cessation of face-to-face interactions in Higher Education. All meetings therefore took place using online conferencing software, and whilst this presented some logistical/technical issues, it appeared to facilitate open and honest discussion amongst the group.

Two data sources were explored for research purposes. Firstly, the online group meeting was recorded and transcribed. Using a thematic analysis approach (Braun &

Clarke, 2006) each academic developer coded the transcriptions, compared codes, and generated themes. Secondly, the written reflections of participants were coded, and themes generated. Themes from both data sources were then compared and agreement was reached on the overall themes. The themes and the transcriptions were shared with the participants and feedback invited.

Analysis

This section discusses specific themes that arose across the data: sharing and listening to stories of practice; focus on pedagogy in a listening environment; honesty and openness; and a longitudinal approach enabled deep reflection. These themes relate to elements of the process and were perceived to contribute to conditions conducive to professional dialogue.

Sharing and listening to stories of practice

For the participants, sharing and listening to stories of practice was integral to conversations and to the learning experience. The articulation of roles and teaching approaches was central to establishing perspective and an understanding of context:

... one of the things that ... we discovered in this conversation using additional insights from our recent experiences in these different roles is that part of it is indeed about pedagogy and exactly what you do, but part of it is about telling a story of what you do. And sometimes a lot of us are good teachers in terms of doing it, but much less good in telling a story be it in writing or in presentation (P3)

At a very basic level, the presence of another and the task of reflecting together on a teaching experience supported the ability to construct these narratives and communicate them to each other:

Having somebody there who's an authentic participant in a way helps you to articulate the value of this personal story (P2)

Throughout the peer observation process the academic developers consistently returned to the factors which might be conceptualized as establishing the optimal climate for effective conversations about practice. As noted above, McCormack and Kennelly (2011) attributed the development of such authentic conversation to the three factors of connection, engagement and safety. The academic developers were thus motivated to explore if and how these factors might be evident to or perceived by our participants.

The analysis of the participants' reflective discussions revealed a number of elements which appeared to foster the best conditions for effective professional conversations to occur. Influenced by Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) and McCormack and Kennelly (2011) key enablers for authentic learning conversations to occur between practitioners were identified. As described previously, the process may be seen as occupying a liminal space somewhere between formal peer observation of teaching feedback protocols and more informal conversations; the nature of which can play a distinct role in supporting academics' reflection on practice (Thomson & Trigwell, 2018). For the participants, the structure and process of the initiative enabled development of trusting relationships

which underpinned what they described as authentic reflection and learning. The central factor may be viewed as the cross-institutional/ cross-disciplinary context which enabled the conditions related to a sense of safety and comfort in authentically engaging in dialogue about practice. The role of the academic developers as designers and co-reflectors in the process also scaffolded these enablers.

Whilst some of the participants were new to peer observation of teaching, a number had experience of observation within a specific institution or discipline area. Regardless of experience, the value of the process for participants was the cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary context. The perceived absence of institutional or disciplinary agendas or ‘baggage’ allowed a shrugging off on assumptions and the different context and/or space facilitated a tuning into a different learning and teaching frequency:

Part of the setting . . . was getting that feeling of this is what the student sees, or, you know, this is how the student sees it. So when you look at, for example, what infrastructure was there, you know, you’re saying it the way that they see it, you’re hearing the clarity, the way the student hears that; the speed and so on. (P5)

The conversations which occurred precipitated a reflective process outside of the disciplinary or institutional comfort zone:

It was so helpful to have someone fundamentally question what you were doing and focus on delivery and approach to teaching and learning instead of the usual content-focused conversations I was more accustomed to with institutional peer observation. (P4)

The cross-institutional context thus appeared to create a safe environment which supported both authenticity in reflective conversations and a space in which to unpack disciplinary or institutionally based assumptions.

Focus on pedagogy in a listening environment

The focus of both the observations and subsequent conversations was on pedagogy rather than the curriculum, observing one another’s teaching without bias or judgment and through the eyes of the student. This was particularly the case when participants reflected on the focus of their conversations. Looking at practice through the lens of a practitioner from another discipline created an opportunity to step back and to question previously accepted approaches in relation to structure and process:

It helped us to focus on the pedagogy, rather than the learning content. As academics, we tend to have very strong opinions about things. If we had been working in the same discipline, there’s a risk, we might have gotten into kind of that, you know, argument about what topics should be covered in what sequence . . . the kind of things that are about curriculum rather than about pedagogy. So because we were authentically in a different learning space, the focus was very much on the pedagogy. (P2)

There was a sense that participants were ‘authentically learners in each other’s classes’, and a sense of comfort in being open about all aspects of practice, ‘warts and all’. The structure of the process gave time for the paired individuals to become comfortable with each other and some took the time to have several meetings before the observation.

Honesty and openness

Establishing that sense of trust enabled honest and open conversations and perspectives which further supported the ability to question assumptions:

It got me out of my comfort zone cos I couldn't comment on the content. So it made me focus more on the pedagogical elements and the delivery. (P4)

Participants were forced to explain details of their teaching which they were less likely to do in conversations with a colleague from their own discipline. They were also surprised by commonalities between areas of teaching focus in their subject areas:

I had so many assumptions this is going to be lots of numbers. This is going to be all about computers. What I was really surprised about . . . actually opened up my mind a lot is that a lot of what xxxx was talking about was communication skills and things that I never would have expected in that field . . . we actually were both talking about communication skills, but just from different perspectives, but there was a lot of commonality between areas seemingly quite disparate. (P4)

A longitudinal approach enabled deep reflection

A common theme of reflection was the impact of the duration of the process and the opportunity to return to the initial reflections and re-examine them together. This, for some, provided an insight into the potential for a different level of reflection as a consequence of an established relationship with their observation partner. Commenting on the initial exercise:

You had advised us, guided us, in advance of the observations to be very specific about the questions that we asked. What do you want feedback on? And we were both very specific. We were wondering, where are we very specific because we were being compliant. We were doing what we were told. Or were we wondering, was it because we didn't know one another, we have met one another. We were all in unfamiliar territory. We both independently came to the conclusion that if we were doing this tomorrow, we were picking up where we left off. But that we would be in a different place in terms of what we'd be looking for. We'd be much more open, I think about the feedback that we get, having gone through that and built up the relationships that we have built up. And if we were doing it again, I think we both take a less fragmented, more holistic support kind of approach. (P2)

There was a sense that an established relationship and a trust in the process could shift perspective from an initial tactical focus on mechanical issues of practice (do I talk quick, too fast, or too slow, do I talk clearly – P3) to broader aspects of teaching impact:

Now I would be more interested to think, okay, holistically what I do in class, how it feeds into the learning outcomes. How can I measure the student learning from this? You know, like, typical, overarching things that you can observe in class, but they relate more to the bigger picture. (P3)

The explanation of that change was a source of critical reflection and is a noteworthy aspect of a structure which facilitated repeated opportunities to engage in reflective conversations. For some this was expressed as a recognition of the need to further interrogate self-development through the process:

Was it because we were guided by the assignment originally to be very focused and micro? Or was it because we didn't know each other well enough? Or maybe it's for me, maybe the whole thing changed my thinking. And now I'm thinking more holistically, I don't know. (P3)

For others, it was an affirmation and extension of existing views on the role of dialogue between practitioners:

It affirms my long-held belief that professional conversations enhance reflection on practice and teaching itself, and that cross disciplinary conversations may be more authentic, less threatening and more fruitful contexts for peer learning about/ scholarship in teaching and learning in HE. (P2)

The cross-institutional context was perceived by P2 as accommodating and supportive of dialogue. This is not to say that PoT would be unsafe within non-cross-institutional PoT settings but emphasises the requirement for building trust and collegiality in such schemes.

Discussion

This review and exploration of this cross-institutional PoT scheme provided insights into how professional conversations can be fostered and structured among academic staff. Overall, participants advocated PoT as a tool for structuring professional conversations. Relationships of trust were built over time with academic colleagues which were key to establishing professional learning alliances.

Notably, the cross-institutional context of the scheme, coupled with the facilitated and structured academic development approach were solid foundations for professional dialogue and learning among the academic staff involved. Consequently, this approach highlights the factors for success of professional conversations founded on openness, honesty, and trust among professionals.

The cross-institutional setting as context for conversations

Our findings illustrate that the cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary setting enabled academics to step away from their busy institutional settings and into new teaching contexts where they were unaware of institutional politics, biases, and behaviours. The external observers saw practices and structures with fresh eyes and asked open questions about them, helping to see the unseeable. Thus, opening opportunities for questioning of practices and structures. Participants reflected upon institutional structures and practices that had been accepted as normal for them.

Furthermore, the focus was on pedagogy rather than the curriculum, observing one another's teaching without bias or judgment. The external observers noticed the pedagogical practice more keenly and discerned commonalities of teaching practices across disciplines. For example, the practice of teaching communication skills was similar in different disciplines. Dialogue validated good practice, they gained reassurance and confidence in their abilities as educators (Donnelly, 2007; Whipp & Pengelley, 2017).

Observers asked questions with curiosity and without judgment about teaching practices. In turn, curiosity sparked dialogue about teaching practice and institutional

practices. In this cross-institutional setting, professional conversations centred around stories of practice, whereby participants made sense of realities through the act of telling (McDrury & Alterio, 2002). Indeed, stories are recommended as a means to trigger and scaffold reflection (Moon & Fowler, 2008; Schön, 1988). Thus, meaning and development of new knowledge for participants happened through the integration of reflection with previous knowledge (Moon, 2006). Moreover, while conversations continued after the cessation of the original PoT initiative, key reflective learning was achieved through formal reflection on this scheme after three years, highlighting the importance of returning to learning after a period of time. This phased approach facilitated an appreciation of the need for continuing and sustained reflection and highlights the importance of longitudinal frameworks to scaffold opportunities and support for professional dialogue.

The scaffolding role of academic developers

Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) highlight that academics typically engage in professional conversations within small groups of trusted colleagues. Moreover, Torres et al. (2017) note that cross-institutional PoT projects can enable collaborative discussions where teaching is unbundled from context (Walker & Forbes, 2018). The academic developers who initiated this PoT scheme aimed to foster cross-institutional conversations about teaching and learning bringing colleagues out of their immediate local networks and enabling connections with new teaching academics to discuss practice and engage in deep reflection.

Academic developers encourage and scaffold conversations about practice. Firstly, they can initiate informal conversations between academics about teaching, and secondly, they reinforce relations between the learning from every day, informal, department-based conversations and the ideas from formally structured academic development programs (Thomson, 2015). Our approach as described herein may be seen as adding an additional layer to the role of the academic developer: sustaining initial conversations and facilitating academics in revisiting their conversations and learning from a meta-reflective perspective. For this role to operate effectively, a number of key elements may be discerned from our analysis.

For the academics involved, the process needed to feel safe, feasible, and relevant. The academic developers provided interventions to develop conditions to foster dialogue. The perceived aspects of safety are described above, but additionally the work of the academic developers in providing training, reflective tools and repeated opportunities for reflective conversation was perceived as providing a supportive framework to motivate participation:

My own students do some reflective writing, but still I wasn't doing it myself. This structured approach, . . . the coaching and the guidelines were really helpful to get there in the end. But I went on this other course which required a lot of reflective writing, and almost continuous to some degree. . . . I'm thinking to myself, you know, you've done this elsewhere, it's okay to do it here as well. And I think the more you do it, the better it becomes. So, I was really glad to have the opportunity to do this. And it's certainly appeared in the course I've been involved with over the last while. (P6)

The light touch checking in process with participants and the placement of the academic developers as participants in the group conversations also contributed to the perceived benefit and safety of the process:

So normally, like all my meetings are, you have to get this done by yesterday and why haven't you got that ready last week. And, but like this, this is one of the rare opportunities this, I get a chance to, like, just think about my teaching, or even to be in a safe space with like-minded individuals that if I use the word pedagogy that they will all keel over and turn off and, and whatever. And, and, you know, it's kind of a privilege to be in this group. (P7)

The experience also led some to reflect on the relationship between academic developers and other members of the academy and the potential role of that relationship in advancing not only reflection on practice but evidence-based approaches to learning and teaching. One participant commented on this in the final reflective conversation which took place in the midst of the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic:

[We] need to consider how to generate evidence of effectiveness to counteract prevailing assumptions about teaching in Higher Education. In the context of Covid-19 co-teaching might assume particular importance when working in synchronous sessions with large cohorts. And not just co-teaching involving two or more HE teachers but also highlighting the synergies possible when learning designers' academic developers collaborate with Higher Education teachers. (P2)

Finally, preparing an opportunity to revisit and reflect on this PoT scheme was significant. Participants considered their previous reflections through a new lens and recognised the learning that had taken place. They commented about seeing PoT more holistically, their capacity to envision teaching in the classroom and how it related to the whole curriculum, and how the institutional structures affected and supported good teaching.

Nonetheless, there are limitations to these findings. The academic participants involved had previous experience working with academic developers and an involvement with other teaching enhancing development activities within their institutions. Consequently, should this scheme be mainstreamed across higher education institutions, more thought into support structures might be necessary to ensure success with staff of different levels of teaching and learning experience.

For the most part, observations happened face-to-face within the HE institutions. However, in some instances it was logistically challenging to organise suitable times for observation during busy semesters. Instead, some teaching was recorded and viewed later between dyads. It seems that recording or online observation of teaching would also work for dialogue and reflection purposes.

Implications for academic development

The paper offers insight into how a cross-institutional PoT scheme became a suitable setting for continued professional conversations on teaching and learning practices. It has highlighted the conditions necessary to foster effective cross-institutional professional conversations among academic colleagues. Also, it can be noted that PoT, using a peer review and collaborative model, can be a worthy model to support longitudinal professional conversations and reflection on practice. The role of the academic developer was integral to supporting this process and scheme, ensuring feelings of trust, comfort and safety were established and sustained among participants. As such, the role of the academic developer as a partner in the establishment and nurturing of professional

conversations and reflections warrants further exploration. If, for example, we conceptualise such conversations in the context of Brookfield's (1995) critical reflection as 'stance and dance', what might the role of the academic developer be in safely choreographing that dance and recognising when to step in and when to step away?

Limitations of this study have been noted, nonetheless, findings may be useful to academic developers wishing to set up opportunities for open and honest professional dialogue about teaching and learning across institutions.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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