

## **OPEN CLASSROOMS: PEER OBSERVATION FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many teachers are reluctant to be "observed" because they associate observation with "evaluation", its traditional function. They feel uncomfortable at the idea of having another person - even a colleague - watching them teach and manage their classroom. However, over the past few years observation has taken on a completely new role and, under the right conditions, it can be a powerful learning tool and a very positive source of professional growth and development for both the observer and the observee. A systematic program of observation can open up classrooms so that teachers can share the many excellent techniques and innovations that they develop individually but which are accessible to their colleagues.

This paper draws on recent research and the experience of a structured observation program within an institute of higher learning. It will discuss some of the purposes and benefits of observation, give guidelines on how to set up an observation program, and suggest some possible aspects of teaching or learning which can provide a focus for observation activities.

Here I am with my lens to look at you and your actions.... I consider you a mirror. I hope to see myself, in you and, through you, my teaching. When I see myself, I find it hard to get distance from my teaching. I hear my voice, I see my face and clothes, and fail to see my teaching. Seeing you allows me to see myself differently and to explore the variables we both use.

*John Fanselow, 1990.*

### **Introduction**

When teachers hear the term "observation" they usually associate it with evaluation of their ability to teach. To be observed is viewed as an experience threatening to the psyche, in which one's vulnerabilities are exposed. But observation can be a positive experience if it is related to personal and professional growth, and if it is carried out in a collegial atmosphere of mutual trust. Many teachers are doing sterling work in their classrooms but, isolated from their colleagues, only their students benefit from their expertise and innovations. A structured program of peer observation is

one means by which classrooms can be "opened up" so that teachers can share ideas and learn from each other.

This paper begins by reviewing the traditional pedagogical uses of classroom observation. Peer observation is then defined and its characteristic features are listed. Drawing on the findings of several studies, some of the benefits of peer observation are then outlined. A substantial part of the paper is taken up with a detailed description of the procedures to be undertaken when setting up a peer observation exercise in a school or department, including some suggested aspects of teaching and learning processes which could form the focus of observations. Finally, the experiences of carrying out a peer observation exercise in a local institute of higher education are shared, and some suggestions are made for the successful implementation of such an exercise in other contexts.

### A Brief History of Classroom Observation

Peer observation appears to have evolved from four separate pedagogical traditions related to classroom observation:

- **Teacher training.** For at least the past 50 years, classroom observation by training supervisors has been employed as an evaluative measure of the ability of teacher-trainees.
- **Research into teaching behaviors.** Flanders (1960) developed "interactional analysis", based on observing actual teacher and student activities in the classroom, as a tool to reveal patterns of classroom behavior. Activities were observed at regular intervals of time and coded according to a set of pre-determined categories. Flanders' study was the first of many which attempted to identify effective teacher behaviors through objective measurement and analysis of data.
- **Comparative methodological research.** Systematic classroom observation became a prime source of data for evaluating the effectiveness of different teaching methodologies. One of the first such studies was the 'Pennsylvania Project' carried out in the 1960s to compare the efficacy of the audio-lingual method in language teaching (Allwright, 1988).
- **Clinical supervision.** Clinical supervision, which had its beginnings among a group of teacher educators at Harvard University in the 1950s, is most closely associated with Goldhammer (1969). It drew on psychological counselling techniques to provide a more effectual way of enlightening teachers about their own classroom behaviors than the existing practice of having "classroom visitors" offer their own, often subjective, advice

Despite its varied origins, most teachers still associate classroom observation with "evaluation" for administrative purposes such as appointment to a teaching post, confirmation in a post, annual assessment, and promotion.

However, under the right conditions it can be a powerful learning tool and a very positive source of professional growth and development for both the observer and the observee. Furthermore, the advantages are not limited to the individuals concerned: a whole department or program can benefit from a structured program of Peer Observation.

## **Peer Observation and Clinical Supervision: Some Definitions**

"Peer Observation" as used in this paper is most closely related to the concept of Clinical Supervision which was first expounded by Goldhammer and his colleagues in the 1960s. As Smyth notes, the term "clinical supervision" itself has some negative connotations: "It conjures up pathological images because of the medical use of the word clinical, while it also has inspectorial and quality control overtones associated with matters supervisory" (1984: 2). However, these associations are misleading; instead, the "clinical" aspect relates to the objectivity of the observation in the classroom "clinic" and of the analysis of the data recorded there, while "supervision" in this context refers to a process in which colleagues work collaboratively to establish a framework within which they analyze their own and each others' teaching.

Like clinical supervision, peer observation assumes that individual teachers are unheralded experts, whose expertise is often unrecognized. Collectively, teachers possess an impressive array of skills and strategies which all too often remain fragmented and under-utilized by the wider community of teachers because it is not available for them to access.

A separate and parallel problem is the lack of opportunity for teachers to develop themselves professionally. Although it is certainly true that teachers learn from experience, "it is no longer professionally acceptable to assume that individual teachers, if left to their own devices, will somehow mysteriously and autonomously develop and flourish" (Sergiovanni & Starret, 1983, cited in Smyth, 1984: 4).

Peer observation addresses both these problems. It provides a means by which collectively held professional knowledge and expertise can be tapped. It also offers a way in which teachers can obtain outside help and feedback in a supportive, collegial relationship, which enables them to reflect on their teaching and modify their own practices in a process of continuous professional growth and development.

The implicit rationale for a program of peer instruction is to improve teaching practices by providing timely and relevant feedback on aspects of a teacher's classroom instructional practices that are of interest and concern to the individual teacher himself or herself. Basically, it encourages teachers to become more reflective about their classroom practices, to become more aware of the complex events and processes taking place in the classroom, and to enable them to see how they may play a more effective role in the teaching-learning process.

### **Characteristic Features of Peer Observation**

Peer observation is characterized by a number of distinctive features which distinguish it from other forms of classroom observation carried out for administrative, evaluative purposes. These features include:

1. Observation is carried out in a non-threatening, supportive atmosphere based on mutual, collegial trust.
2. It is a structured system of observation with a set of procedures. Although it is possible that individual teachers could undertake peer observation at their own initiative, it is more likely that the program administration will need to initiate a peer observation exercise.

3. The procedures adopted should provide teachers with as much autonomy in decision making as possible. For example, they should choose their observers, decide which aspects of their classroom behaviors or activities they wish to be the focus of the observation, and decide on any action to be taken subsequent to the observation.
4. All feedback is formative, rather than evaluative; it is descriptive rather than judgmental.
5. Observations are objective rather than subjective; data recorded during the observation is in measurable units rather than impressionistic.
6. The program administration should remain as unobtrusive as possible, although it may have initiated the exercise. It may also be necessary for the administration to facilitate the peer observation exercise by providing support activities such as organizing a workshop for participants to clarify the objectives of the exercise and explain the procedures involved.

### **Benefits of Peer Observation**

A number of studies of peer observation exercises have been carried out, mainly in the United States. They unanimously report that the exercise produced significant benefits for both the teachers involved and for the program in which it was carried out. In a 1991 study, Storla reported that a peer observation program carried out among first-year composition instructors at the University of California, San Diego enabled instructors to see students from a different perspective; was well-received by instructors, who were receptive to learning from someone on their own level; and made it possible for instructors to see new teaching techniques in an actual classroom setting. The study also found that the exercise resulted in better communication among instructors, an enhanced sense of instructional mission, an improved atmosphere of cooperation among lecturers in the program., and more confidence and self-esteem on the part of the instructors (Storla, 1991).

Findings from a peer observation program implemented among American and Japanese teachers at a Japanese two-year college were similarly positive. The project met the anticipated goals of making teachers aware that positive things were happening in their classrooms, and that they could rely on other teachers for support, encouragement, and feedback. In addition, teachers gained valuable insights into aspects of their teaching, observers learned from their colleagues' teaching, teachers worked more together rather than in isolation and became more involved in preparing for their classes (Einwacchter, 1992).

Finally, in a study of a year-long peer observation exercise among experienced high school teachers in a South Carolina school district, teachers and administrators admitted that although there had been some minor problems involved in implementing the program, overall the effects were positive, including: an increased sense of professionalism, new relationships with colleagues, a more reflective view of teaching, and improved classroom instruction (Egelson, 1994).

### **Setting up a Peer Observation Exercise: Procedures**

#### **Preliminaries**

Before embarking on a peer observation exercise, it is first necessary to ensure that teachers involved will have sufficient time to undertake the observations. For this reason, it is helpful if the exercise can be carried out during a "low season", when teaching loads are lighter. Another important

preliminary which the administration will need to organize, is a workshop for all participants in which the aims and objectives of peer observation are outlined and the procedures for carrying out the observations are explained. A final preliminary step is for teachers to decide who among their peers will be their observers and for whom they, in turn, will act as observers.

### **The Five Stages of Peer Observation**

Goldhammer (1969) set out a five-step method of clinical supervision which forms the basic structure for a peer observation exercise. The five stages consist of:

1. Pre-observation Conference. Observer and observee meet to arrange the observation time, to give the observer some context about the lesson to be observed, to clarify how the observation will be carried out and establish some ground rules for the observation (see later section on "Etiquette for Observing"), and discuss what specific focus the observee wishes the observer to look for in the lesson.
2. Classroom Observation. The observer should be as unobtrusive as possible. He or she should come with pre-prepared checklists, and a class seating plan. Teachers who have acted as observers recommend that class activities and events be recorded on a sheet divided into two columns; the left column records the steps taken during the lesson, while the right column is used for comments. They also recommend recording whatever seems important, both positive and negative, even though not all of it will necessarily be presented to the observee later (Seaver, 1996).
3. Analysis. Both observer and observee, separately, look over the data collected and try to uncover patterns, themes, or tendencies related to the focus of the observation.
4. Post-observation Conference. This should be held as soon as possible after the observation session. Observer and observee meet in a collegial atmosphere to discuss the data and their interpretations of it. As far as possible, the observer should allow the observee to lead the meeting and to reach his/her own conclusions. Above all, the observer should avoid making judgmental remarks or comparisons with other lecturers.
5. Post-conference Self-analysis. In this final stage the observer and observee should both, separately, reflect on their current teaching practices and, in the light of their discoveries through the observation process, determine whether they wish to introduce any changes into their classroom instructional techniques.

### **Some Possible Areas for Observation Focus**

Although the observer may wish to make a preliminary visit to the classroom he or she will later observe, just to get an overall impression or to help determine the eventual focus of the observation session, it is important that for the observation session itself a focus or task for the observer has been predetermined (at the pre-observation conference). This is because there is simply too much going on in the classroom for the observer to record *everything* that is taking place.

Ideally, the observee-teacher will determine the focus of the observation session based on areas of instructional practice for which he or she would like some feedback. However, in the initial stages of an observation exercise it is helpful to have some suggestions of possible areas for investigation. A list of possible focus for observation is set out on the following page.

1. **Pupil time on task and involvement in assigned work:** to determine learner involvement in classwork and in tasks set by the teacher.
2. **Teacher's position and movement in class:** to determine the teacher's mobility and attention to learners in various parts of the classroom.
3. **Verbal interaction patterns:** to determine whether student involvement is widespread in class and to locate the verbally active and inactive parts of the class and students in the class.
4. **Language of questions:** to determine the types of questions posed by the teacher, the types of responses received from students, and the teacher's responses to them.
5. **Teacher's reaction to inattention and misbehavior:** to determine how the teacher handles these when they occur.
6. **Variety of teaching techniques and materials:** to determine the variety of resources used by students during a particular lesson.
7. **Teacher's use of time:** to determine how much class time is used on activities primarily related to teaching and learning (activities of different types) and how much time is taken up with non-instructional matters.
8. **Criticism and praise:** to determine what kind of behavior the teacher singles out for criticism and/or praise, the language the teacher uses to criticize/praise, and how criticism/praise is distributed among students.
9. **Variety of teaching methods:** to determine whether the teacher uses a variety of teaching methods, whether they are appropriate for the content, and whether the teacher's repertoire of methods is sufficient.
10. **Teacher language:** to determine the level of language used, the pace and complexity of the vocabulary and structures used, the clarity and completeness of instructions and explanations given.
11. **Teacher-student reaction and interaction:** to determine how the teacher responds to students' errors and how students respond to the feedback from the teacher. Is the feedback verbal or non-verbal, encouraging and positive or negative and threatening?
12. **Classroom management:** to determine who does the talking and to whom, who questions and who responds, how the teacher involves (or does not involve) students. The signposts used by the teacher to introduce tasks and to move from one task to another.
13. **Questions and responses:** to determine the type of question prompts given, the amount of wait-time for responses, and the purpose of the questions.
14. **Student interest and participation:** to determine teacher-student rapport and involvement.
15. **Use of blackboard, whiteboard, visual aids.**
16. **Teacher's non-verbal behavior:** use of voice, intonation and loudness; facial expression, eye contact; gestures.

17. **Case study:** to concentrate on one or a few students who are of special concern to the teacher.

*(From Smyth, 1984; and Wajnryb, 1992)*

### **Etiquette for Observing**

The following suggested guidelines for classroom observers are based on those offered by Pennington and Young (1989) and supplemented with some of my own:

1. Observation sessions should be held only after the teacher has had time to develop a good rapport with students.
2. The observer should arrive before the class begins, to allow some minimal contact with students, and an introduction to the class before the lesson begins.
3. The observer should not sit at the front of the class. The side of the room often offers a better view of what is going on, but observer's location will depend on class layout.
4. The observer should be as unobtrusive as possible and avoid distracting behavior.
5. It is desirable for the observer not to participate in the action of the class, and the observer should resist the temptation to give any kind of verbal or non-verbal input or feedback during the observation, either to students or teacher. However, in some cases it may be necessary for the observer to interact with students to get a better look at what they are doing.
6. The observer should leave the class with a smile and thank the observee for the opportunity to visit the classroom. Any discussion between observer and observee should take place outside the classroom.
7. The observer should consciously strive to be collegial, non-judgmental, positive, and supportive before, during, and after the observation.
8. Observations should be carried out in an atmosphere of mutual trust, and should not be discussed with other teachers or administrators.

### **A Brief Report of a Peer Observation Exercise**

A peer observation exercise was introduced during the Spring semester for lecturers on the University Preparation Program (UPP) at PPP/ITM's American Degree Program. Teaching loads are lighter during this semester, thus ensuring that time would be available for the observation and conference schedules. At a preliminary workshop, lecturers were provided with information about peer observation, and its potential benefits were discussed. Lecturers were requested to attempt to complete a series of three reciprocal observation sessions with one or more partners of their own choice. The involvement of the administration was limited to holding the workshop, setting the broad objective, reminding lecturers of the observation exercise at faculty meetings, and providing a report form for each observation session. It was requested that one copy of this form be given to the UPP Coordinator, merely as a record that the observation had taken place. Participation was on a voluntary basis; lecturers were not compelled to take part. Near the end of the semester, the

Coordinator distributed a brief questionnaire related to the peer observation exercise to all lecturers (see Appendix 1). Responses to the questionnaire form the basis for this report.

Of 15 lecturers teaching on the UPP, 8 participated in the peer observation exercise and completed the questionnaire. Two other lecturers responded to the questionnaire, stating that they did not take part in the exercise, giving the reason of time constraints for their non participation; five lecturers did not respond to the questionnaire. All respondents were experienced teachers: five have been teaching for more than 20 years. Respondents were equally divided on the basis of gender.

Four lecturers had undertaken two reciprocal observations at the time of the questionnaire, while two had completed three sessions. The other two, who had completed only one session, intended to schedule at least one more session before the end of the semester. Most did not mind being observed; only one lecturer "disliked" having someone observe him/her (the questionnaire was anonymous).

Among the specific aspects of their teaching that respondents asked observers to focus on during the observation session were the following: time on task, eye contact, teacher's movement around the classroom, classroom management, student interest and participation, students' responses to questions, teacher-student rapport and interaction, types of questions and answers, time management, and clarity of lesson content.

From studies of peer observation, 12 benefits were identified and listed as statements, and lecturers were asked to record the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, with 86 percent of the responses falling into the "strongly agree" (40 percent) or "agree" (46 percent) categories. The statement which received the most positive response was "Lecturers became more reflective about their own teaching". Other responses which received high positive responses were "Better communication among lecturers", "Lecturers gained valuable insights into their teaching/classroom behavior", and "Lecturers gained confidence". Respondents also generally agreed that the peer observation exercise gave them more sense of purpose, improved the atmosphere of cooperation, and resulted in increased professionalism in lecturers' attitudes. Two statements which received some negative responses (3 out of the 8 respondents indicated disagreement) were "Lecturers gained new skills", and "Lecturers changed their teaching methods or routines". Some other benefits cited by lecturers in response to an open-ended question were "It makes you realize that there are some areas in your teaching which you need to look into", and "Adds variety to the job; opens your eyes to other aspects such as management and teacher-training".

However, lecturers also noted some disadvantages. They mentioned that lecturers may be self-conscious and unnatural during the observation session, resulting in a different effect on the students. Two or three brought up the problems of trying to arrange sessions with unwilling -participants who had negative attitudes towards peer observation, and with lecturers who used it as an opportunity to criticize rather than be supportive. One respondent raised the problem of discussing "negative" matters with an observee - "not knowing how (or whether) to mention it" at the post-observation conference. The most vociferous comment was from one respondent who said that peer observation "raises the blood pressure of the observee".

Almost all eight of the respondents listed useful information they gained or techniques they learned as both observer and as observee, and five felt that it would be beneficial to have a peer observation exercise every semester because "there is all-round gain", and "it certainly improves teaching techniques and gets rid of peculiar habits which have become ingrained". One other respondent felt that once a year would be sufficient, and the remaining two did not wish to have any further exercises because "we are too busy most semesters", and because "it puts too much pressure on the

observee". Three respondents suggested that if a peer observation exercise were to be held in future there should be some provision for group meetings among those who have participated to discuss their experiences and share ideas.

Clearly, the peer observation exercise has had a generally beneficial effect on the participants, and on the University Preparation Program. It is hoped that the positive reception by the respondents will encourage non-participant lecturers to take part in any future exercise.

## Concluding Remarks

Findings from studies overseas and the small-scale survey carried out at PPP-ITM's American Degree Program are overwhelmingly positive, and clearly indicate that there are many benefits to be derived from a Peer Observation exercise, both for individual teachers and for the department or program in which they teach. Such an exercise will usually need to be initiated by the administration, but beyond acting in a facilitating role, administrators should remain uninvolved. Although peer observation is admirably suitable for language teaching classrooms, it does not need to be restricted to this area of teaching. In fact, it could be implemented at any level of education and in any discipline.

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### APPENDIX 1

#### PPP/ITM – ADP University Preparation Program

#### PEER OBSERVATION SURVEY

I would really appreciate it if you would complete this short questionnaire. The survey is anonymous – do not write your name. Place completed questionnaires in the sealed box under the mailboxes. Responses should either be circled, or marked with “X”. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Did you participate in the Peer Observation Exercise (POE)?
- Yes      No**

2. If you answered “No”, could you please say why you did not participate:

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*Thank you. You do not need to continue with this questionnaire. Please place it in the box provided.*

3. How many times did you observe another lecturer this semester? \_\_\_\_\_
- How many times were you observed by another lecturer this semester? \_\_\_\_\_
4. Choose one of the statements below which best describes how you felt about being observed by a fellow lecturer **before** you began the POE. (Mark the appropriate box with an “X”.)

STATEMENT	X
I enjoy having a person observe me.	
I feel comfortable having a person observe me.	
I don't mind being observed.	
I prefer not to be observed.	
I dislike being observed.	

5. Did you ask your observer/s to focus on specific aspects of your teaching/classroom behaviour?      **Yes      No**
- If “Yes”, which aspects: \_\_\_\_\_
-

6. The following have been suggested in various studies as being benefits of peer observation. Mark an "X" next to each, indicating whether you **strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree** with each statement:

STATEMENT OF BENEFIT	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
better communication among lecturers				
more sense of purpose as a lecturer				
improved atmosphere of cooperation				
lecturers gained confidence				
lecturers learnt new skills				
lecturers gained valuable insights into their teaching/classroom behavior				
lecturers "opened up"; became more willing to share with and learn from colleagues				
lecturers were able to accept feedback from peers				
lecturers became more reflective about their own teaching				
lecturers changed their teaching methods/routines				
lecturers used a wider range of techniques				
the POE resulted in increased professionalism in lecturers' attitudes				

7. Are there any other benefits of a Peer Observation exercise?

Please list below:

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8. Are there any disadvantages of a Peer Observation exercise?

Please list below:

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9. What is the most useful thing you gained/learned as an observer?  
\_\_\_\_\_

10. What is the most useful thing you gained/learned as an observee?  
\_\_\_\_\_

11. In your opinion, should Peer Observation be a regular feature, carried out every semester?

**Yes** because \_\_\_\_\_

**No** because \_\_\_\_\_

12. How would you rate the value of the Peer Observation Exercise (Place an "X" in the appropriate box)

VALUE OF P.O.E.	Very Useful	Useful	Not V. Useful	Not Useful
to you, personally				
to the UPP in general				

13. If the P.O.E. were repeated in later semesters, how could it be improved?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. How long have you been teaching (any teaching, anywhere)?  
<5 years   5-10 years   11-15 years   16-20 years   > 20 years

15. Please circle as appropriate

**Male**      **Female**

Thank you for spending the time to complete this questionnaire.