

Problematising the “received wisdom” of teaching observation: Developing academic practice or embedding the practice of academic development? (0245)

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Introduction

Teaching observation is widely used for professional development and integral to new lecturer postgraduate certificates in higher education teaching or peer observation for experienced staff (Fullerton, 2003). It has been reported that developmental approaches to teaching observation can have a transformatory role in the enhancement of teaching (MacKinnon, 2001). Focused as it is on the actual teaching experiences of lecturers and with specific, practical advice supplied by observers, observation is often accounted by lecturers to be the only valuable feature of their participation in centralised academic development. On the basis of such positive reports, and despite a continued lack of empirical evidence that teaching observation feedback from others can materially contribute to the development of practice, teaching observation has become embedded in institutional enhancement and assurance strategies (Cosh, 1998).

This paper will argue, that the construction of observation as a legitimate, useful practice within academic development research and practice discourses potentially asserts a powerful control on what can be said or not said about teaching observation both within the process itself and in reporting on its role in the enhancement of teaching. As such, whilst critique of the “received wisdom” of what is effective teaching is central to the aims of teaching observation, critique of the wider academic development rhetoric that operates around teaching observation itself is rarely broached in studies that promote observation as a fundamental enhancement activity. This paper seeks to locate an analysis of observation as an activity within the wider disciplinary project of academic development practice and scholarship. The aim is to explore how the construction of observation as an enhancement activity contributes to the debate about the disciplinary identity of academic development both in the attempt to establish higher education learning and teaching as an emerging field of study but also in terms of the potential foreclosure of critical perspectives that challenge the validity of such new disciplinary knowledge claims.

Framing teaching observation within academic development

As Peel (2005) has noted, the research on teaching observation has predominantly emphasised the methodological and implementation issues of observation with limited critical theorising of the process itself. The teaching observation literature available to researchers and practitioners is practice-based and largely draws on examples of existing teaching observation schemes to locate the observation process within a particular paradigm – is it formative or summative (e.g. Shortland, 2004); the model adopted in practice as this aligns to that paradigm – is the observation process evaluative, developmental or collaborative (e.g. Gosling, 2005); and the specific structural format of the process – how is briefing, observation and feedback organised (e.g. Brown *et al.*, 1993)? However, as Blackmore herself demonstrates in her evaluation of teaching observation practices in the literature, such “received wisdom” about effective teaching observation approaches can in itself become sufficient evidence for determining the “best practice” of the process (Blackmore, 2005, p. 219).

The two decades during which the expanding scholarship on the positive outcomes of teaching observation has emerged has seen academic development shift from a marginal to a near central activity in the university. In the context of the academy, the rise in the status of academic development has been explicitly linked to an emerging scholarship of the discipline (Bath & Smith, 2004). The significant issue in this disciplinary agenda is how this informs a conceptualisation of the theory-practice relationship enacted in the scholarship of teaching. Despite the self-interest in developing and contributing to a body of discrete knowledge about higher education learning and teaching, it has been suggested that such scholarship is also serving, perhaps indeed principally serving, wider political objectives driven by a “what works” discourse of evidence and utility for policy and practice in higher education research (Clegg, 2005, p. 416).

The signal outcome of the ongoing debates about academic development is that, as Lee and McWilliam (2008) suggest, such assumptions about academic development as both a politically-engaged practice and a researchable discipline fundamentally “structure the field of conceptual possibilities” (p. 70). Given that the new lecturer programmes within which observations take place “are not simply academic courses; they are change initiatives [and the] theory of change underlying the programmes needs to be articulated” (Bamber, 2008, p. 113), the inherent value placed on “what works” for the future of academic development practice must

challenge scholars in the field to question how such values might ultimately shape the evidence that is presented and the ends that it serves.

Methodology

This paper draws on a qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with five early-career lecturers and four observers engaging in formative teaching observation in the context of a postgraduate certificate in academic practice at a single UK research-intensive institution. Lecturers and observers were asked to discuss their perception of the process of teaching observation and the perception of the outcomes of engaging in observation in the context of their professional development. The thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006) of the transcribed interview data enabled the coding of a series of categories related to the values that underpin positive and negative perceptions of teaching observation.

Findings

The analysis of the interview data identified categories that underpinned judgements about the positive perception of teaching observation as a development initiative:

- *Utility.* Participants identified usefulness, relevance and practical application as central to their positive experience of teaching observation.
- *A developmental community of practice.* Participants asserted the importance of the social interaction, relationships and therapeutic potential of observation and their experience of socialisation into a community of practice through observation.
- *Conservatism and transformation.* Participants configured past approaches as conservative and observation feedback provided the opportunities for risk-taking and transformation of practice. This asserts a powerful change narrative central to positive accounts of observation interventions.
- *A shared language of learning and teaching.* Participants emphasised the role of observation in providing and embedding a shared language of learning and teaching in universities.

Conclusion

This paper argues that analysis of the values underlying positive accounts of teaching observation for enhancement can reveal the criteria by which academic development initiatives are evaluated within institutions. Such criteria provide insight into the ways in which academic development is being embedded in institutions and how this might be aligned to the political and disciplinary aspirations of the field.

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