Supporting academics in challenging times: New thinking on teaching observations

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Background and context

The aim of this research was to explore how learning conversations following observation of teaching might both improve practice and provide support for academics working in a challenging environment in one UK University. The intention was to identify the appropriate skills, knowledge and integrated understanding that would benefit both the researcher's own institution and other educational developers working in higher education. The specific best practice focused on was the discourse with academic staff following teaching observation and how particular ways of giving feedback could positively make a difference to their professional development. This research project involved observing the teaching of 10 academics on three separate occasions. The academics received personalized, work-based support after each observation in the form of 'learning conversations' with an experienced educational developer. In these encounters they were invited to focus on their role as 'teachers', reflecting on how they approach teaching undergraduate students and how they experienced the feedback discourse post-observation.

Previous literature

The literature on teaching observation in higher education, although plentiful, tends to focus on accounts of how initiatives were planned and introduced. Gosling and O'Connor offer a collection of case studies looking at the introduction of peer observation of teaching at six UK universities. It optimistically assures us that peer observation of teaching can 'provide a framework which, at best can enable the dialogue to be safe, constructive and contextualized within scholarly practice' (Gosling and O'Connor, 2009: 5). Yet what precisely is this dialogue and surely, if it is to be safe and constructive, it should be modelled along the lines of the best feedback practices for students? (Juwah et al, 2004) There appears to be an assumption that it is tacit knowledge and that all academics know intuitively how to do it.

Akerlind (2007) finds that taking individual needs into consideration rather than imposing a 'one size fits all' approach is essential. Shortland (2010) argues that a series of teaching observations allow those being observed to demonstrate on-going development and growth in a way that participation in a one-off teaching observation did not. Weller (2009) suggests that within peer observation there is potential for collusion over feedback, with a danger of being non-committal and insufficiently honest. There appeared to be a gap in the literature and a need to explore these important issues in more depth. These include questions such as how might a range of broader issues associated with teaching in higher education be integrated into teaching observation feedback and how do educational developers support and challenge simultaneously? Also, what are the conditions necessary to ensure that the teaching observation is a positive experience for both observer and observee?

Methodology

A 'best fit' was achieved between the research question and the main characteristics of action research .An action research approach is focused on bringing improvement through change; it views the insider practitioner researcher as an essential and credible subject for research and advocates that any exploration of others' experience must be carried out through democratic and collaborative processes (McNiff, 2002). The marriage between action research and grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin1990; Charmaz, 2006) was also a good fit. The action research approach was enhanced by a grounded theory approach to data analysis, the results of which led to development of a new conceptual framework for teaching observation practice.

Ten members of academic staff from engineering and computing science were observed teaching on three separate occasions over the course of one semester. The post teaching observation interview and discussion were recorded and analysed and in addition, participants were given the opportunity during the same timeframe to take part in follow up interviews if they wished. Other data collection sources included field notes from the teaching observations and the journal entries of the researcher.

Theory emerged from close and careful analysis of data from observation, discussion, interview and the researchers' journal entries. Whilst important to distil the findings down to common ground, dominant themes and shared values it was also important to recognise difference, variation and to be wary of generalisations.

Findings

Language and terminology was a recurring theme and the research recommends that assumptions and presumptions surrounding the use of the term 'peer' be addressed to avoid confusion and misrepresentation. It is most important that issues surrounding power, hidden agendas and intention are also discussed.

The key outcome was the development of a conceptual framework to support the enhancement of learning and teaching in higher education. Six different types of teaching activity were identified which were: delivering content; assessment and evaluation; boosting student engagement; managing learning spaces; demonstrating interpersonal and communication skills and painting a bigger picture .Each of the six categories was divided into sub-categories which provide further prompts and areas of consideration for 'learning conversations' with academic staff. It was recognised that while these sub categories were discrete they were also identifiable as part of the dynamic of the interactional space between learning and teaching.

The new conceptual framework does more than list teaching activities and identifies additional areas that offer a possibility for teaching observations to explore pedagogic practices in general including removing barriers to learning which might involve organisational and individual change. This include a consideration of the purpose of higher education and the dimensions of studentship, looking beyond a single teaching session to wider curricular and programme issues together with offering individual academics opportunities to recognise and plan for individual change .

Importantly, the framework makes explicit the dimensions of effective teaching observation practice which comprises of four main areas which are creating the conditions; pushing and pulling; best practice amongst observers with the final dimension being emancipation and democratisation.

Implications for practice

The originality of this study lies in the extent to which dialogic interactions between observer and observee have been scrutinized, the willingness to address some uncomfortable questions, the extent to which issues of power dynamics has been addressed and to consider the needs of academics and students jointly, to change and improve teaching observation practice. Research into the feedback process has highlighted the reciprocal nature of edifying conversations between colleagues. Despite the many protocols and policies that exist, it remains that any tool is only as good as its operator, and different approaches are needed before it can become an integral and welcomed part of professional life.

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4