

Serial number 0282

Title Learning about learning and teaching through collaborative observation

Submitter Dr. Vanessa Cui, Dr. Matthew O'Leary

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Abstract (150 words)

The recent introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework has positioned the quality of teaching high on the political and policy agenda. Yet the notion of 'teaching excellence' remains under-theorised and under-researched. Conventional means of measuring and improving teaching quality have traditionally been driven by a managerialist agenda that has done little to enhance staff and students' understanding of learning and teaching. This paper presents work from an ongoing HEFCE-funded project exploring an innovative collaboration between students and teaching staff through the shared lens of observation. Informed by current research, the project reconceptualises observation and repositions it from a performance management mechanism to a collaborative method of inquiry between students and staff. Underpinned by the philosophy that improving student learning requires teachers and learners to develop a contextualised awareness and understanding of learning, this project brings both parties together as co-interrogators and co-reflectors on their learning and teaching experiences and values.

Outline (1000 words)

Introduction and context

The title of this year's SRHE conference suggests that higher education (HE) is currently faced with a sector-wide challenge of how to balance the different expectations of its key stakeholders. Yet this is not a new challenge. HE has always been faced with the dilemma of attempting to satisfy the multi-faceted, multi-layered and sometimes conflicting interests and expectations of students, staff, sponsors, policy makers and society as a whole (e.g. Collini 2012). Thus the nature of the challenge per se is not new but rather the policy backdrop and wider socio-political and economic climate in which it is situated. Recent policy interventions have placed increasing demands on universities to demonstrate the quality of their teaching and the student learning experience. In turn the marketisation of HE has given rise to a culture of contrived competition in which institutions are now expected to participate in data collection exercises that purport to capture and characterise teaching excellence. Yet, as we argue, the data collected for such exercises invariably rely on reductive metrics that fail to reflect either the authenticity or complexity of HE teaching.

Conventional approaches for measuring and improving teaching quality have traditionally been driven by a managerialist agenda that has conceptualised academic staff as suppliers of a product (i.e. through their teaching performance) and students as consumers of that product (i.e. evaluators of their teachers' performance). In addition to the moral critiques of the application of these managerialist principles (e.g. Ball 2008; Biesta 2010), current

research suggests that managerialist practices do little to enhance understanding of learning and teaching and/or bring about subsequent improvements in the field (e.g. Green 2011).

Learning and teaching (L & T) are part of a complex, dynamic, inter-dependent relationship that comprises multiple elements (e.g. students, teachers, resources, environment etc). While research on staff and student perspectives and practices (e.g. Entwistle & Ramsden, 2015; Hativa & Goodyear, 2002; Prosser & Trigwell, 1999; Marton & Booth, 1997) may contribute to our broader understanding of L & T, the nature of learning and/or teaching in these analyses is largely reduced to a technology of behaviour. For academic teaching staff, the knowledge generated by such studies are of limited practical use when confronted with authentic learning and teaching encounters. With these limitations in mind, this raises the question of how we can create and nurture authentic and sustainable practice that involves learners and teachers collaboratively generating meaningful L & T experiences.

In drawing on a live HEFCE-funded project, this paper explores and discusses the development of an innovative partnership between academic staff and students, where students' inclusion in HE L & T is reconceptualised from passive consumer to active collaborator through the shared lens of observation. Working collaboratively as co-observers, co-reflectors and co-researchers, the project employs a methodology that creates and captures authentic, grounded encounters between students and staff. Using the observation of teaching as a meeting point for these encounters, both come together to interrogate their learning and teaching experiences with a view to developing a richer, reciprocal understanding that provides a platform for meaningful and sustainable improvement.

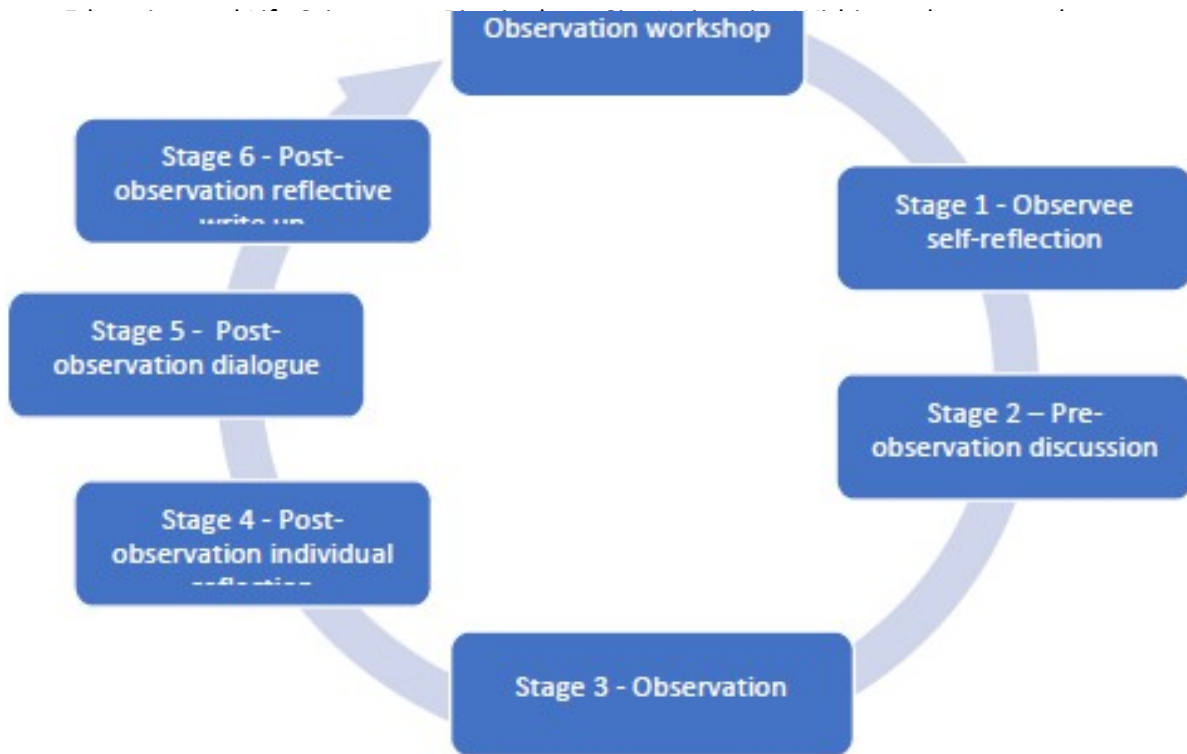
Conceptualisation and Methodology

At the heart of this collaborative approach is the reconceptualisation of student identity from 'consumers' and 'evaluators' of staff's teaching to co-researchers and co-producers of knowledge around HE L & T. Underpinning this collaborative observation process (Image 1) are the principles of reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995), learning as collective consciousness (Bowden & Marton, 1998) and participatory inquiry. We argue that improving student learning requires teachers and learners to develop an awareness and understanding of learning collaboratively in the context of their respective programmes of study. By using the shared classroom experience as a central reference point, teachers and learners come together to examine these experiences, identify and discuss the critical aspects and reciprocally reflect on their understanding.

A key feature of our methodology is the reconceptualisation and reconfiguration of observation as a method to enhance L & T practices. Recent research studies (e.g. O'Leary & Wood, 2016; O'Leary, 2016) have revealed that assessment-based models of observation

that seek to measure teaching performance can often be a deterrent to developing innovations in practice. In addition, most teaching observation models fail to provide meaningful opportunities to involve students. Our approach therefore aims to address this disjuncture by putting student voice and their active involvement in informing and shaping L & T at the heart of this innovation. Removing observation from the context of assessment creates an environment for reflection and dialogue between staff and students. In doing so, this opens new opportunities for the way in which observation can be used as a lens for informing staff and student understanding of effective L & T.

In this paper, we will explore and discuss how students and staff come together to co-investigate their classroom L & T experiences using data from an ongoing HEFCE funded Innovation in L & T project involving five case studies of undergraduate programmes in the Faculty of Health,



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Research domain:

Learning, teaching and assessment **(LTA)**