

Q10 Denbigh 1 Thursday 6 December 17.30-18.00

Collaboration as a catalyst for understanding and improving learning and teaching in higher education: staff-student collaborative observation (0502)

Matt O'Leary¹, **Vanessa Cui**² ¹Birmingham City University, United Kingdom ²Birmingham City University, United Kingdom

Introduction and context:

The recent introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (BIS, 2016) 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 largely been driven by a managerialist agenda that has done little to enhance staff and students' understanding of and subsequently improving learning and teaching (L & T) (Green, 2011). As a counter-narrative to managerialist approaches to quality assurance, we chose to reconceptualise and reposition observation from its traditional application as a tool for assessing and managing the performance of teachers in education to a collaborative method of inquiry between students and staff.

Between November 2016 and April 2018, the project *Improving learning and teaching through collaborative observation* took place at Birmingham City University (BCU), involving five undergraduate case studies. Underpinned by the philosophy that improving student learning requires learners and teachers to develop a contextualised awareness and understanding of L & T, the project brought both parties together as co-interrogators, co-observers and co-reflectors on their L & T experiences and values.

This paper reports some of the key findings from the case studies' two observation cycles. Connecting with the conference theme, this paper will focus on exploring authentic understandings from students and academic staff of meaningful L & T practices that challenge dominant policy discourse and conceptualisations of 'teaching excellence'. The paper will also reflect on the methodology of collaborative observation and invite delegates to envisage how a collaborative approach to understanding and improving L & T might be applied as an alternative to current managerialist approaches that tend to dominate HE practice.

Conceptual framework and underpinning theoretical lenses:

The Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) (Image 1) is underpinned by Brookfield's (1995) idea of the critically reflective practitioner. In our model, students and staff all take an active role in critically reflecting on their practices, viewing the 'same' classroom experience from their individual perspectives, while also exchanging their observations and reflections with each other. Our methodology draws individual perspectives together to observe L & T at a programme-specific level rather than focusing attention on an individual's practice or a one-off session. Central to our philosophy of improving L & T is thus the need for students and teaching staff to take shared responsibility for developing mutual understanding, using a shared frame of reference from which to generate new understandings of authentic L & T situations.

Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)

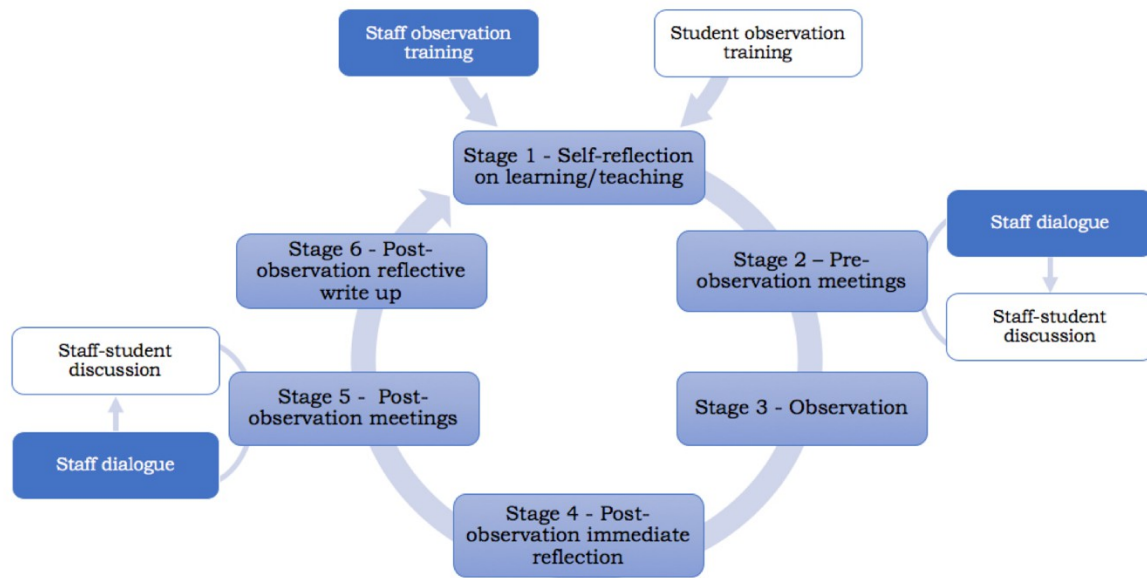


Image 1 – Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)

Methodology and methods:

The research study took place between January 2017 and April 2018. It involved staff and students from five case studies, BA(Hons) Early Childhood Studies, BA(Hons) Primary Education with Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), BA(Hons) Nursing – Adult, BA(Hons) Nursing – Child and BSc(Hons) Radiotherapy, at BCU. In each case study, a pair of academic teaching staff and a pair of students volunteered to take part in the project.

The case studies went through two cycles. The first cycle took place between January and June 2017 and involved the 2016-2017 first year cohort from each programme (with the exception of Adult Nursing). The second cycle took place between October 2017 and April 2018 with the same student cohort in their second year. The rationale was to develop a relationship between staff and students to carry out ongoing dialogue and reflection on learning and teaching rather than treating the observed sessions as an isolated episodic event. This is supported by Jarvis (2017) who argues that learning through making sense of an experience is an ongoing process and progress on understanding is built on evaluations of understandings on previous experiences.

During the two cycles of collaborative observations, a range of qualitative data was generated and gathered. This included: student focus groups to explore their understanding on learning and teaching, staff interviews on their views on learning and teaching and their practices, staff and student individual learning biographies, pre- and post- observation discussion notes and audio recordings, observation notes and post observation individual reflection from staff and students. In this paper, we will present some of the key findings from across the case studies. The project also carried out ongoing evaluations of the implementation of CoCO during the two cycles. A number of findings have emerged to highlight the impact, implications and challenges of bringing staff and students to co-observe and co-reflect on learning and teaching.

Emerging findings and implications:

- Learning as a social and collaborative act: during the two cycles of observation, students and lecturers looked learning and teaching through a social lens and made sense of their own learning/teaching in connection with their peers' and their teachers'/learners' understandings and practices. (In)congruence of the inter-relationship between learning and teaching was illuminated during the discussions. Subsequently, actions were taken by students and staff to improve their practices based on their situated understandings of the reciprocal exchanges between learning and teaching.
- Understanding and improving learning and teaching collaboratively is a process: during the two cycles of observation, students and staff went through a process of building relationships to create a safe professional environment for openly sharing their experiences and views. During this process, authentic views on learning and teaching were developed and shared between students and staff which prompt critical reflections on learning/teaching practices. Students' confidence in critically evaluating their learning grew with their understandings on learning and teaching. This played an important part in their developing increasingly active role in the collaboration with their teachers.
- As an unintended consequence of the collaboration, students and staff developed deeper empathy for their peers and their teachers/learners. This is an overlooked aspect in current policy thinking and discourse yet plays an important part in learners and teachers making sense of each other's thinking and practices. It allowed students and staff to consider learning and teaching through other's lenses when evaluating their experiences and taking a reflexive view when approaching learning and teaching.

Improving student learning requires meaningful understandings by both learners and teachers and their understandings shared to maximise the effectiveness of the interdependent relationship between learning and teaching. Current policy discourse on the product oriented approach to HE teaching and learning does not provide a constructive environment to foster such relationship and practice. This leads us on to considering collaboration as a catalyst for driving improvements in L & T in HE. Teaching excellence is important to learners and teachers, but before we can interrogate it in a meaningful sense, we need to develop a better understanding of the relationship between learning and teaching with learners and teachers.

References:

- Bowden, J. and Marton, F. (1998). *The University of Learning: beyond quality and competence*, London: Routledge.
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Department for Business Innovation & Skills. (2016). *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*. London: Department for Business Innovation & Skills.
- Green, J. (2011) *Education, Professionalism and the Quest for Accountability*. New York: Routledge.
- Jarvis, P. (2018). Learning to be a person in society: learning to be me. In Illeris, K. (2018) ed. *Contemporary theories of learning: learning theorists... in their own words*. Second edition. Oxon: Routledge.

Research domain: Learning, teaching and assessment