

Peer observation – why bother? A SWOT analysis

Ruth Benveggen and Lesley Curnick discuss the benefits of a useful PD activity.

Teachers can learn from each other in different ways and one of those ways is through peer observation. Head & Taylor (1997) state that peer observation aims at being supportive rather than evaluative, with a focus on teacher development rather than teacher training purposes, particularly if certain principles are respected. Such principles include teacher development being 'done with peers, and angled towards personal growth and the development of insights', whereas teacher training is 'done with experts' and angled towards the acquisition of knowledge (pp8–9). Bearing this in mind, this article discusses the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of peer observation, substantiated by a peer observation project that was set up in Lausanne University's Language Centre during the autumn semester of 2016–2017. The experience from this project shows that the many purposes for peer observation can benefit any team of teachers, particularly if certain steps are put into place, practised and respected.

Context

The Language Centre (CdL) of the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, offers courses in seven different languages to undergraduates, postgraduates and university staff at two sites: EPFL and UNIL. The teaching team consists of 37 experienced teachers, most of whom are qualified

to at least a Master's level. During the 13-week semesters there is little time for exchanging ideas, finding out what colleagues are doing in the classroom or holding training sessions or workshops, despite a noticeable interest in other teachers' methods and practices. With the agreement and support of the head of department, a peer-observation project was set up with the principal aim of encouraging staff to learn about themselves as teachers, possibly acquiring tips and ideas, both by being observed and by observing a colleague. The project was followed up by a questionnaire and team discussion session in order to find out the project's strengths and weaknesses.

Strengths of peer observation

Strengths of peer observation are many, but one is possibly more central. Observed teachers initially need to spend some time reflecting on their own practices to identify their own strengths and weaknesses. Using a list of teaching dimensions, which included both universal teaching categories such as lesson structure or interaction, and institutional categories such as plurilingualism, CdL teachers analysed and determined 2–3 points to receive feedback on. The peer-observation project therefore obliged the whole teaching team to reflect on their individual teaching techniques, styles and approaches and this reflection

encourages a deeper recognition and awareness of self.

The project brought the team together, both transversally and holistically. Teachers could choose to observe a teacher of a different language, level, site or specific content, which fostered new exchanges between language teams. All of the teachers were involved in the same project, which helped promote positive 'whole-team' spirit: the sharing of one venture. Before the full launch of the project, the CdL teaching team benefited from a half-day workshop that explored what peer observation is and how to give peer feedback through analysis of examples and role play. The logistics of setting up the observations were explained. The teaching dimensions were suggested, discussed and selected by the whole team. In this way, each teacher was able to take control of their peer-observation experience.

Once the project was launched, peer partners organised to meet before and after observations. In the pre-observation meeting, the observed teacher (observee) discussed the dimensions s/he wanted feedback on and both the observee and observer had time to clarify when and how the observation should take place, discuss course context, timing, etc. The post-observation meeting offered a moment of focused exchange on the chosen dimensions but also possibly on what



the observer had learned through watching the lesson (ideas to try out but also reflection on her/his own teaching). The project raised awareness of what goes on in classes and offered precious moments of exchange and sharing on anything from small teaching tips to more general teaching beliefs and rationale.

Weaknesses of peer observation

A study by Fullan & Hargreaves (1992) strongly suggests that where there is a positive 'interactive professionalism' within a teaching team, teachers continue to learn in a positive environment, problems are exposed more naturally and gracefully than in more punitive schemes, and thus encourages professionals to reassess their situation as a continuing commitment. In order to foster this environment, observing teachers should adopt the role of developer or noticer rather than trainer and assessor (Maingay, 1988). One of the foremost potential weaknesses in peer observation is the risk that the observer doesn't understand her/his role correctly and gives feedback in an intimidating or hierarchical way.

To avoid this risk, specific ground rules for peer observation should be strictly respected. Giving feedback to a colleague or receiving feedback from a colleague is not necessarily an easy task. Despite role-playing feedback situations and supplying feedback documents to base feedback upon, there was some evidence of discomfort amongst certain teachers on the CdL team concerning clarity over who was going to have access to the feedback information and how it was to be given. A peer-observation pair must be clear that the process is confidential and that any information is the property of the person observed (Brown *et al*, 1993). Preparation is necessary, through role play, support documents, video, clarity of instructions, etc., to enable partners to comfortably give feedback to each other in a secure-feeling environment. The CdL project, in hindsight, would have spent more time preparing teachers for giving feedback to colleagues and developed support documents differently. This would ensure that every teacher felt 100% at ease giving and receiving feedback.

Another potential weakness is if a pair of teachers does not function together well. In a situation where all teachers

are participating in a peer-observation project and there is an obligation to find a partner, there is a risk that within a pair, differences in personality, teaching styles, teaching habits, experience and so on, may lead to misunderstandings and friction. Allowing teachers to choose their own partners reduces this risk. Another solution is to replace pairs by triads: A, B and C. A observes B who then observes C and A is observed by C.

Again, if peer observation is insufficiently prepared, there is also the risk of the peer-observation process being too unfocused or vague and thus becoming of 'limited developmental advantage' (Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker, 2006: 98), hence the importance of previously choosing a small number of specific dimensions to be observed upon and to receive feedback on those dimensions only, unless otherwise requested.

Another potential weakness is that an observed teacher teaches differently when an observer is present. Teachers with experience in teacher training are accustomed to having trainees observing their classes and no longer feel the need to be on their best (teaching) behaviour but some others, even with a long experience of teaching, admit to slightly adapting their teaching in an observed class. This could result in an inaccurate picture of the observee being formed. Again, by ensuring that the right secure environment is established, teachers should feel comfortable being observed by a colleague.

Opportunities leading from peer observation

The opportunities that became apparent through the CdL peer-observation project were significant. An online anonymous questionnaire was completed by all the team after the teachers had both observed and been observed. The results of this questionnaire gave valuable insight into the overall procedure and what the teachers had gained from it, and offered the opportunity to target real training needs. Through being

observed and observing a colleague, teachers on the CdL team were more aware of their own personal and/or professional needs and those of their colleagues. Opportunities for the sharing of concrete ideas were increased. Teachers learned from each other during the team training sessions at the launch and the closure of the project, and/or during the semester in the peer group meetings, observations or project-generated informal discussions in the staffroom. Stemming from the questionnaire results, follow-up workshops and swapshops have been organised for the team. The opportunity to learn more about one's own teaching practices was also appreciated. The fact that observees need to initially reflect on their own teaching styles and approaches in order to choose a few dimensions for the observer to focus on often lead to a deeper awareness of self. Another impression gained informally was that team spirit was enhanced through sharing this project.

Threats

A potential threat when participating in a peer-observation project is the fear of criticism. When peers choose to observe each other as a means to develop professionally and share ideas, these teachers are generally quite open to being observed, less inclined to fear the presence of a colleague in their classroom. However, if a peer-observation project is obligatory for all, certain teachers who would not have chosen to take part in such a project, may feel threatened by the idea of a colleague observing them in the classroom.

Whilst quite often in the teaching profession, initial training is largely encouraged and supported financially, qualified teacher development opportunities are seldom supported (Head & Taylor, 1997). Initial training includes observation for training purposes but once teachers are fully qualified, observations can become non-existent. This can mean that qualified teachers teach for years without being observed. When the CdL

peer-observation project was initially launched, time was spent on role play and discussion in an attempt to reduce the risk of teachers fearing the presence of a colleague in their classroom. Based on the results of the anonymous questionnaire completed by all at the end of the project's first semester, this was noticeably successful, with 93% of the team replying that they had felt comfortable being observed by a colleague. Only three people had felt slightly uncomfortable.

A second potential threat with peer observation is linked to Head & Taylor's (1997) suggestion above that qualified teacher development opportunities are more rarely supported. A teacher's time is precious and a peer-observation project needs financing. Management and stakeholders need to agree on supporting such a project and the risk is that this support can be withdrawn at any time.

Conclusion

Coming back to the question of the value of peer observation – or *Peer observation, why bother?* – the CdL project shows that there are many benefits, namely: a raising of awareness of own strengths as teachers, a way to identify training needs, a development of team cohesion, the sharing of ideas and further reflection on teaching in general. Although potential weaknesses and threats exist in any peer-observation project, these can be avoided by thorough preparation of the project and of the teachers participating in it, ensuring the right environment is established, and peer feedback is given and received in the appropriate manner. The idea is that the CdL project continues, encouraging colleagues to observe each other at least once a year and to organise workshops and training days based on the outcomes.

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