

Setting up a peer observation scheme

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Professional development for teachers can take many forms, and as academic managers and supervisors it is our responsibility to create and facilitate opportunities for such development. In many cases it is additionally a requirement of an accreditation scheme.

Training on the International Diploma in Language Teaching Management (IDLTM) for many years has given me an exceptional opportunity to hear about the performance management and professional development schemes of over 300 LTOs worldwide. In that privileged position I have been a party to countless discussions and debates over one major feature of such schemes – observations. In this article I would like to focus, in particular, on peer observations, because it is something which interests many LTO managers and supervisors, but, it seems, it's often set up in such a way that it doesn't really work. By peer observations, I mean teachers observing other teachers in a structured or semi-structured way, and in so doing creating the conditions for dialogue over shared experiences.

Why Peer Observations?

Peer observations can be, if properly organised, a really useful tool for professional development. The benefits of observation for both observer and observed are self-evident as a learning tool, and in general it's an excellent source of professional development which is sitting right there in your LTO. The observed teacher gets the benefit of a second set of eyes who can see things that they may have missed, while the observer gets the chance to see how another teacher may handle certain situations or activities in a different way from them.

As such it is not only useful, but it is also an inexpensive form of PD (though its low cost should not be taken to suggest it is of little value). Unlike other types of observations, it is not (or rather shouldn't be) perceived as judgmental, but rather as developmental. And finally, a successful peer observation system opens up the channels of communication in the staffroom and can be a step along the road to creating a culture of feedback.

So, why not?

Despite the fairly clear advantages, it looks as if few LTOs actually run successful peer observation systems. In late 2012 I carried out an online survey on peer observation systems, in which more than 60 teachers and managers answered questions about their own organisations. Only 12.5% of these respondents said that their LTO has a system in which teachers participated enthusiastically and from which they gained a lot.

There are two main reasons for this gap between the obvious benefits in theory and the lack of them in practice: attitudinal and practical.

Attitudinal

- A fear of observations in general, brought about by people having had bad experiences, or because observations are the way we are judged/evaluated in most training courses (and often in LTO performance management schemes).
- Because observations, even peer observations, are seen as imposed from above
- Because they are seen as not important. A curious side effect of the importance attached to judgmental observations, is that developmental ones can, if not sufficiently promoted, feel unimportant.

Practical

- Teachers don't have the time to organise and actually do the observations
- Teachers don't have the time to do it well , Perhaps they do the observation, but don't meet before and don't have a worthwhile feedback session afterwards
- Teachers don't know how to observe
- Teachers (and others) don't know how to give (and receive) feedback

So, there are a fair number of reasons why peer observation may not be as successful as we might hope.

What does the research reveal?

Through the survey , the following data emerged: Of the LTOs surveyed,27% had obligatory peer observation, 38% encouraged it, and the remaining 35% had no system. In response to the question 'Do teachers participate enthusiastically and gain a lot from the process?', 13% responded "yes, very much so", 50% "some yes, some no", 9% "it's just an obligation" while the remaining 34% that it "never happened".

As for the details of the systems that were in place, the vast majority were perceived as imposed by the DoS/management. Before the observations, sometimes teachers would meet, or sometimes there were forms to be completed, but often there was no formal contact between observer and observed before the lesson itself. During the observation, sometimes there were tasks, or observations sheets to be filled in; in other situations the role of the observer (and what they were observing for) was negotiated by the two teachers, and in some cases there was no clear idea of what should be done. Post observation tended to be described as a discussion, with, in some cases, a form to be completed (and subsequently put on file).

Developing a successful peer observation system

So, given the reasons for the given above for the gap between theory and practice, how can we come up with a system that actually works more effectively? Can we develop a system that can actually be a great way to enhance professional development, and open up channels of communication and feedback within our LTOs? It seems there are a few ways which can, at the very least, create the conditions for a more successful system.

To begin with, let the teachers themselves decide how it is to work . It may be that the virtues and value of peer observation are not entirely obvious to everyone, so you may have to sell the idea to

them, but once you have, let them design the system – how it will work, what the structure of the system will be, and what the details are. If necessary, make some suggestions, or at the very least, provide some articles and reading materials to help the teachers choose among some options. Ruth Wajnryb's book "Classroom Observation Tasks" is perhaps a good starting point.

Secondly, offer training in the skills needed to observe one another productively. Run a training session in how to observe – it's a skill that many people need to acquire. Maybe someone in your staff is an experienced observer and can offer such a session. Put together a training session on giving and receiving feedback. Not only is observing someone a skill, but giving and receiving feedback is very definitely a skill – and one which will not only be useful in the after-observation discussion, but will benefit the LTO anyway. Peer observation, and by association professional development is important, and it needs to be seen as such. It's no good telling everyone you believe wholeheartedly in peer observation, but don't support them in doing it. So, thirdly demonstrate its importance through concrete actions. Give teachers the time to do it by making it part of their contractual professional development time, as well as making it an integral part of the annual performance management systems.

Finally, one more aspect that tends to tie people in knots when thinking some of this through is the question of proof. If you make peer observation a contractual requirement, then what kind of evidence will you be looking for to confirm that the observations have taken place? If you require observation notes or lesson plans, then immediately the "between peers" aspect of it becomes subverted, and whatever resistance you might have managed to overcome could reoccur. But, many DoSs argue that if there is no paper trail then they can't be sure that the observations are taking place. I would suggest you put this point to the teachers too. Perhaps one compromise option is to ask teachers, in their annual review meeting, to discuss how it went, what they got from it and how the peer observation system itself could be improved.

Peer Observation in Practice

I'd like to close with an approach devised by Pip Linney-Barber, an academic manager in Australia, as part of his work on the IDLTM. Called the 'peer-support model', it is based partly on the work of Jill Cosh (reference below). Pip was working in a situation in which he felt teachers were extremely resistant to being observed both for historical reasons and because of the perceived power dynamic. The peer support model flips the power relationship of the observed lesson. As Pip puts it, "In this model, a teacher with a particular concern or interest *e.g.* pacing or a specific grammar point, will request to observe a colleague who they feel might give them some insight, or new ideas, about how to address the particular area of interest or concern. In this model the observed teacher is assuming the mantle of teacher trainer. The emphasis shifts from the observer *judging* the lesson to the observer *learning* from the lesson."

His proposal was to introduce this idea to the teachers. Prior to the meeting they were given a handout on peer observation and peer reflection (from Jeremy Harmer's *The Practice of English Language Teaching*) to spark discussion and thinking about peer observation. At the meeting the peer support model was proposed, and discussion began about how to make it work and what would be helpful. The final version was as follows:

1. All teachers identified an aspect of their teaching practice that they were interested in developing

2. Teachers were then invited to the lesson of a teacher who felt they had something to offer in this area.
3. Prior to the observation, the teachers sat together to discuss the upcoming observation and to determine whether the observer could contribute to the lesson in a co-teaching capacity.
4. The observer attended the lesson for an hour and filled in the 'peer support activity' form (a form which was developed by the teachers as part of this process)
5. After the lesson, either on the same day or the following day, the teachers met for a follow up feedback session which was guided by their completed 'peer activity support' forms. (Before this training had been given in giving and receiving feedback) [Linney-Barber, 2012]

Having recently been in touch with Pip, I gather that the feeling from him and the teachers is that the new system is working. However, there is a remaining difficulty: finding the time for teachers to do the observations (especially in a situation whereby the teacher needs to be substituted from their own class in order to observe). He is currently trying to come up with a solution. But in general, he feels that in a difficult environment, the peer support model has stimulated discussion in the staffroom, has got people thinking about their teaching in a more open way, and has been done in such a way that the teachers feel they have made it their own, with the result that enthusiasm for the system is high.

Obviously, this is just one possible solution of many, and which one works best will depend very much on context and situation. A highly motivated teaching team who already share a lot of ideas will probably aim for something slightly different from a group of suspicious teachers who jealously guard their teaching "secrets". I'd argue, however, that an effective, well run peer observation scheme is something which is very much worth striving for, as part of your organisation's professional development plan for teachers, and as part of the quality assurance programme that your LTO may be involved in.

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