

Perspectives and Politics of Classroom Observation

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ABSTRACT The process of classroom observation is experienced by all, teaching in further, adult and higher education. This will either be as part of the organisation's quality assurance procedure, in-service staff completing teaching awards or the training of pre-service student teachers. Given its evaluative nature, it is a practice that generates strong reactions from those who are subject to it, ranging from the very positive to the very negative. However, due to the complexity of the issues involved, these views cannot be located on a simple continuum. This article is based on research that sought to explore the complexities of the observation procedure, and reports on the perceptions and attitudes of participants to the process. A typology of resistances is outlined, the role of observation schedules explored, the value of observation highlighted and styles of receptivity to feedback categorised. An argument is proposed that if observation is assimilated to an action research perspective, rather than a quality assurance procedure, the observer will be recast as a supportive facilitator and the idea of educational practice as ongoing enquiry will be enabled.

Introduction

Regardless of attitude or perception, the prospect of classroom observation has a powerful resonance for most classroom practitioners. Whatever the reason, the professional isolation of the teacher – particularly in the classroom – is a cultural norm shared and often celebrated by college staff. Perhaps it stems from the notion of professional autonomy; possibly it is a function of the separateness brought about by the traditional distribution of scarce resources throughout educational organisations; either way there is often a sense of infringement of professional rights when observation is mooted. Competence is being assessed; professional integrity compromised. It is associated with early training and novice performance; the experienced professional has outgrown these needs and feels sensitive to the idea that his or her classroom practice should be 'checked'.

However, as practice is increasingly 'viewed' by those who have a quality assurance brief, college teachers will need to adapt and accommodate to the

observational regime as part of their working lives. Here lies an opportunity. Those teachers who see the value of observation celebrate its potentiality for improving the educational experience of learners and their own professional lives. Yet despite these two major benefits, the peer observation procedure still meets with considerable resistance in many colleges.

If the observation of teaching and learning is only associated with inspection, appraisal or evaluation, it is not surprising anxiety is commonly associated with the process. However, if it is perceived in an open-minded, collaborative and non-defensive spirit, and construed as a valuable developmental exercise, its appeal will be heightened. Peer observation borders on action-research. The professional dialogue following observation is certainly a facilitator and discipline on reflective practice. Situated within the contemporary context of the 'new managerialism' (Randle & Brady, 1997), however, it is associated with audit trails, performance indicators, appraisal and the other paraphernalia of the accountability movement.

In this article I draw on research findings that I hope redeem the classroom observation process. I will argue that it is a positive developmental experience, which in principle should be welcomed by all post-compulsory professionals. To achieve this we must do at least two things: first, identify and openly examine the issues involved, and consider their implications for practice and development; secondly disconnect it from the audit-orientated managerialist perspective, in favour of research found most frequently in the action-research movement. Such an examination may help demystify the process and legitimise it as a growth activity in the perceptions of those who will be involved.

The Research Methods

This study rests on a mix of qualitative methods, which generated a range of different types of evidence placed to educational action in different ways. Interviews were carried out during the winter of 2004 with a range of professionals deeply involved in the classroom observation procedure. Documentary analysis focused on classroom observation feedback sheets. College policies and the literature were reviewed. Focus groups of observers and the observed examined experiences and perceptions of the process.

Value of Observation

Given that we are both authors and observers of our own behaviour with privileged access to our inner subjective worlds, it is perfectly reasonable to assume we are also the most reliable witnesses of our professional experience. Yet it is this very fact that renders self-observation problematic. Drawing on psychological insights we might cite attribution theory and psychodynamics as providing explanations regarding why the observation of self is compromised.

Attribution Theory

Experimental psychologists have demonstrated the way we explain events and experiences is largely a function of our placement to them (Eisner, 1983). If I am to explain the behaviour of my learners I am likely to be drawn towards internal attributions; that is, it is probable that I will explain them by reference to their personalities or motivations. The effect of self and other context-related variables are downplayed.

Not surprisingly, if we view the world from the position at which we stand – both psychologically and physically – we are less likely to factor in to our explanations of events the influence of our own presence. Others in the classroom will do the same: their explanations will feature their own behaviours less than those of the teacher and other learners. Invariably the phenomenological fields in which we work are experienced from the centrality of our own respective standpoints. Expressed simply, our understandings of classroom processes are partly subjective.

Psychodynamics

Furthermore, as psychodynamic work has demonstrated, we are not purely rational beings when it comes to accounting for self. In order to preserve ego and bolster self-esteem, we construct personal worlds, which in extreme cases border on the mythic and fanciful. Ego defence mechanisms are quickly deployed to ricochet bruising feedback. Interpretations of classroom action are frequently subjectively 'spun' to preserve professional integrity. When offering accounts of self, we 'square' experience; that is, we bring episodes of behaviour into alignment with a picture of self, which is coherent, integrated and rational, not conflicted, incongruent and discontinuous. Expressed simply, our understandings of classroom processes are partly biased.

Here lies the problem of reflective practice. We live in somewhat delusional worlds. Our reflections are edited, faulty and distorted. Triangulation of accounts through feedback from observation and a negotiated interpretation allow us to render our primary experience a problematic data source that will feed into a more 'objective' interpretation.

The Non-reflective and Reflective Act

To help understand the distinction between the spontaneous act and the reflective act it is useful to go to the work of Schutz, an early phenomenologist. Schutz (1932) makes the distinction between the 'duree' and reflection on the duree. The duree is the flow of inner duration:

What we in fact experience in duration is not a being that is discrete and well defined but a constant transition from a now thus to a new now thus. The stream of consciousness by its very nature has not yet been caught up in the net of reflection. Reflection, being a function

of the intellect belongs essentially to the spacio-temporal world of everyday life. The structure of our experience will vary according to whether we surrender ourselves to the flow of duration or stop to reflect upon it trying to classify it into spacio-temporal concepts. (Schutz, 1932)

Whilst in the stream of non-reflective spontaneous experience the 'now point' continuously flows. However, when an effort is made to reflect on experience we ask ourselves to halt the flow briefly and to make objects of those phases of experience that have transpired. Casting back over the undifferentiated stream with the spotlight of reflection enables us to make past experience intelligible.

In the case of observation, teacher and observer together reflect on the 'transpired phases of existence' and make objects of them. However, now they are intersubjectively constructed, grounded from two disparate positions and separated perspectives. The psychological defences and biases posited by attribution theory are challenged and neutralised.

Video recordings of self in professional action, supported by an action research collaborator who will provide a counterpoint, is the professional dialogue par excellence. The process to be considered is no longer a transpired phase of existence. It can be replayed and analysed outside the pressures of the ever flowing now moment. The teacher is also free of the field variables, intentionality, emotions and centralised standpoint, which impacted on his or her experience.

Figure 1 highlights the range of stances we can take to practice.

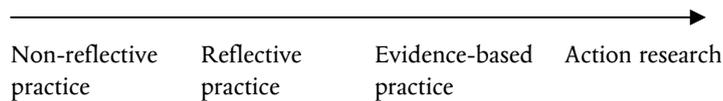


Figure 1. Scale of intervention.

Reflective practice shades into action research as others become involved in providing feedback and evidence is interrogated to achieve insight. The empirical base becomes more substantial and the process more purposeful as we move along the continuum to the right. At the level of action research, conscious interventions and the testing of hypotheses become commonplace.

Resistance

When college lecturers are asked to report their attitudes to observation a wide range can be discerned from the very positive to the very negative. In the focus group part of this research the positive responses outweighed the negative by 35%. Of those who express negative views a typology of resistances can be discerned. The following was devised through the categorisation of views

expressed by college teachers, who, either completed a short questionnaire or voiced their perceptions in focus groups.

Scrutinisation

The last decade has seen an increasing growth of surveillance in colleges under the name of quality assurance. The peer review procedure is seen as another coercive and malign instrument designed to hold them to account.

The following quotations illustrate this sentiment well:

I spend as much time filling in quality forms to prove stuff as I do teaching. There'll be video cameras in all the classrooms next so they can see what we're up to.

It's about putting on a show for inspectors.

Yet another respondent suggests that, in his experience, staff are 'provided with little preparation or guidance'. It is also a 'paper exercise with the focus on tick boxes'. One respondent 'was left feeling it didn't really matter what I did as long as I had the right paperwork'. These teachers clearly see the observation process as a bureaucratic exercise with little genuine concern for teacher development – a 'necessary evil' as another described it.

Artificiality

The presence of an observer is thought to change the situation and make the behaviour of the observed contrived and artificial. The 'Hawthorn Effect' is often quoted. Yet the proponents of the artificiality argument seem to miss the paradox produced: the prospect of classroom observation induces 'on-stage' behaviour in teachers and learners who, recognising the 'display' is a put-up-job that they themselves have orchestrated, cannot help to dismiss the process as invalid! This quotation illustrates this viewpoint:

I hate it ... it changes things ... the situation becomes artificial and nobody behaves normally ...

Another teacher explained that her normally busy active group went completely silent on the occasion of the observation. When she asked them why none of them said anything during the lesson they replied 'We didn't want to get you into trouble miss!' This change of student behaviour was reported on more than one occasion. Most observers are aware that learners most commonly collaborate with the teacher during the session. One teacher felt the observation 'Made me stick to the planned lesson rather than respond to students' needs', and the stress and anxiety that is commonly reported due to observation reduced the quality of delivery for one teacher who 'will be put off and I will be less effective than usual'.

Credibility

The qualities, agenda and experience of the observer is often questioned, rendering the relationship between observed and observer problematic. If it is a relation of peer equality, by what right can the observed be labelled with a numerical grade. The length of service, classroom competence, power relationship and personality of the proposed observer are often quoted as reasons why the observer may lack credibility:

What right has she got to be my observer ... I've been teaching twelve years and she's been teaching for less than three.

This teacher thought there was something wrong at management level because they 'select observers who have an axe to grind'.

Reductionism

Given that the observer is usually outside the phenomenological field of the teacher group and has not been privy to the historical development of its social dynamic, observation is often seen as reducing the complexity of teaching to a set of technical skills, which can be deployed in a way absent of expressive interpretation. When like Schon (1983), we see teaching as artistry, we recognise that it draws on a capacity for intuitive awareness, creative empathy and unorthodox action. The tick box designs that are features of observation schedules fail to do justice to the complexities of the teaching environment in which an immeasurable number of psychological variables are juxtaposed and processed simultaneously. When grades are given without the pedagogic reasoning of the teacher being heard, the sense of being reduced to a technical performer is all the greater.

Organisations differ regarding the process of giving the observed a grade. Some allow for a reciprocal debrief before the grade is disclosed, others insist the grade has to be provided following the observation, but prior to the debrief; others require that the grade should not be disclosed to the teacher at all. This latter policy meets with great disapproval by most participants, who point out that it can hardly be a developmental process if the grade is withheld.

The following highlights these points.

A Case Illustration

The following material is taken from an observer's note-book:

Joanne was teaching an IT group in a room laid out for computer use and the session was to last the full morning. I was there as an observer between 9-10am and noted the following behaviour pattern.

The room appeared to be divided between two rows of motivated learners and one row who were exuberant and tending to

move off-task given the slightest opportunity. Joanne's physical behaviour was to stay in a particular quadrant of the room (approx 85%) of the observed time and to move along guiding the motivated learners individually (I thought she was staying in 'safe' territory). Frequently her attention would be attracted by the other row's noisy behaviour and she would look up, address them in a harsh tone of voice and maintain eye contact with a steely glare. Occasionally she would enter the hostile territory and on these occasions her voice softened, she smiled more and the climate became more collaborative. Her interactions became learning rather than control related. When she was in close physical proximity the behaviour of this group changed notably.

I felt pleased to discover this strong pattern and reported back to Joanne in the break. Instead of being enlightened by this feedback she took it for granted and explained that in her experience with this group it was the best use of time to set the motivated learners up with work during the first hour, and then to move on into the others' space and work with them in closer proximity later.

The point of this story will not be lost on experienced classroom observers. First, any session of 1 hour is selective. Secondly, it cannot be fairly judged without taking into account the observed teacher's pedagogic reasoning and a broader sweep of time. Prior to the dialogue the teaching episode would have been awarded a 4; following the dialogue it becomes a 3. Yet, in many organisations, it is a requirement that the grade will be given and not changed following the dialogue, even though, when the strategy is disclosed, we see an effective strategy at work and much better sense is made of what was observed.

Quality teaching is about creatively managing the personal experiences and worlds of the individual learners, as well as staying in touch with the nuances of the group dynamic. It requires pedagogic decision-making to be made swiftly on the wing and draws on the historic stock of previous exchanges the group has held in its collective memory. The insightful teacher makes decisions legitimised by implicit reference to events, themes and banks of goodwill, which have bonded the group throughout its life and are outside the awareness of the observer. Indeed, the greater the artistry of the teacher, the more intangible the psychological events being juxtaposed, and the less apparent these are to the observer. A teacher points out that:

There is one group I take which is comprised of some emotionally distressed learners and I know of their idiosyncracies and I know from experience how to work with them ... this requires me to change my voice tone with some, to challenge others ... to be particularly gentle with others about certain things ... I know confidential things about their past ... the observer does not and cannot make sense of what I do and the way I do it without knowing those things.

Observational Schedules

Examination of a range of lesson observational schedules strongly suggests that there is an orthodox style of delivering lessons and the closer these are adhered to, the greater the quality of the teaching. However, to what evidence is appeal made to justify the assertion that the usual checklist criteria actually do define a good lesson? Is it just conventional wisdom or common sense? Legitimacy of the criteria should come from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) or peer reviewed academic research. Where, for example, is the educational research that demonstrates that lessons should end with a 'crisp summary' (a counter-intuitive view is suggested by Rogers (1995), who citing conventional psychological research notes that leaving issues cognitively hanging, rather than neatly packed away is likely to mean they will be better remembered).

Experienced observers were asked about observation schedules. There is a tension between an inductive and deductive approach. The deductive constructs *a priori* categories that are prescriptions of desired teaching behaviours (tick boxes), while the inductive allows for the value to emerge from the immediacy of the teaching. This response reflects the tension:

When I first started I liked a very prescriptive format but as I became more confident about what was important to observe I became less constrained by those outcomes ... but they are a reminder ... I consumed them, they are in the background to where I want to go now ... and they help with a broad consistency.

Another observer states:

Having internalised the observational categories I make a point of leaving them at the door as I enter ... then I am naïve and open to the experience I am about to witness ... Only then can I learn about the process delivered there and then by that teacher. I will then be better able to feedback to the teacher whose experience will be lived and real ... if I simply ticked the boxes of a schedule we wouldn't be able to go beyond it.

A teacher picks up on a point made above:

There should be recognition by the observer that this is a learning opportunity for them too.

This attitude to observation keeps the process fluid, authentic and developmental. Furthermore, it contains the recognition that the teacher needs to factor in to his or her own teaching, aspects of his or her own personality, which may colour the meaning of the observational categories in unique ways. They also have to contend with and manage their own subjective impulses, frames of reference and psychological preferences within the immediacy of context. This is where the reflective mirror is of value.

It would not be appropriate to reject schedules out of hand, but it is important to recognise that they are only applicable when teaching is seen as technology and the appropriate behaviours can be featured. However, when teaching becomes artistry, the observation schedules dissolve in the face of moving and profound experiences. Magic can occur in the classroom when curriculum contents and minds meet, as culture is transmitted and values truly explored. The most exceptional learning experiences are likely to happen when events have occurred that cannot be apprehended by the usual categories. Indeed, we might contend that the very best teaching occurs exactly to the extent conventional criteria found in observation schedules are not met – when teaching is artistry.

The Reflective Mirror

The dominant metaphor used by experienced observers when describing their process is that of the mirror. There is common agreement between observers that they provide developmental feedback by seeing the classroom from a point of view alternative to that of the teacher. The observer is free of the classroom responsibilities experienced by the teacher and can devote all their attention to observing the emergent collective experience. We might also see the observer's narrative as a counterpoint to the central melody which, when combined, provide a gestalt as objective as it's possible to be.

Lesson Selection

Whether it is part of the pre-service, in-service or quality assurance process, all lecturers have the right to choose the lesson they want observed. The 'challenge' provided by a lesson could be measured against two criteria: the first is concerned with the complexity of the learning objectives to be taught and how difficult it is for these to be learned; the second with size and motivation of the learning group – an issue about control and classroom management. These two aspects of lesson delivery draw on different kinds of skills. It is of note that observation procedures do not factor in these issues, so not surprisingly, most teachers select lessons they will be comfortable with, where they know and can trust the group, and have taught the content numerous times before.

When asked about the criterion teachers use to select the lesson the observer will attend, this experienced observer replies:

Often they seem to choose one that they think will be interesting for me ... they want to educate me in their subject ... or its about performance ... they select something that's going to be dramatic, something controlled by them ... but that's not necessarily what I want. I want to see them facilitating learning not something that is tutor led or performance led.. It often comes up – come when I'm doing this ... it's like a 'wow' for them but not for me ... my concern is with process.

The value of the process for this observer is:

that it is a chance to help (the teacher) consolidate theory and practice. We're in this great position where we can offer our interpretation of how they've put into practice what they have learned.

A particular value of feedback is that it:

makes explicit that which is implicit – tacit knowledge – being overt ... being a mirror on process ... and you can observe that mirror in the feedback. Often they'll recognise something in the feedback, not that they were unaware of just haven't articulated it before, so it's a chance for articulation and in that you get some confidence in discussion which can lead further ...

They might have intuitions and hunches about themselves which are then affirmed, unpacked and explored through the eyes of the observer.

On the other hand, 'they don't want to appear out of sorts with theory or about what they say they do and so if feedback contradicts it's a problem for them'.

From the point of view of college lecturers, observation is valuable when it throws light on activities central to the professional role.

Professional Identity:

- 'Boosts self-esteem.'
- 'Provides support for teachers who are struggling and have lost direction.'
- 'Can be useful in giving the teacher a fresh perspective.'
- 'It helped me gain confidence in the teaching and learning process.'
- 'Good feedback has left me feeling proud and satisfied.'

Teaching and Learning Skills:

- 'I learned things of value that enhance my teaching skills.'
- 'It has provided help and guidance.'
- 'A very valuable way of improving one's delivery and organisational skills.'
- 'Subject knowledge not needed but understanding of the student group is.'

Observational Style:

- 'Observers can sometimes point to empirical evidence to help evaluate a process.'
- 'They should be completely independent of the course (being observed).'
- 'Should be non-threatening and unobtrusive.'
- 'Observer joined in helping to make the lesson normal.'
- 'Their presence should be minimal.'
- 'They should be highly observant.'
- 'Formal but relaxed.'

- ‘They should enjoy the experience!’
- ‘Should have subject awareness and expertise.’
- ‘Observations should not be closely time bound.’
- ‘Should show positive body language.’
- ‘They should have confidence in the teaching and learning process.’
- ‘They should ensure there is sufficient opportunity for dialogue.’
- ‘Notice should be given.’
- ‘They should avoid judgementalism and negative body language.’
- ‘They should avoid comments about things over which I have no control – for example the noise outside the room and that there are too few females in the group!’
- ‘Observer should not pretend to not be there.’

The issue of feedback following observation appeared to be an emotionally charged area for both teachers and observers:

- ‘Feedback should be full, sincere, honest and knowledgeable.’
- ‘Willing to engage in a two way dialogue.’
- ‘Both able to freely give their views with supporting evidence.’
- ‘Should be specific not general.’
- ‘Allows the teacher to comment on the lesson and their feedback.’
- ‘Empathic and constructive.’
- ‘Honest and tactful.’
- ‘Specific feedback related to suggestions about improvements in a particular area which “involve” me not “tell” me.’

Giving Feedback

Great store is set by the feedback and we see it should be collaborative, constructive, specific, honest, empathic and, by implication, insightful, challenging and justifiable. It is important to give feedback under the appropriate conditions.

An observer again said:

It’s difficult to get people relaxed and confident enough to challenge what you’ve written sometimes and so for example if its been very tutor led with little opportunity for learner interaction they might say ‘well come back later when I do all that’ and you acknowledge you might have to miss that ... but you are there to observe and you reflect back what you observed.

Sometimes teachers will be upfront about their feelings ... sometimes they will hide them ... sometimes those hidden feelings will come out much later in their journal or post course discussion when they are feeling ‘safe’.

The observer raised the question of their own professional autonomy:

When you look at your own feedback it says so much about you as an individual. What you value. What you believe in – your own philosophy. I should be under closer scrutiny because why should I be the one to have my values as priority and not somebody else's values?

That closer scrutiny has been and is being increasingly imposed by the standards provided by FENTO and the questions asked by the inspection framework (although both are under review, it is highly likely the observer's professional autonomy will continue to be compromised).

The Power Flip

Though the ideal is to see observation as a collaborative exercise between equals, the reality is that the observer is commonly perceived as possessing greater power and in the case of the QA procedure this is legitimised by organisational arrangements. However, observed teachers who are more confident tend to be willing to share the feedback with others and test it out with a third party to check validity. They may do this quietly with a colleague after the event, or may appeal to the learners who shared the session there and then to seek collaboration or disputation. It can weaken the 'status' of the observer who may feel disempowered and wrong-footed. This observer described the situation thus:

On one occasion the teacher I observed wanted to share the feedback I'd written with the learner group without me there ... I felt robbed and disempowered ... I wanted to be able to explain my observations and felt denied the opportunity.

More commonly, the relationship is collaborative. This teacher draws attention to the sharing of experience; sees it perhaps as an 'appreciative moment':

when a lesson goes well and students go away with something positive, and if this has been seen by someone else then the whole experience was good.

It is in the freeing of the teacher from the immediacy of teaching that the value of observation as a developmental exercise lies and this is emphasised by comments made in observational feedback sheets. Documentary analysis reveals that detailed specific comments generally fall under the following categories:

- teacher's communicative style;
- design and structure of the session;
- learning activities including variance to accommodate alternative learning styles differentiation and individual needs;
- creative use of resources;
- competence with classroom management technique;
- strategies for resolving potential conflict;

- ways in which individual learning was supported;
- psychological and learning climate;
- the way critical incidents were managed;
- quality of planning;
- how assessment was used to support learning;
- the pitch of the session in relation to learners' entry behaviour;
- how the experience was aligned or otherwise with the learning objectives;
- flexible responses to the exigencies of the situation;
- curriculum management and development issues;
- classroom layout.

Examining feedback with a different slant we note that it is:

- affirmatory – thought-provoking;
- diagnostic – praise-giving;
- advisory – probing;
- suggestive – challenging;
- exploratory – explanatory.

As we see from the above, feedback unsurprisingly focuses on the range of segments within the learning cycle (and, therefore, the FENTO Standards) and offers constructive guidance about professional practice generally. However, not all categories of feedback possess the same psychological status: those comments that focus on the personal behaviour of the teacher, and cannot therefore be seen by them, have a greater emotional charge. Here are some examples that have had an emotional effect on the teachers concerned. Their responses range from the light-hearted to the more serious.

Physical Behaviour:

- 'Tilt head to the left like an owl'
- 'Pace up and down in a distracting way.'
- 'Take flight from the lesson by rustling through papers on the desk.'
- 'Avoid real communication by submerging self into the material through the use of the white-board.'
- 'Eye contact is selective and excludes some groups.'
- 'Proximities in the room: only inhabiting certain parts of the room.'
- 'Rasping tongue.'

Verbal Behaviour:

- 'Excessively repeating certain phrases (okay! Who remembers..?)'
- 'Uttering long uuuuurghs at the start of new verbal paragraphs.'
- 'Focus questions only on the left-hand side of the room.'
- 'Rising the pitch of voice at the end of sentences.'
- 'Voice frequently tailing off into quietness.'
- 'Pace of talk changes in rapidity when a particular sub-group is addressed.'

- 'Rapid talk expressed in such a way that learning points merge but should be discrete'
- 'Talk excessively peppered with endearments.'

Feedback about issues outside the immediacy of the teacher's lived process – like the lesson plan – is not subject to the same emotive reaction because it is already objectified and accessible to the teacher on the same terms – they do not have to get outside themselves to see it. This is clearly why video recording of self is feedback par excellence: self is objectified and observable – an impossible situation most of the time.

Receptivity to Observational Feedback

Feedback is a form of communication that is crucial we receive if we are to remain well positioned in the social world. It is equally important to receive feedback in order that we can calibrate where we stand professionally. It can be challenging, as well as affirming; painful as well as nurturing; disturbing as well as reassuring. It should be given as close as possible to the observed event in order to catch the charge of the experience and to avoid 'drift' (Ewens, 2001, p. 11); an aspiration common to all the observers in the research.

It was possible to identify three main styles of responding to feedback from observers and a typology has been developed.

Compliant Acceptance

Here, there is a failure of disputation when it would be justifiable and appropriate. The teacher accepts too readily the perceptions of the observer and accords them greater status than they warrant because their own perspective has been downgraded. The collaborative venture is distorted and the views of the observer dominate the dialogue. The counterpoint overshadows the melody.

Critical Absorption

Here, the teacher notes, considers and evaluates the feedback provided. The teacher often accepts many of the points and discusses ways they may be addressed for the benefit of future practice. They often justify and explain their decisions as they recognise these were outside the compass of the observer and these arguments are often perfectly valid and based on quality pedagogic thinking. Occasionally, they are rationalisations that are disclosed more as a defence than a genuine example of reflective thinking.

Sometimes a period of time needs to pass before the observer's points are fully processed and accepted – incubation of this type signals the best form of learning.

It is notable that, in cases of critical absorption, the relation between observer and teacher is commonly one of high credibility. It is recognised by

the teacher that the observer's feedback is authorised by virtue of experience and skill. Parallels can be made with psychotherapy in which the therapist is a psychological container and the client contained; similarly in teaching. It is preferable for the observer to be weathered through classroom experience if his or her feedback is going to carry the badge of authenticity with the teacher.

Unthinking Rejection

The most defensive of teachers put up a psychological barrier and deny the validity of observational feedback all together without any processing. Feedback ricochets away indicating a deep lack of confidence in self. These teachers are far from becoming reflective practitioners and are unlikely to benefit from training courses until they have resolved deeper personal issues.

Development of Observational Skilfulness

Observers of the teaching and learning that goes on in further and adult education classrooms go through stages of professional development. In their early days they experience anxiety; they feel self-conscious; they worry about how to give feedback in constructive ways; they are concerned they know little about the subject being taught; they feel imperfect and sometimes fraudulent. However, as their experience grows and their confidence increases they move in three discernible ways:

- from a position of obscurity to one of centrality;
- from a position of deductivity to one of inductivity;
- from a focus on teaching skills, to a focus on educational values.

The experienced observer will not hide themselves in a corner of the room, but will be fully physically present; they will not spend their time ticking boxes in observational schedules, but will observe the collective experiences emerge and respond to the lived event; they will move beyond the observable behaviours of the teacher to an understanding of the quality of the psychological climate, values and relationships that comprise the educative moment.

An observer was asked to describe what they have observed when they have observed the ultimate educative moment:

It's so difficult to describe ... it's something that appeals to your soul ... something that moves you ... its not necessarily sophisticated or professional but about seeing something that really makes a difference. It is something internal. You've got all the external stuff there but its more than that it's something inside. It's that 'wow' factor. Excellence touches your soul, moves you emotionally at that time. It's to do with the relationship between the teacher and the learners, not the learning outcomes ... its over and above that. A special thing ...

Conclusion

Whatever underpinning basis classroom observations may have, they are designed to encourage and facilitate learning, to heighten educational achievement, to empower learners to achieve more in their lives and, in the manner of all good education, contribute towards social transformation.

We need, therefore, to construe observation as an opportunity for participants in the educational enterprise to open a critical discourse concerning what 'best practice' might be. In so doing, three developments are likely to occur.

First, the observer is recast as a facilitator sharing with the teacher an action research perspective. Secondly, and as a consequence of the first, the counterproductive audit-orientated notion of peer observation is undermined. Thirdly, the idea of educational practice as ongoing enquiry is enabled.

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