

# Peer observation of Teaching as motivation for educational development – From teaching as private enterprise to a collective approach

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper reports from an explorative case study at a multidisciplinary Faculty in a Norwegian university using reciprocal peer observation of teaching to the enhancement of teaching and a culture for extended peer cooperation. The aim of the study is to investigate how to enhance the peer observation teaching and learning in the spirit of SoTL.

A pilot took place during the fall term 2016 and the full project will be launched 2017. Eleven academics participated in the pilot. Reciprocal peer observation of teaching and learning took place with pairs representing different disciplines and departments. A shared and structured pattern helped organize the cooperation, focusing on planning, preparation and classroom management. In the full project, perspectives of teaching and learning will be added as part of the framework for the reciprocal peer observation and evaluation of the teaching and learning activities. Written documentation from the sessions and interviews of participants constitute the data material of the study.

The pilot showed eleven participants being fairly pleased with their attempts to conduct peer observation or in some cases review of teaching though several had been skeptical from the start. The outcomes were both about getting inspiration from observing a colleague and getting feedback from a “critical friend”. The peer observation generated discussions about teaching and learning activities, and student-learning strategies. This also seems to have a potential to enhance the pedagogical discourse at faculty level.

The theoretical framework is a sociocultural perspective on teaching and learning. First, the findings so far indicate the potential of peer observation of teaching, pairing colleagues from different disciplines to help academics focus on teaching and learning. Secondly, the feedback practices is a strong element in enhancing the educational discourse. The educational significance of the study is how peer cooperation is enabling real step from teaching a private enterprise to a collective approach.

## 1 AIMS

This paper reports from an ongoing explorative case study using reciprocal peer observation of teaching to enhance teaching and a culture for extended peer cooperation. The aim of the study is to investigate how to develop peer observation of teaching and learning in the spirit of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Peer observation of teaching is in this project understood as a reciprocal process where colleagues observe each other’s teaching and provide different forms of feedback that encourage good practice and awareness to improving practice (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; P. Ramsden, 2003; Sullivan, Buckle, Nicky, & Atkinson, 2012; Thomas, Qui, Mathew, Raj, & Beh, 2014). The focus is on development of teaching and learning. By emphasizing peer observation as a systematic, collaborative, rigorous peer review, using theories and research on learning to improve teaching, the spirit of SoTL is addressed (Engin, 2016). A reason for doing SoTL research is to move practice forward as that SoTL research “emerges from practice and is meant to directly inform it” (Billot, Rowland, Carnell, Amunden, & Evans, 2017, p. 6).

The study is proceeding at a Faculty that offers multidisciplinary and professional educational programs in both natural science and social science disciplines. At this Faculty peer observation of teaching was included in the strategy for 2014-2017. A pilot took place during the fall term 2016 and the full project will be launched during 2017. This paper presents the pilot that aimed to find out whether small steps like volunteer peer observation of teaching had impact on development of the

teaching and learning environment at faculty level (Chalmers & Gardiner, 2015; Tight, 2015). The full project will be developed based on the findings from this pilot.

## **2 BACKGROUND, METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

### **2.1 The institutional context**

For the Strategic plan of the Faculty an appointed group of teachers and students suggested peer observation of teaching as an important measure to enhance teaching and learning. This was included in the Faculty Strategy. In February 2016 a new group of representatives from the natural and social science research groups together with the Vice Dean of Education and a researcher from the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology at the university, discussed and prepared a plan for a pilot on peer observation of teaching at the Faculty. This plan was accepted and supported by the leadership at the Faculty and Institute level, with a project start-up in May 2016.

Heads of Departments and the Vice Dean of Education recruited academics by asking them to participate in the peer observation project. Eleven academics accepted to involve in this pilot. They had different scientific backgrounds including biology, management, history, veterinary medicine, business and economics, marketing and finances.

Reciprocal peer observation of teaching and learning was conducted in pairs representing different disciplines and departments to enhance the discussion about pedagogy and didactics (Boud, 2006). A shared and structured pattern in the shape of a template helped organize the cooperation, focusing on planning, preparation, classroom management and reflection. The peer observation of teaching took place primarily in first years courses, and includes observations of lectures, seminars and supervision.

### **2.2 Empirical material**

A written report from the pilot and interviews of four participants constitute the data material of the study. The report is based on smaller reports / documentation from the academics doing the peer observation of teaching.

Four of the participants were interviewed March 2017 by the researcher who was not a part of the pilot. The interviews were carried out face to face; they lasted around 30 minutes focusing in following questions:

- What was your opinion about peer observation of teaching when the project started?
- You were placed together with a colleague from another disciplinary background than yourself, which advantages and disadvantages did it have?
- What did you discuss after the observation of teaching?
- Can you identify anything from the completed peer observation project that had led to changes in your teach?
- Do you have any ideas about how peer observation can be further developed in your department to get greater impact for the quality of teaching?

The interviews are transcribed and analyzed by alternating between reading the transcripts, categorizing, reading relevant literature returning back to the transcripts, and so on, in an iterative process that allowed issues and experiences to be identified and categorized.

## **3 OUTCOMES**

Findings are based on the report and the interviews. The pilot revealed eleven participants being fairly pleased with their attempts to conduct peer observation; however, several had been rather sceptical from the start. Conducting peer observation of teaching was a break-off with the “private practice / enterprise”. The general view was that this initiative was a departure from an established practice and therefore demanding. Those who were sceptical took part in the pilot because they were loyal to the faculty or department and they saw it as a top-down initiative written into the Faculty Strategy.

The participants in the pilot, who had experienced peer observation of teaching when taking part in the Program Basic pedagogical competence in higher education, did not present this type of scepticism.

Nevertheless, when introduced to a more demanding model with three sharing and changing roles as observer, observed and mediator it was too much.

*I think it is clean, beautiful and simple with two, and I cannot see any issue where we would have a use for a third person.*

*Firstly, it should not be too ambitious. It should be a concrete and feasible plan. ... I speak warmly for it.*

### **3.1 Trust as fundamental for the peer observation**

The participants underlined that this type of cooperation will depend on being able to trust each other. There had to exist good chemistry between the two colleagues observing each other:

*I am very concerned about being a good teacher and prioritize this part of the job. This is also a somewhat private room, and I have to admit it was an obstacle. Therefore, my attitude was positive, but I had to go a few rounds with myself before letting someone in. This is great a paradox as I am an experienced lecturer. ... My colleague and I found the right tone and we might do it again voluntary.*

### **3.2 Collaboration across departments**

Working with a peer from another department caused no problems and several positive comments:

*I was not caught up in details, rather more, on how she did it in class.*

*He could look at my teaching with an outside glance and that was an advantage. I cooperate with my colleagues at the department of course, but an outsider commenting was a plus.*

This does not totally omit peer observation of teaching among colleagues at the same department. As one said:

*I think it is best that you are not related to the content of the teaching, and then you will look more at the pedagogics instead of considering subject content. However, I never did any peer observation of teaching with colleagues from my own department; and it might turn out very positive.*

### **3.3 From a private enterprise to a community property?**

The participants emphasized that opening up for an observer into their teaching gave them a feeling of opening up a “private room” after working quite alone with teaching:

*I have been working many years as a teacher completely without any interference. We have worked 30 years as lectures without anyone evaluating what we have done except the students.*

Two of the interviewees emphasized that they have been missing the opportunity to discuss problems and challenges in their teaching with colleagues:

*It is what I simply miss, when I have a problem in a lecture, with whom can I discuss? It would have been nice to have - perhaps every third year – peer observations, so you can bring in ordinary situations from teaching that might be challenging or difficult or something, and then get the opportunity to discuss it with colleagues.*

Even with a somewhat reluctant start, the project report up the peer observation of teaching to be useful and inspiring, not at least from those being skeptical before the start. This includes both getting inspiration from observing a colleague and having feedback from a “critical friend”. For the majority it was the first time a peer had commented on their teaching. The peer observation pilot resulted in several discussions about teaching and learning activities, student-learning strategies and seems to have a potential to enhance the pedagogical discourse also at the faculty level.

## **4 DISCUSSION**

The findings so far indicate the potential of peer observation of teaching, pairing colleagues from different disciplines to help academics focus on teaching and learning. In this case, reciprocal trust is underlined. It seems moving away from teaching as private enterprise presupposes a clever and flexible start. The feedback practices is a strong element in enhancing the educational discourse. The level of the feedback and the reflection will depend upon the engagement in educational research and theory (Tight, 2015). The crux is how to make ‘pop ups’ like this pilot permanent and make informed

discussions about teaching and learning and didactics part of the local community work. This involves knowledge about teaching, which is not always present, as experience has had a tendency to be more valued in these settings. Pedagogical content knowledge is mandatory (Glassick, Huber, & Maeroff, 1997; Shulman, 1993). Research about what constitutes good teaching in higher education exist and can inform and inspire the further shift from teaching to learning (Biggs, 1999; Paul Ramsden, 2003). Shulman (2000, p. 50) gave principles for SoTL: “We develop a scholarship of teaching when our work becomes public, peer-reviewed and critiqued, and exchanged with other members of our professional communities so they, in return, can build on our work”. The demanding question is how can the gain from peer observation of teaching be taken further and opened to the members of the academic community. A suggestion from Engin (2016) when referring to Shulman (2000) is that the output of the peer observation need to be shared and reviewed.

The limitations of this study are several; the number of participants, the short period of trying peer observation out and few interviewees. Nevertheless, the experiences from the pilot gives valuable knowledge about implementing peer observation and peer review of teaching at a larger scale.

#### **4.1 Possible follow-ups**

Experiences from the pilot tell us that one size does not fit all. To make peer observation a community property at this faculty we need to more than one alternative of doing it. In the launching of the full project we plan to include different levels, like peer observation and peer review of teaching:

- Peer observation in pairs - giving those new to the method and others the opportunity to have this experience, starting with an introductory workshop.
- Peer review – making groups of three academics with shifting the roles of being observe, observer and mediator (Søndergaard & Leth Andersen, 2007), starting with an introductory workshop.
- Workshops on writing about peer observation / peer review of teaching and learning to make the experience community property (Shulman, 1993).

The further project will be included as a case in a four-year innovation and research project: Study management, teaching and learning enhancement conducted by the Center for Teaching, Learning and Technology at the university.

#### **4.2 Theoretical and educational significance**

The theoretical framework is a sociocultural perspective on teaching and learning and the SoTL framework. It is common to highlight research when one discuss the identity of academics. Peer observation and peer review of teaching can have a positive impact in the development of an academics' teacher identity (Nevgi & Löfström, 2015; Trigwell, 2001) (Boud, 2006; Roxå & Mårtensson, 2016; Tight, 2004). The educational significance of the study is to document how peer cooperation is enabling an important step from teaching seen as a private enterprise to teaching seen as a collective approach. This implies to introduce a culture of sharing experience and ideas about teaching and learning and to deepen the discussion of scholarship of teaching and learning (Kreber, 2002).

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