



## A window on our teaching practice: Enhancing individual online teaching quality through online peer observation and support. A UK case study

Shirley Bennett <sup>a,\*</sup>, Julie Santy <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Education and Online Learning, Institute for Learning, The University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull, HU6 7RX, UK

<sup>b</sup> Faculty of Health and Social Care, The University of Hull, UK

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Accepted 25 January 2009

#### Keywords:

Peer observation

Quality

Online learning

e-Learning

### SUMMARY

This article provides a practical exploration of the conduct and outcomes a case study in which the process of peer observation in online learning and teaching is articulated and shown to be relevant to the enhancement of online learning and teaching in health and other educational contexts. Copious literature on the subject of peer observation and a small body about online peer observation suggests a variety of different approaches which lend themselves to the complexities of health education settings. The practical example described here was conducted in the UK. The authors, lecturers from two different departments in the same university, shared the new experience of online peer observation. Following face-to-face discussion of areas we wished each other to explore we undertook a documented review of a specific aspect of each others' chosen learning activities. This led to further peer-support and discussion. The paper is illustrated with examples of our review and the discussion which followed which we hope will illuminate the process for other practitioners as well as stimulate research and further debate and discussion.

© 2009 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

### Introduction

In the UK, quality in higher education is often driven both by external organisations such as the [Quality Assurance Agency \(2007\)](#) and [Skills for Health \(2007\)](#), as well as by individual and institutional commitment to continuous improvement. Such approaches do not always fully illuminate what really matters about the quality of education and delivery for students being prepared for the health care workforce ([Horrocks, 2006](#); [Lauder et al., 2006](#)). With the expansion of online methods of teaching and learning in higher education as well as within health care education, there is a need to consider these issues within a new context ([Forman et al., 2002](#); [Kennedy, 2005](#)), still with an eye on quality.

The development of online peer observation (OLPO) is relatively recent. The use of peer observation in the development of educators and educational delivery has long been a feature of quality assurance and development processes in health care education in the UK as well as elsewhere ([Berk et al., 2004](#), [Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2004](#)). Peer observation is typically understood as a process whereby a teacher participates as an observer in a lesson (or other form of educational delivery) to facilitate exploration and evaluation of the learning and teaching process. This leads to reflection and discussion with the aim of enhancing students'

learning through focusing on the practice of the teacher. A plethora of different terminology (encompassing amongst other terms; 'peer coaching', 'classroom observation', 'clinical supervision', 'peer review of teaching', 'peer-supported teaching development', 'peer reflection of teaching') reflects differences in underlying values, systems and approaches. Most approaches share one key feature in that they typically refer to group teaching within classroom settings. This is one of the potential limitations of traditional peer observation ([Marshall, 2004](#); [Gosling and O'Connor, 2006](#)) and there is a need to broaden the remit to "embrace the breadth of the 'teaching' role and its impact on the total learning environment" ([Kell, 2005, pp. 8](#)).

Online learning in health and social care education requires not only a new approach to delivery ([Santy and Smith, 2007](#)), but to how the quality of delivery is addressed ([Kennedy, 2005](#)) both from a curricular perspective and the perspective of individual teacher approaches, including the development of the individual as a new kind of teacher. [Salmon \(2004\)](#) talks of the monitoring of e-moderator/e-tutor practice as a development strategy.

Some have started to examine how practices from face-to-face peer observation might be applied to and adapted for the online learning context (e.g. [Bennett and Barp, 2008](#); [Goldsmith and Rogers-Ward, 2003](#); [Swinglehurst et al., 2008](#); [Tonkin and Baker, 2003](#)). Whilst these early adopters demonstrate that the implementation of peer "observation" of the online learning and teaching process is practically possible, how they went about it differs.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 0 1482 466802; fax: +44 0 1482 466137.

E-mail address: [s.bennett@hull.ac.uk](mailto:s.bennett@hull.ac.uk) (S. Bennett).

These differences are interesting in that they shed light on the extent to which online peer observation (OLPO) broadens the range of what is possible. They also demonstrate a flexibility which may be especially beneficial given the complexities of online learning and the time and place constraints which it causes.

In the work of Bennett and Barp (2008) and Swinglehurst et al. (2008), the OLPO process took place amongst members of single programme teams, with differing experience of working together previously within varying pre-existing cultures of collaboration and peer-review. In the work of Goldsmith and Rogers-Ward (2003), and Tonkin and Baker (2003), the observation involved pairs of colleagues either working in the same department, or at least within similar disciplines, across 8 different subject areas. The impression given is that the participants were physically located within the same institution whilst the Bennett and Barp (2008) project involved e-tutors based in 5 different countries.

These OLPO examples also differed in how much of the process was carried out online. In the work of Swinglehurst et al. (2008), the focus of the initiative was the online learning and teaching process, but instead of observation taking place within the online context, individuals brought material such as a transcript of a virtual seminar to a face-to-face group discussion and this formed the basis for reflective exploration of the topic. Tonkin and Baker (2003) carried out the observation online, but the preparation and feedback discussions took place face-to-face. There was a little change to the established departmental process for observation of face-to-face teaching. Goldsmith and Rogers-Ward (2003) and Bennett and Barp (2008) carried out the whole of the process via the internet and online communication methods. This project made use of an online discussion board that provided an asynchronous forum running alongside the actual teaching. Bennett and Barp (2008) used synchronous post-observation discussion and feedback using either instant messaging or chat.

These differences were motivated in some cases by practical factors and in others by deliberate design. The projects illustrate the fact that the 'archived' nature of online learning opens up possibilities for online tutors to work together in ways (relating to time and place) that have not been possible in the past. This flexibility presents new challenges. We may need to develop new structures and processes for OLPO (Swinglehurst et al., 2008) in recognition of the possibility that the practices used in more traditional approaches may not fit in with the online environment. Peer observation of the online learning/teaching process must not merely replicate the traditional use of peer observation of classroom teaching but capitalise on the additional opportunities it offers.

### The case study

This case study aims to illuminate some of the detail of the issues raised above.

### Context

We are two colleagues working in different departments in the same UK University – one in education the other in health and social care. These two departments in many institutions are often drawn together by commonalities in the vocational focus of most programmes. One of us (Santy) uses e-learning within a broader blended learning approach to a number of modules and programmes offered largely to health professionals. The other (Bennett) teaches an international programme involving professionals working in a range of education contexts around various areas of the UK and internationally. We work with different VLEs (Virtual Learning Environments) with broadly similar tools. We employ a

similar approach to e-learning that involves the development of student activities and delivery of materials through a web based environment. Learning is stimulated through online activities led by students and moderated by the tutor. Students share their thoughts and ideas with the tutor and other students through related discussion forums accessed via the same web site.

We were brought together through a common interest in e-learning and built on previous work by undertaking peer observation review of each others' online teaching practice through an action learning approach. Action learning is described as a continuous process of learning and reflection through which individuals learn from and through each other (Kember, 2000, pp. 35). Peer supervision might be another term to describe the approach taken in providing development and support opportunities for teachers (Claveirole and Morgan, 2003). Through face-to-face discussion we initially explored the problems and advantages of the approach and our own, related, support-needs. This enabled us to develop a supportive relationship not unlike the process of clinical supervision seen in the practice of some health care and psychotherapy/counselling practitioners (e.g. Playle and Mullarkey, 1998). This enabled us to provide mutual support in the, often isolated, process of teaching online. This example aims to share information about the process and our thoughts and reflections as well as explore how this process has enabled enhancement within our online teaching practice.

### Process

As a first step we met face-to-face and each of us identified and explained a concern we had about some online teaching currently underway. The broader module context was outlined, as were the aims of the learning activities involved. We also identified "what" specific aspect of teaching and learning events would need to be looked at within the process of the observation, as this is by no means straightforward within online learning and was exacerbated by the fact that we were both novices in the use of each other's VLE. We needed to direct the observer to visit different areas of the VLE to explore the relevant learning materials, to access specified discussion forums and view samples of student work. With students' agreement, we each provided the other with VLE access and individually undertook the observation by reviewing specified online activities. Feedback was sent by email, but as post-observation discussion was practicably possible, this was also undertaken face-to-face.

Learning was mutual and was enhanced by the opportunity to look through a "window" into the practice of another e-learning practitioner. The analogy of the window refers to the fact that the complexities of online-learning events means that the observer must necessarily limit the section of learning considered. The 'observation' is therefore limited to a specific aspect or section of teaching and learning. Even so, this provides the opportunity for a more longitudinal approach to the review than would have been possible with a discrete 'classroom' event. Through this approach we gained insights into our own practice through a third-party perspective. We found that the process enabled us to provide mutual support for our online teaching practice foster our own development. Through this direct experience we were also able to identify potential pitfalls and challenges when developing the process to support other colleagues new to online teaching.

### Discussion

The primary impetus for peer observation is to raise the quality of teaching and learning (Shortland, 2004), and this relates to what

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/367424>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/367424>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)