



DISTANCE LEARNING AND TEACHING: UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF TUITION OBSERVATIONS

Chris Douce, School of Computing and Communications, The Open University, United Kingdom

Introduction

Quality of distance learning can be considered in different ways: the quality of the teaching and learning materials that students can engage with, the quality of correspondence tuition given to students in response to their assessments and the quality of online or face to face teaching. The quality of online or face to face teaching is considered to be especially important in terms of helping to develop tutor-student relationships and student motivation.

This paper describes a project to capture and understand the practice of tutorial observations from two different perspectives: the perspective of the distance learning tutor, and the perspective of the line manager. The project has a number of linked objectives: it aims to understand what happens during a tutorial or class observation; understand what good observation feedback is; what considerations need to be made regarding the observation of online tutorials; how to observe team teaching and offer feedback that is appropriate and useful for lecturers; how to best influence and develop teaching practice; to understand attitudes of different groups of staff across the university.

This short case study begins with a description of a literature review, followed with a brief summary of a series of focus groups that were designed to elicit opinions and perspectives about tuition observations: two focus groups for associate lecturers, and one focus group for their line manager. The focus groups helped to identify a set of practice recommendations, which are shared. The paper then concludes with a summary and pointers towards further research.

Literature Review

One of the first steps of the project was to carry out a literature review (Chyriwsky, 2017). Before commencing, it was acknowledged that the term *teaching observation* can be connected to a broad field of study; it can relate to observation practice at school level, tertiary education as well as higher education. Exploration of this area can also expose debates relating to educational policy and development. A direction was given to focus attention to research that related primarily to distance education, higher education and the management and development of teaching practice.

Fifty-nine publications were identified. These included journals, books, and professional development conferences. A range of key themes were identified, along with important papers that shared research findings and provided pointers to research practice.

Some of the key themes identified included: peer observation (Cosh, 1998; Jones & Gallen, 2015) and observation design (Gosling, 2001); the philosophy of tutorial observations, i.e. whether they were for lecturer performance monitoring or for personal and professional development (Shortland, 2004); aspects of development related to technology skills, fostering a sense of belonging and developing of competence (Harper & Nicolson, 2013); the exposure to different pedagogic approaches, changes in personal understanding and perspectives (Harper & Nicolson, 2013); the importance of dialogue between the observed and observer (Donnelly, 2007); the recognition of challenges such as workload and observer bias (Martin & Double, 1998; Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker, 2006; Courneya et al., 2008).

Following the literature review, it was decided to run two sets of focus groups for university staff: one for associate lecturers, who are generally observed, and another for the academic managers who regularly carry out observations (known as staff tutors). A description of both focus groups can be found in the next sections.

Focus Groups: Associate Lecturers

Open University associate lecturers, who are also known as tutors, are part time members of staff who are the student's first point of contact when they are studying a module. A module is usually up to 30 points of study and runs between 6 and 9 months. Tutors have up to a group of twenty students and can teach on undergraduate and postgraduate modules across a range of different faculties. All the teaching and learning materials are written by a module team and the tutor's role is to help the students understand and work through the module. Tutors respond to student queries, mark assessments and run tutorials. Tutorials can take place face to face, but they increasingly take place online using Adobe Connect.

Two focus groups were run at an associate lecturer development conference in May 2017. During the session, tutors were asked two questions: "How should staff tutors and faculty managers run effective observations?" and "What feedback would help you the most?" During the focus group, tutors were encouraged to write down key thoughts and opinions using a flip chart. After the session, important discussion points summarised in a blog post which was made available to participants (Douce, 2017a).

The discussions that took place can be summarised by a set of keywords. These were: purpose, importance, dimensions, acknowledgment, dialogue, frequency, practicalities, negotiation, feedback, differences, opportunities and connections. Purpose relates to the overall objective of observations; whether they were solely for management or for developmental purpose. This linked to the theme of importance: observations should be done properly; they should not be cursory or brief. The term dimensions related a number of different aspects, i.e. whether the observation was formal or informal, group or individual, or whether line managers were visiting a live or a recorded tutorial. It should be acknowledged that observations can be stressful and

that trust between the observer and the observed is important. Feedback was also discussed; there should be a dialogue and tutors should be given a right to reply, and observer engagement within a tutorial can also be something that can be negotiated.

An important point is that there appears to be differences in observation practice; there were differences in terms of frequency and the ways that feedback is shared to tutors. Reflecting the literature review, the tutorial or teaching observation can be considered to be a rare opportunity for both development and collaboration; there are certainly opportunities, particularly with respect to developing and facilitating peer observations.

Focus Groups: Staff Tutors

The second set of focus groups took place in November 2017 within a regular meeting that is scheduled for tutor line managers. The aim of the faculty staff tutor meeting is to learn about changes within the university and to share academic and management practice. The meeting was attended by staff tutor representatives across the Faculty of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

Tutor line managers were split into 7 groups, roughly representing disciplines and were asked the following questions:

- What is the most important reason to carry out an observation?
- What procedure or procedures do you follow?
- How do you record an observation?
- What do you look for?
- How do you share feedback?
- Is there anything special about online observations?
- Should there be standardised guidelines for STEM?

All groups were asked to discuss the questions, make notes and provide a brief summary of their discussions.

The keywords that related to the themes that were exposed are as follows: philosophy, relationships, dialogue, guidelines, feedback, online, experience, priority and opportunities.

Philosophy reflects the earlier use of the word *purpose*; for example, the staff tutors were exposing the question as to whether an observation was developmental or managerial in the sense of ensuring quality assurance. Relationships relate to the fact that observations can also have multiple purposes; they can help to develop and build relationships, reduce tutor isolation and offer reassurance. This theme is linked to dialogue and feedback, in the sense that observations are an opportunity to have helpful conversations about practice. Two other important points were: online tutorials do not need to be perfect; the challenges accompanying the use of technology are thoroughly appreciated, and the experience of both the observer and the observed are to be taken into account.

Reflecting the tutor focus group, opportunities were also discussed: peer observations have the potential to be facilitated and observation results and feedback have the potential to have a broader impact in the sense that they could feed into discussions regarding module development and design. Finally, there was a conclusion that a standardised set of standardised observation guidelines were not appropriate; tutors, disciplines and modules are all different.

Faculty Guidance

One of the immediate outcomes of these discussions was to uncover a set of practical and adaptable guidelines that have been used for Science tutors. For sake of brevity, the guidelines have been summarised in the following two paragraphs. A more thorough description is available in Douce (2017b):

During the tutor probation period (which lasts for two years), each tutor should be observed once across all different tuition methods. Line managers should liaise with each other to decide which observations would be appropriate and the *lead line manager* will ensure that at least one observation is made before a tutor's appraisal which takes place every two years. A lead manager can ask other colleagues for an observation report (with tutor permission) to prepare for a tutor's appraisal.

Every tuition report should present some useful feedback (using a feedback form) and should be stored on a secure server. Line managers should give at least 2 weeks' notice before an observation and, if appropriate, ask tutors to prepare a lesson or a tutorial plan, and have them send it to you. When a report has been sent to a tutor, ask for reflective feedback from tutor.

Summary

This research has exposed a variety of different practices and attitudes regarding tuition and tutorial observations, and has helped to suggest further research. There are three immediate areas of focus. These are: continue to read and analyse the literature review, continue to explore the subject of online teaching observations, and continue to consider how to appropriate conduct observations when team teaching is carried out. This third point implicitly reflects an important and repeated theme: how to balance the needs of management and quality with the needs of pedagogic and professional development. This is, of course, connected to a theme that has emerged from the literature, the tutor focus group and the line manager focus group: how best to develop and facilitate peer observations. This question points towards an important action: the need for further staff development workshops to share practice.

This research has been carried out within the Faculty of STEM. Looking long term, there are clear areas of further development: there is the possibility of extending this work to other faculties, and also building on the focus group research to develop a more detailed survey to uncover and expose broader attitudes regarding tutorial observations. There are, however, a number of key themes that can be identified. These are of course, the importance of trust and the importance of communication.

References

1. Chyriwsky, S. (2017). *Tutorial observation literature survey*. eSTeeM project internal report. The Open University.
2. Cosh, J. (1998). Peer observation in higher education - a reflective approach. *Innovations in Education & Training International*, 35(2), 171-176.
3. Courneya, C.-A., Pratt, D., & Collins, J. (2008). Through what perspective do we judge the teaching of peers? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 24, 69–79.
4. Donnelly, R. (2007). Perceived impact of peer observation of teaching in higher education. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 19(2), 117-129.
5. Douce, C. (2017a, October 25). Tutorials and tutorial observations: what works and what helps tutors? Personal blog [Blog post]. Retrieved January 27, 2018, from <https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/oublog/viewpost.php?post=200062>
6. Douce, C. (2017b, November 13) Tutorial observation guidelines. Personal blog [Blog post]. Retrieved January 27, 2018, from <https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/oublog/viewpost.php?post=201136>
7. eSTEEeM (2018). The OU centre for STEM pedagogy. Retrieved January 27, 2018, from <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/teaching-and-learning/esteem/>
8. Gosling, D. (2001). *Guidelines for peer observation of learning and teaching*. ESCalate Regional Networking Seminars.
9. Harper, F., & Nicolson, M. (2013). Online peer observation: its value in teacher professional development, support and well-being. *International Journal for Academic Development*, 18(3), 264–275.
10. Hatzipanagos, S., & Lygo-Baker, S. (2006). Teaching observations: a meeting of minds? *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 17(2), 97-105.
11. Jones, M. H., & Gallen, A-M. (2015). *Peer observation, feedback and reflection for development of practice in synchronous online teaching*. Innovations in Education and Teaching International (Early view). Open Research Online, The Open University.
12. Martin, G. A., & Double, J. M. (1998). Developing higher education teaching skills through peer observation and collaborative reflection. *Innovations in Education & Training International*, 35(2), 161-170.
13. Shortland, S. (2004). Peer observation: a tool for staff development or compliance? *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 28(2), 219-228.

Acknowledgements

Time for this research was funded by eSTEEeM, the Open University centre for STEM Pedagogy (eSTEEeM, 2018). Many thanks are extended to Sarah Chyriwsky for all her hard work on the literature review which is continuing to guide the analysis.