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Giving lesson observation feedback

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Abstract

The paper highlights the context bound nature of giving observation feedback and indicates some of the complexities around fostering a dialogic approach. It focuses on the teacher education feedback dialogue as it occurs on a full time one year PGCE (Postgraduate Certificate) in Post Compulsory Education course at a University.

The research is autoethnographic and includes autobiographical and creative writing as well as analysis of empirical data. The research centres on myself as PGCE tutor working with groups of students. It considers the complexity of that role (module tutor, personal tutor, assessor). Selected findings from my tutor observation feedback dialogues and from peer student observation feedback dialogues are shared. This is with a view to comparing and contrasting the roles, structure and conventions.

Theoretical discussions draw on particular concepts from Foucault's work, and Copland's research on English Language Teacher Education triadic observation feedback. Research on lesson observation and feedback practices includes O'Leary's critique of graded lessons and current shifts to ungraded and peer observation models. The paper therefore broadly reflects on the political context of which observations are a part, and makes reference to Lifelong Learning and to schools.

Keywords

Lesson observation; observation feedback; autoethnography; lifelong learning .

Research context: the Lifelong Learning sector

Further Education (FE) sits under an umbrella term of Lifelong Learning. Further Education provision includes work-based learning, Further Education colleges, sixth form colleges, adult and community settings and prisons. Following the Foster report (2005) and the FE White Paper (DfES, 2006), the 2007 Regulations (DIUS, 2007) meant that teachers had to record and update their Continuous Professional Development (CPD), they had to be members of the Institute for Learning (who would also monitor CPD), there was a Professional Code of Conduct, and any new entrants had to train for a teacher education qualification (e.g. Clancy, 2007, in the Guardian, online). Regulations for teacher training first appeared in 2001 but before that 'there was no requirement for those teaching in FE colleges, adult and community learning and work based learning to have a professional qualification' (UCU, 2006).

New professional statuses and qualification routes were designed around Full Teacher and Associate Teacher roles. There was a sense that this would lead to parity of esteem and perhaps pay for FE teachers (in comparison to their school counterparts). Teachers would apply for QTLS: Qualified Teaching and Learning Status. There was also a sense that moving from FE in to school settings would be more viable, though it was not until 2012 that 'the

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professional status of Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS) became recognised as equal to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) for teaching in schools' (IfL, 2012: 7).

Fast forward to a Times Educational Supplement article reporting in March 2012 that 'The Lingfield review's recommendation to remove the legal requirement for staff to achieve teaching qualifications in favour of "discretionary advice" seems at odds with its emphasis on quality' (Lee, 2012, in TES online). The FE Week reported in February 2014 that 'At least 94 per cent of England's colleges and independent learning providers (ILPs) will only take on qualified teachers or staff working towards qualifications six months after the government removed legislation' (Whittaker, 2014, in FE Week, online). IfL (the Institute for Learning) handed over to the Education and Training Foundation (in October, 2014). This includes handing over the monitoring and receiving of QTLS applications, developing new Professional Standards and advising on CPD. This paper has been written against a backdrop of ongoing debates around teacher education, the role of Higher Education Institutions in teacher education, the place of the Education and Training Foundation Professional Standards in teacher education and professional development, and the use of lesson observations in inspection and quality assurance processes.

Introducing the research

The research focuses on the lesson observation feedback dialogue as it takes place on a full time one year PGCE PCE (Postgraduate Certificate in Post-Compulsory Education) course at a University. It was a central theme in my doctoral thesis. The research is autoethnographic as my autobiography is also a component. I look at the observation feedback I provide as teacher educator in order to see my role in that dialogue more clearly. I compare that to peer observation dialogues where student teachers gave feedback to each other.

The overarching aim in the thesis was to 'interrogate' (Foucault, 2003c: 179) the relations between power (the institutional and policy context I work within), the subject (myself as observer, my students) and truth (the nature of observation discourse, its forms of knowledge and ways of being and behaving). The intention of the thesis, and this paper, is not to present a 'one size fits all' 'best practice' model but to share an example of a teacher critically engaging with one aspect of their work. I hope to illustrate Foucault's (2001: 236) view: 'what we need to know are relations: the subject's relations with everything around him'. We need to look at the context in which lesson observation and feedback takes place. This includes reflecting on the stage the student teacher is at in their development or the place of the observation for an established teacher. In my research, I recognised myself and my students as working within sets of expectations around what constitutes an 'effective' teacher. For students, that would include their own expectations as well as the PGCE expectations.

The autoethnographic approach to writing about lesson observation feedback is unique. It answers some of the calls for observers to be more aware of their role and their approaches (Copland, 2008a: 259; Engin, 2013: 11; Wragg, 1994: 69). In the following extract, I share some of my motivation for my current research.

Sharing some of my autobiography

I have shifted between observing as a quality observer (internal quality assurance in colleges) and observing as a teacher education tutor. I have worked in various Further Education colleges prior to coming in to Higher Education. I have held quality roles that included conducting internal graded lesson observations both alongside being an English Lecturer and later alongside being a Teacher Education tutor.

When I applied for my current job as a university senior lecturer, I was asked what my research interest might be. I'd never been asked that question before. I had been a college lecturer since I finished my PGCE in FE (Postgraduate Certificate in Further Education). No one wanted to know what research I might be interested in doing. They wanted to know how I would manage and motivate learners, the extent of my subject knowledge and my teaching experience. Later on they wanted to know what my impact was so they asked me about the performance data. How many learners did I retain? How many of them achieved? What did they achieve? What about the range of things I could teach on? What responsibilities had I taken on? What was my own observation record? I was confident in answering these questions. This was the context I was working in. I was also measuring myself in the same terms. Foucault (1980: 155), drawing on Bentham's Panopticon (an architectural design for a prison), expresses how 'each individual ...will end up interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer: each individual thus exercising surveillance over, and against, himself'. I was my own overseer and I also oversaw others as I held quality and leadership/ management roles and delivered on teacher education.

Before I went to the interview, I'd anticipated the question. My research theme was lesson observation feedback. Very particularly the feedback dialogue rather than the observation because I had become increasingly uncomfortable with the different roles I had played in that dialogue. I had observed as part of colleges' quality assurance and as part of delivering on teacher education programmes. I was also observed myself. I was struggling increasingly, and I felt morally, with the way in which feedback was given to me and the way in which I also gave observation feedback.

Lesson observation and observation feedback

I have selected literature from mentoring, teacher education, Higher Education, and (as most specific to feedback) in the English Language teaching field.

Literature on lesson observations has focused more on the observation itself than on the feedback stage. O'Leary (2014: 33) noted that more research on observation and feedback had been undertaken in the schools sector (examples include Wragg, 1994; Tilstone, 1998; Marriott, 2001; Montgomery, 2002). He has conducted substantial and critical research in to graded lesson observations of FE teachers (and written on observation across the education sector, 2014). Stevens and Lowing (2008: 182) writing on feedback to Secondary English student teachers reflect similarly that 'relatively little research focuses on the written and oral comments made by university Initial Teacher Education (ITE) tutors on their student teachers' observed lessons'.

Montgomery (2002: 55; schools context) describes feedback as a 'helping interview' which might therefore require 'counselling and guidance'. Harvey (City College Norwich, 2008: 5) describes observation feedback as:

an informed professional dialogue. The observer's job is to give the teacher information in order to maximise his/her teaching choices and strategies.

Martin (2006) draws on mentoring and counselling perspectives in his consideration of videoed tutor and mentor observation feedback on a University teacher education course. He does not share the data but reflects that 'the majority of interventions are authoritative' and to be 'facilitative' would 'require high level counselling skills and qualities' (ibid: 10). Cullimore and Simmons (2010; Lifelong Learning context) look at mentoring on an in-service teacher education programme. They share their perceptions of two different models of mentoring (where the second is teacher education):

It has more in common with a model of coaching than one of mentoring in its fundamental sense, and is essentially judgemental in its approach. This is the version fostered by the guidelines from government organisations such as OfSTED. The other is more to do with personal relationships and is the humanist, interactionist version (which makes it high risk) and is essentially developmental in its approach (ibid :237).

Cockburn (City College Norwich, 2005: 48) also notes the complexity of the feedback dialogue in his comment that 'in the case of observation, teacher and observer together reflect on the "transpired phases of existence" and make objects of them, but now they are intersubjectively constructed, grounded from two disparate positions and separated perspectives'. Both O'Leary (2013b) and Cockburn (2005) emphasise the place of peer observations as a professional development tool. O'Leary (2012: 16) uses concepts of 'restrictive' and 'expansive' learning, drawn from Engeström, to stress the need for 'practitioners to engage with (observation) as a tool for reciprocal learning'.

I found more research specifically on the feedback dialogue in English Language Teacher Education. In particular, I focused on Copland's work. Copland has written substantially on ESOL triadic observation feedback. She (2010: 468) reports that:

Feedback in teacher education has been the focus of a number of studies over the past fifteen years. Researchers have demonstrated that the asymmetric power relations inherent in most feedback situations can lead to trainee resistance (Waite,1995), lack of clarity (Vasquez, 2004) and trainer dominance during interaction (Hyland & Lo, 2006). Brandt (2008) suggests that trainers and trainees hold conflicting expectations with regard to the purpose of the teaching practice element.

In that paper, Copland suggests other 'causes of tension' (ibid). In other work, Copland and Mann (2010: 188) advise that in observations of student teachers: 'There needs to be a balance in feedback between meeting trainee's perceived needs and also developing skills'. Copland and Mann (ibid: 21) explore 'dialogic talk' where 'teachers engage students in talk that is collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful (Alexander, 2005) in order to co-construct knowledge'. The notion of dialogic talk is also in Copland's PhD thesis (2008b) on the observation feedback dialogue. Moving to more dialogic talk could allow the trainee more chance to share their reflections. Copland (2008a) identifies lesson observation feedback as a genre with particular phases and conventions. In her thesis (2008b: 25), she describes the feedback dialogue (in ESOL triadic context) as 'polygeneric'; a main genre comprised of other multiple genres or phases. Copland (2008a: 9) also suggests:

Language is the key resource in the feedback event. Trainers in particular use their language resources to represent their positions and ensure that the feedback event proceeds smoothly and that trainees learn from the experience.

I have drawn on a number of concepts from Copland’s work and references continue therefore in this paper.

My work as tutor observer

As tutor observer on the PGCE in PCE, I feed back in order to support the development of the student teacher. In my research, I wondered about the extent to which previous experiences of grading informed my current teacher education observation feedback. The lesson observation process is a ‘technology of power’ (Foucault, 2003b: 146). In my role as quality observer, I had not always known the person I was observing and the tool I used (graded judgements) acted as a measuring stick. I exerted ‘capillary power’ (Foucault, 1975: 198). For me, that Foucauldian concept can be understood and applied in the context of grading lesson observations. As quality observer, my understanding was that I was interpreting and working within the judgements that might be made by an external inspection (Ofsted). Peim (1993, p.184) comments that capillary power ‘reaches into daily practices and habits and is thoroughly institutionalised’. In this example, the power represented by Ofsted ‘reaches into’ (ibid) quality assurance processes in educational institutions; thus power is distributed through the observation paperwork, the feedback dialogue and exerted in the role of observer.

I also thought about the impact of observation on how we behave as participants. I would suggest; similar to Copland’s, (2008b), idea of a ‘genre’, that our expectations and experiences of observation and feedback inform what ways of communicating we feel are open to us; our ‘discursive possibilities’ (Butler, 1990: 184). This is something that might be seen in the extract below:

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~ ~ ~ ~ ~
~ In one observation feedback (when I taught in FE), I was explicitly told that I couldn't be ~
~ given a grade one (outstanding) because my class hadn't been a challenge for me. I asked ~
~ what I needed to do to get a grade one: ~
~ Observer: "Something extra." ~
~ Victoria: "What exactly? Can you give me an example?" ~
~ Observer: "If you'd have had two students causing a riot and you'd had to step in and sort it. ~
~ Something that challenged you a bit more." ~
~ Victoria: (nonplussed, thinking this is an adult class where all of the learners cooperate with ~
~ each other. Thinking are you sure?) ~
~ Observer: "Well that something extra...." ~
~ ~ ~ ~ ~
    
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Foucault describes power relations as ‘mobile, reversible, and unstable’ (Foucault, 2003a: 34). As a tutor observer, I wondered to what extent I (my ‘capillary’ power; Foucault, 1975: 224) was influenced by graded inspections and quality assurance processes that serve to standardise or regulate what is an ‘effective’ teacher. In the poem; and in rethinking the transitions I had made between graded and teacher education observations, I sought to capture the distinctive emotional dimension of working as a tutor observer with student teachers.

analytical and evocative autoethnography'. My explicitly autobiographical and creative/dramatised inclusions are designed to 'evoke' or show rather than tell because these experiences are messy and subjective. I do however also include empirical data (such as observation feedback dialogues). That analysis is more in line with Anderson's (2006a: 378) approach: 'analytic autoethnography'.

Anderson (ibid) developed and coined 'analytic autoethnography', which he characterised as:

- (1) complete member researcher (CMR) status, (2) analytic reflexivity, (3) narrative visibility of the researcher's self, (4) dialogue with informants beyond the self, and (5) commitment to theoretical analysis.

I am a member of the research context I describe (1). In the thesis I returned to key decisions (2) i.e. in relation to ethics. I included research diaries (3). In relation to (4), I recorded 3 tutor observation feedback dialogues in 2011-2012 and 3 in 2012-2013. I also collated 3 peer observation feedback dialogues; 2 in 2010-11 and 1 in 2012-13. Participation at any level was voluntary; very particularly as all students were in my tutor groups. Students received the normal tutor observation paperwork (both a stream of consciousness record and a formal record). I recorded the dialogues by flip camera, and transcribed and analysed them. That was not shared and is therefore not fully in line with (4), though pen portraits and focus group discussions (sharing student expectations) are included in the thesis. Volunteer students recorded their peer observation dialogues. They paired themselves up and conducted the observation as one of the formal eight observations; the peer one being assessed as developmental rather than Pass/ Fail. They had each been observed by me and by their mentor and/ or other colleagues. They had conducted informal observations of colleagues with no explicit requirement to give feedback. I transcribed those dialogues and; in line with (4), shared that initial analysis with them in a semi structured interview. All except one participant was able to attend.

It is in relation to (5), that I feel my research is more in line with Ellis' 'evocative' approach. Ellis comments that 'the only real point of contention is [Anderson's] commitment to developing theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena' (2006: 437). My aim (already acknowledged) was to interrogate my experiences and practice rather than promote a particular model of giving feedback. Autoethnography as a choice of approach was grounded in a wish to share and discuss the complexities of giving observation feedback, and also to emphasise the place of subjective teacher experience in educational research.

Analysis and discussion

I had a number of concerns about my dominance as an observer. I saw the feedback dialogue as an assessment decision but also a place in which the student teacher reflects on their practice. I was writing autobiographical and creative extracts at the time of collecting and analysing the data. That process supported my self-assessment that I was working within a particular structure and in particular ways as informed by my previous observer experiences. The final analysis of the tutor observation feedback dialogues was informed by theoretical concepts drawn predominantly from Foucault and from Copland's work. The codes and categories were therefore theoretically inspired, and were applied through constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1965). I came to analyse the peer observation dialogues in the same way.

The theoretical categories and codes are identified below:

- Regulatory practice: exploring conventions (University, known/researched, individual), and patterns/ phases
- Division of labour: turn taking, marked interruptions, length of turn, negotiation of actions, use of questions
- Political technology: my attitude, values and expectations
- Contradictions: with conventions, with own attitude and values

I aimed to see my practice more clearly with a view to improving it. The data and its analysis (alongside the sharing of previous observer and observed experiences) supported me in problematising my roles as teacher educator observer and previously quality observer.

Peer observation feedback

When I compared across the two peer observation dialogues 2010-2011, there were a few things that I was surprised or struck by. Neither observer asked the observee how they felt the observation went. Both observers focused very explicitly on strengths and the actions became either really enclosed by strengths or, in the second case, were very minimal. There were no prompts or eliciting or questions designed to provoke reflection and critical engagement (such as I came to see in my tutor observation feedback) yet the first one in particular provided a thoughtful reflective discussion. It was this data that reinforced my desire to look at my own observation feedback to see the ways in which I might open up or close off that level of participation.

At times the peer observation dialogues reflected modelling (peer observations 1 and 3) and offering suggestions. These strategies were evident in my own tutor observation dialogues. Peer observers were more likely to focus on strengths and to keep to the order of items in the written record. The observer was still more dominant (inevitably leading the dialogue) but peers were clearly actively learning from each other by readily sharing their practice. This point was reinforced in the semi-structured interviews. In Political Technology, there was shared 'teacher'/ 'teacher education' vocabulary and expectations. I saw the following as significantly different: their use of questioning (to share rather than elicit, and at times to seek reassurance as an observer), the absence generally of eliciting strategies and the translation of the dialogue in to a 'learning conversation' (foregrounding the sharing of related experience; one asked about working with a support worker, another pair had a discussion on how to handle lateness). In O'Leary's (2013a: 80) survey for UCU into observations for experienced FE teachers, 'Practitioners talked about it [peer observations] being 'less stressful' and feeling 'safe enough to be observed and to observe', as the emphasis was on 'sharing best practice' and 'learning from observing others'. Interestingly two peer observers lead the Negotiation of Actions though there remained a natural hesitancy about directly critiquing practice.

My observation feedback

Wragg (1994: 69) refers to supervision, the observer observing student teachers, as 'a craft' and considers that 'exploring various styles of post-lesson analysis is just as important for supervisors, as trying out different styles of teaching is for teachers'. Copland (2008: 291) also talks about developing awareness as a trainer. Likewise Engin (2013: 11) writes 'In the same way we expect teachers to be monitoring their performance in the class, as trainers we should also be examining how we give feedback, and how our interaction and talk can support trainees' understanding of teaching'. As already noted, my research centred on seeing my practice more clearly with a view to improving it.

My aspiration was for a more 'dialogic' approach but I saw some less helpful strategies such as 'hyper questioning' (quick series of questions; see Copland's concept of 'legitimising talk', 2007, online). In looking at questioning, I identified what I saw as general conventional questions, high order questions and very specific focused questions that at times followed on quickly. A more conventional question might be one that referred to a previous action point or that asked 'How do you think it went?' High order questions pushed the student to develop their response i.e. 'You said about differentiated questioning to what extent do you think you actually achieved it?' Specific focused questions could occur in a chain i.e. 'What was their personal target setting? Did they definitely set personal targets then at that point when you were going round?' In one of my memos I reflected on how persistent I was: 'very persistent! I have tied in to earlier discussion about making explicit reference to the criteria to support differentiation'. I was also critical of an instance when I asked a closed and also leading question: 'Would that have been worthwhile to do that with them?' In another memo, I highlighted the need to monitor my use of questions. I recorded that at times I closed off their reflection by not allowing for it. My analysis reflected Copland's (2008a: 8) suggestion that:

the Questioning Phase is perhaps the most peripatetic of the phases. It is only performed by trainers and can interrupt self-evaluation and peer feedback as well as being embedded in trainer feedback and the Summary Phase.

When I looked at the pattern or phases of my dialogues, I could see that the start and the final section were the clearest. The start saw some review of previous action points and general eliciting questions. The final section was focused on the action points for next time. Questioning, turn taking and length of turn had all indicated my dominance as observer. The category Negotiation of Action very particularly pushed me to reflect on the power dynamics. In a summary memo I recorded that 'I am very powerful in this aspect of their development as student teachers. It is one of the clearest phases and the dialogue has moved in and out of these areas. This seems like my agenda: to give them areas for development'. I also commented on the extent to which I followed up actions with suggestions. It is interesting to note that in other data (student focus groups; not shared here), the students tended to refer to the dialogic and humanistic nature of the post observation feedback dialogue. It is more honest to see myself as striving towards, at times achieving, and continuing to be mindful of this.

In looking at conventions, I saw how much I drew on my experiences. This included modelling and giving examples. At times I worried about setting myself up as the ideal teacher. Wragg (1994: 64) advises the observer to be mindful of two likely tendencies- one of which is to present themselves as an ideal 'imagin[ing] themselves teaching flawlessly the class they are observing, forgetting their own errors and infelicities'.

Conclusion

Writing about my previous experiences, I was reminded of the stress of lesson observations, of that sense of observation as performance (it is one judgement at that time). The students naturally linked observation to reflection and action planning and explicitly to their development as teachers. O'Leary (2012: 16) refers to 'reciprocal learning' (in relation to observation of established teachers) and Copland and Mann (2010: 21) to more 'dialogic talk' (in relation to student teacher participation). As part of my role as PGCE PCE tutor, I continue to reflect on the clarity and coherence of the dialogue, my use of questions, ways of opening up spaces for student reflection, when I start to identify strengths and use praise, and the stage the student is at in their development.

Autoethnography as an approach has been crucial to the development of the research. It enabled me to review the experiences I have had as an observer and as observee. It also positioned the research explicitly in its historical context, now a turning point between graded and ungraded lessons (in the case of established teachers). I hope it encourages other teachers to share their practice with a view to problematising and potentially improving it. I also hope to have shown the importance of our subjective experiences in framing how we approach the situations we encounter. In the observation of established teachers, and of student teachers, it is important to recognise the context in which that observation takes place. Interestingly I have felt more confident as an observer since conducting the research. I remember my development points and remain mindful of the individual and their context.

Observation and feedback is a common method of making a judgement on teaching and as such, this research is relatable across the education sector. In the current climate (moving towards ungraded models), it is timely to interrogate practices and processes of observation and feedback: the roles we inhabit, our sets of expectations about what constitutes an effective teacher, the place of observation in learning. I hope to have shown how important it is not to present context free models or checklists but also to examine how your own experiences inform your current practice.

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