

Case Study

Collaborative Conversations: Developing a new way to view and approach peer-observation

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Summary

Staff who teach at the University of Birmingham are required to undergo peer-observation on a regular basis (every two years in the case of full-time staff and every three years in the case of part-time staff). However there were inconsistencies in peer-observation practices across various Schools (Centre for Learning and Academic Development (CLAD), 2014). This led the School of Education to seek volunteers from the three departments within the School of Education during Autumn 2014 to undertake a project aimed at developing 'a new, effective and respected model for implementation' which would then be disseminated more widely. This case study describes the adopted approach.

The project team

The self-selected project team represented the diversity of the departments within the School of Education with specialisms ranging from teacher training (Primary Mathematics, Secondary Religious Education and Modern Languages) to special educational needs and disabilities and psychology. Their roles encompassed research, personal tutoring, teaching, admissions, welfare, PhD supervision and mentoring, and work on courses as varied as professional full-time courses to distance learning programmes, with undergraduate as well as postgraduate students.

The initial idea

Right from the beginning the project team felt strongly that they wanted to develop a new approach to peer-observation which would be truly collaborative. They felt it ought to be supportive of both the 'observee' and the 'observer' and their professional development, and would go beyond the mere observation of teaching to include the myriad of activities that staff may be involved in, be they module development or the mentoring of a newly appointed colleague. As educationalists the team members were very familiar with the value of using reflective practices (Donnelley, 2007) and agreed that this would be at the heart of the approach that would be designed. It was discussed that including a range of contexts in addition to teaching observation would allow colleagues to develop a 'community of practice' (Harper & Nicolson, 2013:266). This would afford opportunities for colleagues in groups of two or more to meet for 'focused and planned confidential conversations to foster development and encourage the sharing and understanding of problems and solutions' (Harper & Nicolson, 2013:266). The notions of community of practice (Harper & Nicolson, 2013; Wenger, 2000) and of collegiality (Bell & Cooper, 2010; Byrne, Brown & Challen, 2010; CLAD, 2014; Donnelley, 2007) were strongly favoured by the team and it was agreed that the new approach would be described as a 'collaborative conversation'.

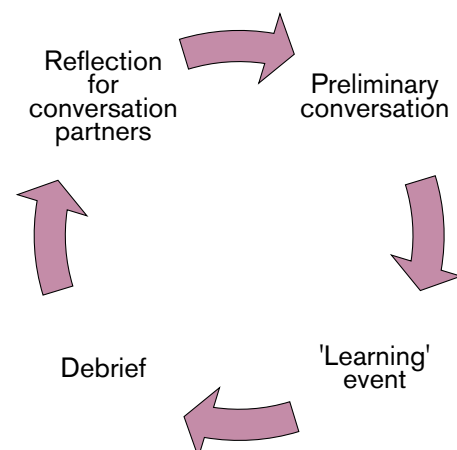
Collaborative Conversations

The project team developed a set of values which they felt needed to constitute the foundation stones of the new approach:

1. It is collaborative and it is democratic. This would allow for developments and improvements to be identified by colleagues working in the traditional model, in pairs as 'observer' and 'observee', or in larger, more flexible combinations, as co-observers at a common 'event'.
2. It is a dialogue between colleagues. This would allow a wider range of events, not just formal teaching sessions with students, or with students in attendance, to be used as the basis for Collaborative Conversations; for example, programme or module-level development meetings, assessment moderation, pastoral or supervision tutorials, mentor or distance tutor training, or professional development of post-doctoral teaching assistants.
3. It is undertaken in a spirit of co-operation and is a supportive experience. It should in no way be seen as a judgement of performance. The sole purpose of Collaborative Conversations is an opportunity to engage in a constructive discussion on an aspect of student learning and/or the wider student experience in order to improve the quality of education in one's own subject.

The aim of the new proposed process was one in which observation as a formal process between two people was replaced by one in which organic and democratic Collaborative Conversations between peers became central. The proposed Collaborative Conversation model has a tripartite structure (a preliminary conversation; an event which is 'observed'; and a debrief). The three parts of this process are imperative in order that the aims and values of the new proposed process are met – a Collaborative Conversation leading to the enhancement of best practice. The tripartite structure (Figure 1) has been designed in order to ensure that the conversation partners have meaningful and purposeful dialogue throughout the process and that the new proposed system is one in which the potential negativity or 'tick box' approach to observation is replaced by continual professional dialogue which has positive outcomes for the 'observer', 'observed', and learners (if applicable).

Figure 1: Collaborative Conversation cycle.



Trial

Three trials of this process were undertaken which allowed the project team to ascertain whether the new system met its intended objectives, and whether the accompanying documentation (guidance and template) supported the process effectively. This enabled the team to make any amendments that were needed as a result, as well as build a manageable bank of short case studies to support staff in the future to undertake a Collaborative Conversation.

The project team explored each case-study or trial using a simple framework considering three different aspects: the Collaborative Conversation's focus and approach (what did they do?), how it compared with the original 'peer observation' (what was different about this approach?), and finally the strengths of the new approach (what was positive about it?).

The Collaborative Conversation approach was trialled in three very different contexts: observation of a seminar, reflection on marking and feedback, and a module review. Our reflections on these trials are summarised below, using this developed framework.

Case Studies

Case Study 1: Observation of a seminar

What did they do?

This trial took place in the context of teacher training, where two colleagues engaged in a Collaborative Conversation prior to, during, and after a seminar session. The two teacher trainers each delivered a separate seminar and the 'observing' colleague was, in each case, a 'participant observer'. As such, Collaborative Conversation was integrated into the seminar at particular points, for example when students within the seminar were working independently, or during group work. The 'participant observer' and 'observee' had the opportunity to engage in powerful dialogue during the seminar; the collaborative conversation was centred on a specific focus agreed by the 'participant observer' and 'observee' prior to the seminar, for example the use of 'observee' questioning, and the integration of academic sources and policy sources into teaching. This approach integrated the Collaborative Conversation into the seminar session. Following the seminar session, a debrief was undertaken which focused on sharing good practice and empowerment. This approach was one of cooperation and formalising what the two teacher training lecturers already do informally to share best practice.

What was different about this approach?

Unlike a traditional peer observation, undertaken in response to a request to arrange to be observed, the timing and focus itself was at a point of need. Moreover, the 'observer' was a 'participant observer' and as such was active within the seminar; discussion between the 'observee' and participant took place during the seminar being observed; minimal formative notes were recorded as feedback was instant and purposeful. The conversations that took place prior to, during and following the 'observation' were powerful and focused. This was a collaborative and democratic approach rather than one person offering a judgement of another's performance. This approach to an observation was one which reinforced the importance of 'working together' and 'exploiting' lecturers' own strengths for the benefits of students.

What was positive about it?

This approach enabled an organic, naturalistic and positive conversation throughout the 'observation' rather than the static formalised comments of 'observations' in a traditional manner. This approach of 'observee' and 'participant observer' also helped both parties to reflect upon a specific element of their own teaching and provided an opportunity to discuss this with the participant observer as the lesson was progressing. It was felt that this approach was very beneficial and empowering. The written notes afforded both parties involved with comments which can be used for probationary paperwork, however, the powerful Collaborative Conversation dialogue was seen to be most beneficial in terms of formative and summative progress.

Case Study 2: Reflection on marking and feedback

What did they do?

This trial took place in the context of teacher training, where two colleagues engaged in a Collaborative Conversation about marking and giving feedback on a Masters-level primary teaching assignment. The second marker, a member of the project team, also had the role of mentor to the first marker and had previously undertaken a traditional observation. The focus on marking emerged during the process of second marking and through dialogue about students' academic work. In particular, a Collaborative Conversation took place about feedback to try to improve the quality of resubmissions. This was undertaken in a spirit of co-operation to share ideas and improve practice.

What was different about this approach?

Unlike a traditional peer observation, undertaken in response to a request to arrange to be observed, the timing and focus itself was at 'point of need.' The focus was important to both colleagues at the time, and the conversation about assessment raised the profile of the wider aspects of teaching and learning. It was also a collaborative and democratic process, rather than one person offering a judgement of another's performance.

What was positive about it?

The fact that the conversation was driven by the immediate needs of those involved, rather than imposed, contributed to the supportive and meaningful nature of the collaboration about the nature of feedback and the response of the students to the feedback. It helped both lecturers to reflect on their practice to date and shaped their ongoing marking practices. The written notes also afforded wider evidence to support the mentee's probationary paperwork.

Case Study 3: Discussion around a module review

What did they do?

This trial took place in the context of an annual review of a module of a professional doctorate programme. Two co-workers engaged in a consideration of the impact of their contrasting inputs to the module. The lecturers co-present and purposefully offer alternative views. The Collaborative Conversation revolved around the impact of co-presenting on students' learning and professional practice. The approach and content were reviewed and implications identified for next year's programme planning.

What was different about this approach?

The Collaborative Conversation facilitated each lecturer's thinking and reflection on discrete aspects of teaching and learning. The act of conversation allowed the co-workers to explore learning outcomes more deeply. The new approach was interactive, allowing for constructive criticism of one another's approaches, and flexible enough to be used in a context other than an observation of teaching.

What was positive about it?

There was no need for a third person to observe as both co-workers engaged in reflective discussion together. They took away from the Collaborative Conversation a greater awareness that students' learning changes over time, which would not have emerged from the more traditional peer observation of teaching model. Overall, it enabled a broader and more longitudinal reflection than 'snap-shots' of single teaching sessions.

Dissemination

The team presented the proposed new approach to colleagues further afield at two in-house conferences: the University of Birmingham's Teaching and Learning Conference in June 2015 and the School of Education's Research and Scholarship Conference in July 2015. Informal feedback obtained at these two conferences further fed into refining the Collaborative Conversation documentation. Other colleagues in the School of Education are currently trialling the approach and resources. A Canvas course has been created to house the Collaborative Conversation pilot key documents.

Conclusions

We are aware that these trials were undertaken by members of the project team with colleagues within the School of Education. Our reflections on the original trials highlight emerging synergies and so far the results are encouraging; the Collaborative Conversation trials allowed the participants to carry out a reflective observation beneficial to all participants ('observer'/'observee'), and offered them the opportunity to enter a dialogue on their practice and work co-operatively, in a range of teaching and learning contexts.

It is clear from the above trials that the format of the Collaborative Conversation provided colleagues with a focus at 'point of need' and helped all participants to reflect on their practice. The Collaborative Conversation approach positively supported cooperation and discussion to the mutual benefit of all participants as well as being democratic.

Having engaged in these trials, and having reflected upon our own Collaborative Conversations, we have come to appreciate the value of the co-construction of knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) in this approach. When we work with students, we discuss the ways in which learners actively construct their own understandings in a social context, and we now recognise that the new collaborative approach extends this practice to working with colleagues. The conversations supported the development of a repertoire of good practice, and contributed to the situated learning of colleagues (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The values set out earlier in this paper; collaborative and democratic dialogue undertaken in a spirit of cooperation, offer a social context for reflection, and hence learning, to take place. This project, in bringing together colleagues from different departments, created a new community of practice, and this, together with dissemination activities, has positively shaped our own thinking about learning and teaching.

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