

# PEER OBSERVATION AS A MECHANISM TO IDENTIFY AND PROMOTE QUALITY TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Peer observation has in recent years become a standard feature in Institutes of Higher Learning and the primary motivation is the drive to raise teaching quality via the development and sharing of good practice. Peer observation also aims to support continuing professional development. In Malaysia, with the rapid growth of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs), substantial initiatives have been undertaken to increase educational quality. One of the measures is peer observation and this study presents the findings of a peer observation exercise involving a team of three staff in a private higher education institution in Malaysia. The findings show that the success is highly dependent on the instrument, membership and institutional culture. It concludes that peer evaluation is a suitable mechanism in the identification and promotion of quality teaching and that a second round is necessary to reassure and convince participants of the benefit of peer observation.*

## Notes

[1] Neither the institution nor lecturing staff involved are identified as this peer observation exercise is underpinned by confidentiality.

## Introduction

The demand for Higher Education in Malaysia from local and foreign students and the limited places in the Public Universities has caused an increase in the number of private higher education institutions (PHEIs) in the last two decades. This development, while satisfying market demand for higher education raises questions as to the quality of education, primarily determined by teaching quality. Over the years many PHEIs had taken initiatives to obtain ISO accreditation, with the hope of improving quality of service and gaining competitive advantage (Sohail, Rajadurai et. al, 2003). But these external controls, benchmarking quality based on internal system (Maleyeff, 2003), cannot ensure teaching quality, as it does not accredit teachers and teaching standards. Customers are not merely interested in standardisation of procedures but are more conscious of the quality of education provided by the Institution. Parents and students are guided by past and present experiences and are influenced by the graduate employability rates of the Institutions, a factor often judged as an indicator for quality teaching.

In the late 1990s, significant legislations, such as The National Accreditation Act, 1997 and subsequently, The Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act 2007, were introduced to ensure quality in the Higher Education sector through the setting up of quality agencies such as The National Accreditation Board (1997-2007) and the Malaysian Qualifications Agency (2007). However, these Agencies do not have sufficient manpower nor the capacity to ensure minimum standards in teaching quality, as the focus is on the peripherals such as curriculum and minimum teacher-qualification. The quality of teaching is left to the individual Institutions.

### Quality Teaching and Peer Observation

Quality teaching is promoted by the use of short and long term measures. Short-term measures such as the use of audiovisual equipments can help improve teaching delivery. Long-term measures such as pedagogical skills are necessary to *promote deeper learning through reflective practice and, thereby, the acquisition and development of teaching competencies* (Shortland, 2004, p. 220). One method is enhancement through exposure, where teachers are exposed to other teachers and their mode of teaching to provide collective learning possibilities (Smylie,

1995). One mode of promoting this is peer observation where both the observer and the observed learn through watching, listening and inferring (Brown, 1993).

Peer Observation however is different from classroom observation. The former may be defined as a *non-judgmental description of classroom events that can be analysed and given interpretation*' (Gebhard, 1999, p. 35). Classroom observation on the other hand, is *a process whereby a third party observes, and provides feedback on teaching in a university or college* (NATFHE, 2001). Peer observation schemes at Higher Education Institutions usually make use of checklists; stated as issues to guide the observer in what to look for when carrying out the observation. As such, both peer and classroom observation usually involves pre-structuring of the issues. The main difference between the two forms of observation is, however, the greater use of systematic and quantitative techniques within classroom observation and the greater reliance upon descriptive processes within peer observation. Irrespective of the differences, both peer observation and classroom observation are used to promote quality teaching. This study proposes to evaluate peer observation as a mechanism in the identification and promotion of quality teaching.

### **Peer Observation in Malaysian Higher Education**

Within the Malaysian PHEIs, peer observation is not a common practice, even though classroom and student evaluations are ubiquitous. This could possibly be as a result of lack of resources and the reluctance of the management to place the responsibility of quality and personal development on individual teaching staff. The reality for PHEIs today however rests on the success of these measures, which are highly dependent on support of the staff especially at a time of tremendous change when the stakes are high (Normore, 2003). It is within this given scenario that the Study was conducted at a Law School in one of the leading PHEIs in Malaysia. The School had decided to be the first to implement peer observation in September 2006.

Traditionally, peer observation is divided into four stages, pre observation briefing, the observation itself, post observation briefing and report writing for purposes of establishing

written record (Smylie, 1995). This study takes a fresh approach to peer observation and these are Design, Observe and Re-observe.

## **The Study**

### Design

The design stage is further divided into four parts, namely establishing the team, identifying the objectives, agreeing on the objectives and identifying and formulating the instruments. In establishing the team, the offer to be part of the peer observation team was sent out via e mail to all eight full time staff the law school. The invitation stressed on the voluntariness of the project and that the observation and feedback will be confidential (Jones, 1993). Yet despite the assurance of confidentiality, only three out of eight full time teaching staff agreed to participate in the peer observation. The others did not volunteer as they were either apprehensive, could not see the benefit of the exercise, self conscious or took a wait and see approach or for a combination of reasons. The one underlying reason was time as the exercise adds hours to the working day and place additional burdens on staff. Thus to be successful, the members of the peer observation team must be willing to cooperate and motivate each other through positive recognition for the efforts and to the development needs as they arise (Shortland, 2004). If these are not met, then the peer observation process becomes meaningless.

Once the peer observation team was identified, the objectives, terms and instruments were discussed and agreed upon. The objectives were to share best practices from each other and motivate and improve teaching quality through sharing and discussion. The terms for the peer observation were that all information will be kept confidential and all reporting anonymous. This is crucial as the team felt that the information should only be used for personal and team growth and not for management or evaluation purposes. The team also agreed to adopt the classroom observation instrument on the basis that the team can compare the findings. The team felt that there is a need for benchmarking and for reassuring the team that they are on the 'right track'.

## The Observations

The initial part consists of a series of brown paper bag lunches, with the view to discuss, whether peer observation within the given guidelines can be successfully completed and if all individuals involved are consenting participants. The team agreed that the observation will be recorded using the evaluation instrument and that the strengths and weaknesses will be discussed. There shall also be pre and post discussions. These meetings discussed the strategies and target and identified ways to improve teaching and learning. The team agreed to compare the findings from the peer observation and that of the staff evaluation exercise conducted three month before. As this was the first peer observation exercise in the institutions, it was also agreed that the team will discuss the effectiveness of the instrument used and proposed an alternative if required. The team agreed that each peer will be peer observed by another two peers. Hence, Peer 1 was observed by Peers 2 and 3, Peer 2 by Peers 1 and 3 and Peer 3 by Peers 1 and 2.

## The Findings

The observations showed that all peers have sufficient content knowledge and showed great enthusiasm. The delivery was systematic and the students responded with interests. There was sufficient lecturer-students interaction. It was clear that Peers 2 & 3 had sufficient pedagogical knowledge. However the observation also highlighted some areas that required improvement. As examples, the lecture were very teacher-centered, not learning outcomes focused and the aims and learning outcomes were not clearly stated at the start of the class. Peer 1 and 3 displayed poor whiteboard management and Peer 3 in particular was seen reading from the slides. All peers seem to commonly use certain words repetitively.

At the post observation, the findings were shared with each other and improvement markers were agreed upon where possible for all the peers. The findings from the peer observation were compared to the staff evaluation findings which were carried out about 10 weeks ago. The findings do not show much variance as can be seen in the table below, providing the much needed assurance.

**Table 1: Peer Evaluation – Observation Schedule and Findings**

Lecturer Observed	Subject, Level and Date of Observation	Marks awarded by Individual Observers				AVG	CE
		1 <sup>st</sup> Peer	Score	2 <sup>nd</sup> Peer	Score	Scores	Scores
<b>P1</b>	Legal Process/DIL Sept 7 2006	P3	65	P2	63	<b>64</b>	68
<b>P2</b>	Company Law/HDIL Sept 13 2006	P3	89	P1	91	<b>90</b>	91
<b>P3</b>	Law of Trust/HDIL Sept 4 2006	P1	83	P2	78	<b>81</b>	76

Note:

1. P1 = Peer 1, P2 = Peer 2, and P3 = Peer 3
2. AVG = Average
3. CE = Classroom Evaluation

The team felt that that the observation supported the basic quality of education. In the post observation discussion, it was agreed that the instrument was not suitable for peer assessment though it provided a good benchmark. As a result a new instrument was developed to reflect the subjective and developmental natures of peer observation (See Appendix 2). It was also agreed that a second round of observations was necessary to gauge the effectiveness of peer observation. It is hoped that at the second round of peer observation exercise will ascertain whether the feedback from the first exercise had indeed caused improvement to the teaching quality and whether good practice discussed after the first round of observations had been incorporated into teaching.

### The Second Observations

The second round of observation was scheduled six months after the first, in March 2007. The purpose of these observations was to ascertain if the issues agreed upon post the first observation were implemented by all peers. Generally there were improvements in the teaching approach as the lecturers had clearly indicated the outcomes and made sufficient reference to these during the lesson. There were better whiteboard management and lesser reading from the power point slides and use of repetitive words.

Post second round peer observation discussion revealed issues of timetabling difficulties in arranging observations and training requirements. The team felt that to be more effective, peer observation members must have comparable experience, as this exercise showed that the least experienced of the team showed most improvement and the oldest member had difficulty adapting to some of the more innovative suggestions to better delivery. Where participants are not comparable peers, power balance between the observer and the observed (Fullerton, 1999), becomes an issue and this undermines the usefulness of peer observation as a formative. Nonetheless, all members of the team unequivocally agreed that the exercise help them to develop their own mechanism for self-development, Members agreed that they felt more confident in being observed and wanted feedback from their peers on difficult areas and how to manage them. In fact all three agreed that the observation should go beyond lecture and include tutorial and presentations and that it is made an annual activity in the faculty as continuing professional development can only take root if it is entrenched or becomes a permanent part of the Institute's own processes (Gosling, 2000).

Peer learning was identified as valuable and it was agreed that peer observations is an important tool for as professional development is not something that is done to teachers, rather it is something that supports and encourages individuals to invest in their own personal growth (Nicholls, 2000; Loughran & Gunstone, 1997). It is only when staff are aware of their own needs are they motivated to learn and improve as stated by Wade and Hammick (1999), self-diagnosed need for learning provides greater motivation to learn than an externally diagnosed requirement.

## **Conclusion**

The exercise though very small and limited to one group of peer observation provided some very important conclusions. Primarily that peer observation is not possible without the support of management and faculty. It also showed the importance of the right instrument and the need to train lecturers in classroom observation skills. Clearly the exercise met the target of identifying and promoting quality as seen from the findings of the second round of observation and benefited

all peers – the most and the least experienced. The formation of annual peer observation clusters will help facilitate quality teaching. Peer observation is an effective tool for the identification, sharing and promotion of quality teaching in higher education. All three members recognized the professional development ramifications and that observation offers tremendous potential to promote self-knowledge and personal development, particularly when it is part of a continuing process.

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**Appendix A**

<b>Name:</b>
<b>Observation Date:</b>
<b>Observation Time:</b>
<b>Location:</b>
<b>Class:</b>
<b>NOTES FOR PRE-OBSERVATION MEETING:</b>
Description of Room: _____ Description of Students: _____ Class topic: _____ Goal(s) for the session: 1. _____ 2. _____
<b>Objective (s) for the session:</b> (What will the students be able to do/know by the end of the session?) 1. _____ 2. _____
<b>Teaching Strategies:</b> (What strategies/methods will you use to help the learners to reach this objective?) 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____
<b>Assessment Tool(s):</b> (How will the students show that they know and can do what you expected of them?) 1. _____ 2. _____
<b>Instructor Concerns/Focus:</b> (What would you like the observer to pay special attention to?) 1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____ 4. _____
<b>Post-Observation Conference:</b> <b>Date:</b> _____ <b>Time:</b> _____ <b>Location:</b> _____
<b>Re observation requested:</b> <b>Yes/No</b>
<b>General Comments:</b>