Expansive and restrictive approaches to professionalism in FE colleges: the observation of teaching and learning as a case in point

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Expansive and restrictive approaches to professionalism in FE colleges: the observation of teaching and learning as a case in point

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What it means to be a 'professional' in further education (FE) in England has been the subject of ongoing debate over the last two decades. In an attempt to codify professionalism, New Labour developed a package of reforms, crystallised by the introduction of professional standards and qualifications and a new inspection framework under Ofsted. These reforms reflected a political desire to improve FE teachers' professional skills and knowledge and prioritised teaching and learning as the main driver for 'continuous improvement'. The observation of teaching and learning (OTL) subsequently emerged as a pivotal tool with which to evaluate and measure improvement, whilst also promoting teacher learning and development. Drawing on recent research into the use of OTL, this paper focuses on two case-study colleges in the West Midlands, whose contrasting OTL practices serve to exemplify expansive and restrictive approaches to professionalism in FE.

Keywords: observation of teaching and learning; classroom observation; professional learning; professional development

Introduction

In recent years, the observation of teaching and learning (OTL) has emerged as an important initiative in the quest for continuous improvement in further education (FE) colleges in England (O'Leary 2011, 2013). Its dominance as the key means of collecting evidence about what goes on in classrooms, underpinned by the aim of improving the quality of teacher knowledge, competence and performance, has been repeatedly endorsed by the custodians of quality for the sector (e.g. Ofsted 2008).

The use of OTL in FE has a relatively short history. It is only over the last two decades that it has become an established practice in colleges, yet in this short space of time it has come to represent the bedrock of quality systems for teaching and learning (O'Leary 2012). Its emergence as a key initiative in the drive for continuous improvement occurred as part of a wider neo-liberal reform agenda to introduce managerialist systems of management in to the public sector on the premise that they would lead to enhanced levels of performance, productivity and accountability (O'Leary 2011). *Managerialism* is a ubiquitous term found in much of the cognate literature on FE and has become associated with how colleges have operated since

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the early 1990s as others have discussed (e.g. Avis 2003; Ball 2003; Randle and Brady 1997). Whilst it is not my intention to rehearse previous discussions concerning managerialism in any depth in this paper, it is important to acknowledge its link to the emergence of OTL in FE.

A key principle of managerialism was the view that workers could no longer be trusted to do their jobs efficiently and effectively (Robson 1998). This led to the introduction of audit systems and mechanisms of accountability and 'performativity' to monitor output and performance (Ball 2003). The measurement of teachers' performance and productivity was a key part of this new culture and it was in light of this that OTL emerged as an important means of gathering evidence for colleges' quality systems and preparing for Ofsted inspections (O'Leary 2013). The introduction of professional standards and qualifications for teachers in the sector (FENTO 1999; LLUK 2006), along with the formation of a new inspection framework under Ofsted, were key milestones in crystallising increased reliance on OTL as one of the dominant methods with which to gauge improvement and to judge performance.

This paper examines the role that observation plays in shaping notions of professionalism among staff working in two different colleges. The first section of the paper outlines the study's research focus and methodology. The second section, the core of the paper, presents the study's findings and discussion through the narratives of interviewees from two case study colleges. References to relevant literature are embedded throughout and drawn upon when appropriate, as the intention is to use the limited space available to present the narratives of practitioners working in the sector rather than rehearse the plethora of literature on professionalism and professional identity in FE.

The study

The research data that this paper draws on formed part of a wider mixed-methods study using quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry with a sample of 500 FE staff working in 10 colleges situated across the West Midlands region of England (O'Leary 2011). The study's focus was concerned with investigating the ways in which the professional identity, learning and development of FE tutors were being shaped through the use of OTL. Given the enormity of the data generated and that some are discussed elsewhere (e.g. O'Leary 2013), the scope of this paper is therefore restricted to examining qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews of participants from two of the three case study colleges involved in the second phase of data collection (interviews).

One of the underpinning aims of choosing to explore OTL through a case study approach in the selected colleges was to provide a more richly contextualised response to what Yin (2009) calls the 'how' and 'why' questions of research. Simons (2009) and Yin (2009) contend that one of the strengths of case study research is that it allows a contemporary phenomenon to be examined in depth and 'in the precise socio-political contexts in which programmes and policies are enacted' (Simons 2009, 23). Thus, the term 'case' is used here to refer to context-specific examples of OTL rather than to describe the intensive study of a single institution.

The two 'case study' colleges presented here, referred to henceforth by the pseudonyms 'Middle England' and 'Millennium', were chosen because they

provided rich, contrasting examples of the differing contexts, cultures and practices associated with expansive and restrictive approaches to OTL.

In drawing on Engeström's (1994, 2001) notion of 'expansive learning', Fuller and Unwin (2003, 410), in their case studies of UK modern apprenticeships, developed the terms 'expansive' and 'restrictive' as categories of juxtapositional analysis to make sense of, 'the ways in which modern apprentices experience[d] apprenticeship and the opportunities and barriers to learning that the programme produced'. They argued that an apprenticeship that displayed features associated with expansive learning was likely to lead to a, 'stronger and richer learning environment than that comprising features associated with the restrictive end of the continuum' (411–412). They found that expansive approaches typically resulted in more substantive learning opportunities, with apprentices encouraged to reflect more widely on what they were learning. In contrast, restrictive approaches were symptomatic of a technicist interpretation of learning, where apprenticeship was seen as a means to an end, with limited opportunity to access learning and a desire to complete the 'journey' as quickly as possible.

The application of these two juxtapositional terms provided a useful framework for describing and illuminating the study's data and to understand the relationship between the institutional context and practitioners' conceptualisations of professionalism. Thus, the terms 'expansive' and 'restrictive' are used consistently throughout this paper to refer to 'opportunities and barriers to learning', respectively.

Through the narratives of the three participant groups involved in the OTL process, that is, senior managers, observers and observees, the experiences of staff in Middle England College and Millennium College are examined in detail. Each case starts with a brief overview of the college's context and location, which is then followed by three illuminative vignettes from each participant perspective.

Case study 1: Middle England College

Middle England was a medium-sized college situated in a small city in the centre of England. Unlike some of the other urban colleges included in the study, its catchment area was not subject to the typical socio-economic difficulties associated with inner-city areas. Ryan, a tutor and University and Colleges' Union (UCU) representative at the College, encapsulated its profile:

> White, middle-class college and we don't have any of the inner-city problems. I've been here 20 years and I'm still working with people who taught me! The turnover is very slow. I've only ever had three Principals in my time here … it's a kind of *easy* college that hasn't got the tensions, it hasn't got the problems.

Ryan's description of Middle England as an 'easy college' depicted a stable learning culture. His interpretation was confirmed by Paula, the Vice Principal, who referred to the 'soft and gentle approach to life' that she associated with the 'Middle England *way*'.

The senior manager perspective

Paula had been in post as Vice Principal for teaching and learning for seven years. She commented that her main remit was to transform the College's quality systems

for teaching and learning. Observation of teaching and learning was, in her words, the 'bedrock' of these systems:

> I was brought in as a Vice Principal to do something about lesson observation and improve it. There were no managers doing the observations when I arrived, it was the staff development officer and a team of people who she got together, who were advanced practitioners in the main. They didn't observe in their own subject area, in fact they deliberately observed outside of their subject area and that led to this sort of contretemps between the managers who were heads of department, but they didn't know what was going on in any of the observation practices.

The picture Paula painted of the previous OTL regime was one of disjuncture. She referred to the 'contretemps between the managers' as they were excluded from the OTL process, yet paradoxically, as she later went on to say, it was their responsibility to ensure and improve the quality of provision in their respective curriculum areas. Paula was sceptical of the previous scheme's effectiveness in addressing the developmental needs of tutors and its role in the quality improvement (QI) cycle. She was critical that it 'wasn't tied in to the formal coaching and development' of tutors and felt that it had become a perfunctory exercise as there was no evidence of any follow-up action after OTL had been carried out, apart from what she referred to as a 'cursory recognition' during their annual appraisal.

One of the first changes she implemented as part of the new approach was to ensure that the remit for OTL was taken away from the central staff development team and control was passed directly to heads and deputy heads of faculty for them to observe tutors in their own curriculum areas. Paula saw this as fundamental to the success of the QI cycle.

As well as changes to its approach to OTL, Paula was keen to emphasise the role of another key development in the learning cultures of the College, which was the introduction of 'Study Centres'. According to Paula, in order to understand the teaching and learning culture of Middle England fully and its efforts to engender a learner-centred focus to its curriculum, it was important to understand the culture of 'Study Centres':

> The other movement of the College which has moved us from a culture of teaching to learning is the Study Centres. It's a curriculum-based area with all of the human and physical resources that students need in that curriculum area, open plan with no walls or as few walls as possible to keep the building up and therefore teaching sessions and drop-in sessions were there for everybody … We're now into the fifth or sixth year of these and the thing is you can't do didactic teaching in a Study Centre because you're surrounded by six classes going on at once. So you've got to do personalised learning and task-based learning.

Paula saw the Study Centres as instrumental in encouraging tutors to switch from a traditional, teacher-centred approach to one that had a more personalised, learner-centred focus. One of their unforeseen consequences was that they had also led to tutors becoming more accustomed to being observed by their peers, albeit informally. In some cases, this appeared to have helped to break down barriers, tensions and concerns traditionally associated with OTL as a form of surveillance, discussed elsewhere (e.g. O'Leary 2013). Instead of feeling guarded, working alongside colleagues in these Study Centres seemed to trigger a greater sharing of professional knowledge, skills and resources according to Paula:

> What it means is if I'm watching you doing a lesson over there while I'm doing a
> lesson over here and you're doing something I'd like to know about, I can say 'how
> did you do that?' And they might say, 'Oh, I went to someone's Passport session and
> saw them doing it.' And there's much more sharing.

The 'Passport session' that Paula referred to was part of Middle England's staff
development programme 'Passport to Success', an online continuous professional
development (CPD) booking and tracking system that was accessible to all staff,
much of the content of which had evolved from their OTL scheme. Tutors were
encouraged to enrol for sessions based on the 'coaching and development' interview
with their manager, following their observation. The coaching and development
interview had replaced the annual appraisal meeting between line manager and tutor
at Middle England. In practice what this meant was that many observers conflated
the interview with the post-OTL feedback so that the CPD needs of staff were dis-
cussed in conjunction with their observed lesson. For Paula, this change had helped
to 'join up' the various stages of the QI cycle in a way that she felt was missing
under the previous regime. It had also enabled the senior management to create a
transparent audit trail through which to track the CPD journeys of staff across the
College.

    Paula argued that these two developments (i.e., changes to the OTL approach
and the introduction of Study Centres) had been key in helping to transform the
learning cultures of the College. She claimed that they had been responsible for
increased levels of collaboration between colleagues and the fostering of a collegial
trust between observers and observees:

> The way it's helped with teachers is we've got people saying 'don't come and observe
> that lesson, come and see this one because I'm really struggling with this one and I
> want you to come and help me' and so it's changing the focus.

Paula's description of the nature of the observer–observee relationship revealed
evidence of the openness and collaborative commitment regarded as vital ingredients
for meaningful QI and professional development through OTL to occur. There are
parallels to recent research in the field of mentoring in FE vis-à-vis the mentor–
mentee relationship and what factors are considered to underpin the success of such
relationships (Tedder and Lawy 2009). Paula's comments also accentuated the trust
between colleagues and resonated with Avis' (2007, 93) conceptualisation of the
conditions required for developing expansive notions of professionalism.

    As a result of the College's approach to formal OTL, tutors were given a greater
sense of ownership and autonomy in deciding the focus and negotiating which
sessions they wished to be observed. Although tutors were informed by their line
managers towards the start of the academic year in which week their OTL would
occur, the observed session was negotiated between the two. This negotiated
approach connects with Freire's (2005) assertion of the importance of democratic
relations in professional learning, underpinned by collaborative and egalitarian
principles.

    The OTL process at Middle England seemed to be driven by individual rather
than institutional needs, or what Trorey (2002, 2) referred to as 'professional
development' (i.e., individual) as opposed to 'staff development' (i.e., institutional).
Yet the institution appeared to benefit as well as the individual as there was a contin-
uous 'giving back' to the College community of practice through the Passport to

Success programme and the 'sharing of practice' that Paula referred to above through other outlets, such as the online repository, nicknamed 'Mr Cute', which was created and managed by tutors:

> It's basically a repository but they call it 'Mr Cute' and people are putting things into it all the time and it's part of this whole movement that has come out of observations.

There was a synergy to the strategy adopted by Middle England's SMT to transform the learning cultures of staff and students, exemplified by their approach to OTL and its role in the QI cycle. When asked why she felt their approach had been a success, Paula replied:

> It's about getting them on board, getting them to understand the process and giving them a sense of ownership … it's used as learning for all of us rather than a judgement.

Paula's response epitomised some of the features of an expansive notion of professionalism – that is, ownership and collective learning (Fuller and Unwin 2003).

The observer perspective

Irene had worked at Middle England for over 15 years in the delivery of NVQs and assessor training. As a curriculum manager, she was involved in observing staff across a broad range of vocational areas in the college formal OTL scheme and in her role as an internal verifier for external awarding bodies whose accredited programmes were taught at the College.

What emerged as an area of contention across several colleges involved in the study was whether observers carried out OTL in their own curriculum areas or were assigned to others. In the following excerpt, Irene argued for the importance of the subject knowledge of the observer:

> When we had the cross-college observation team one of my concerns was that you could be faced with an observer with no idea of your curriculum area. When we had the transition from the team into departments, what we did there was invite a curriculum expert to come along with you as long as the observee agreed, and I did that and I accompanied somebody who did this. Although I didn't do the observation, I certainly gave my input and the good points and the bad points of the session and I think that should be an option for all. Whatever the observation system is, I think the observee should have the right to ask for an expert to be around.

Irene's comments reinforced Paula's earlier account that under the previous system the allocation of observers was random and this was an issue of concern for her. She went on to argue how Middle England's change to a system whereby managers observed within their own faculties had helped to remove some of the anxiety surrounding OTL experienced under the previous regime and helped to establish trust and confidence among staff:

> I think one of the main contributors has been that they got rid of the observation team. They were a bit like the 'police' really! Even though they were teachers, they were still the 'police' coming round to observe you. Then they put it into the faculties and it became your colleagues and I think that's done away with a lot of the anxiety because if you walk around the offices here, you'll have teams of people sitting there and the

programme managers are in with the general teaching staff and there isn't this elitism and the 'police' have gone … so I would say that the transition from a specific team to bringing it down into your own team level is a big step forwards.

Irene's reference to the previous observation team as the 'police' was a telling remark about the culture surrounding OTL during that era and exemplified the 'punitive' face of teacher assessment referred to by Freire (2005). Her interpretation of the disjuncture between observers and observees resonated with Paula's earlier comments and contrasted noticeably with the subsequent scheme, which seemed to adopt a more transparent, collaborative approach.

Irene's interpretation appeared to vindicate Paula's decision to devolve power to curriculum managers in order to allow them to play an active part in the quality cycle. What came across very strongly in her comments was how important OTL was to her as a means of ascertaining the skills and knowledge base of her team and identifying those areas of practice where additional 'training' needed to be put into place. Irene used OTL as a springboard for engaging in professional dialogue with the members of her team rather than as an end in itself (Peel 2005). The hierarchical divide between observer and observee seemed less marked than under the previous scheme as the two participated in an ongoing process of negotiation and collaboration as part of a collective quest for continuous improvement.

Irene's attitude to those tutors who were assessed as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate' seemed largely supportive and reflected a commitment to helping them to improve. The way that she carried out her role was what Tilstone (1998) labelled 'partnership observation' (6), but also consistent with Middle England's written policy document on OTL, which stated that:

Improving the quality of teaching and learning is a *shared* responsibility. This involves Heads of Department and/or Programme Managers working together with teachers to ensure that objectives are discussed and agreed.

The observee perspective

Ryan had taught for over 20 years at Middle England. He was also the Chair of UCU and its main representative in the College. Below, he recounts an anecdote about the previous OTL scheme based on his experience as an observee:

There were concerns about the scheme. The main concern was that in many areas people were saying that the people doing the observations were not technically qualified. So I was doing something on local government finance and you don't get anything more arcane than local government finance and the observer came in. She was a well-known character in the College, so she was doing her inspection, so she got involved with all the students and all that but I could have been talking complete rubbish about local government finance for all she knew because she didn't have a clue. To be honest it didn't worry me but that was a continuing criticism that had gone on about the old scheme, it did cause a lot of resentment.

Ryan's critique of the previous scheme triangulated with the views of Paula and Irene. His use of the word 'resentment' also highlighted the strength of emotions among staff, reinforcing the negative attitudes towards it, as too did his description of OTL as 'inspection', suggesting that it was seen as a form of 'policing' practice (Gleeson, Davies, and Wheeler 2005).

Talking from a union perspective, Ryan acknowledged the 'new approach' to OTL as positive with a clear focus on the professional development of tutors:

> I think the message we got from the management with the new approach was the new observation scheme was intended to be developmental. It's meant to observe lessons but in the spirit of, 'Well, how does this fit in with your coaching and development?' Now as union officials we were quite pleased with that, you'd be mad not to agree with that. … My feeling is that actually the system is reasonably open. And secondly as I say, I haven't had any member coming to my door and complain. The system we have now is that programme area managers do the lesson observations and that's an important step forward we think. You know them so they're not being parachuted in and there is an argument that they are much closer to your area of work.

Much of Ryan's description of the OTL scheme and the union's reaction to it echoed the original rationale put forward by Paula. Unlike the scheme it had replaced, there was evidence of a shared, transparent understanding across the College of what its aims were and staff working towards a shared goal. Besides, the fact that Ryan mentioned that he had not received a single complaint about it in all his time as a union representative was not only noteworthy in itself, but especially bearing in mind how it has 'become an increasingly common flash point in colleges, triggering local negotiations, and in some places industrial disputes' in recent times (UCU 2009, 1).

Case study 2: context and location of Millennium College

Millennium College was situated in rural settings in the centre of England. During the first phase of the study it was a small institution with fewer than two thousand students enrolled, specialising in land-based programmes. A team of just three observers were responsible for OTL across the College. However, by phase two it had completed a merger with two other local colleges and had become the smallest of four campuses of a new, much larger college with a capacity for 20,000 full- and part-time students.

The senior manager perspective

At the time of interview Graham had been in post as Director of Quality at Millennium for less than a year. He had held a similar post at one of the other two colleges prior to the merger for several years, before which he had worked in management in the automotive and engineering industries.

In contrast to Middle England's approach to OTL, Graham chose to implement a similar model to the one that had been in place when Paula was appointed and which she was so eager to remove. In other words, Millennium chose not to allocate managers to observe their own departmental staff but assigned them randomly to different departments:

Researcher: I'm just thinking about the observers who carry out formal observations. Who do they observe? Are they doing it cross college?

Graham: Well, they never do their own staff.

Researcher: Oh right, is that a deliberate strategy?

Graham: Absolutely! Managers are very competitive people! And part of the monthly report I produce for the Executive has the breakdown by faculty area and I know it's a competitive world when it comes to management.

Researcher: So does this mean then that the people that get allocated to observe is a completely random selection of people?

Graham: Yes, totally random.

Graham's comment about managers being 'very competitive people' depicted a very different conceptualisation of working cultures at Millennium to the one described by Paula at Middle England. Instead of fostering a community of collaboration and cooperation between colleagues, Millennium's approach seemed to reflect a managerialist model that insisted on regular surveillance coupled with performative measures.

Although Graham was not explicit in his use of the word *trust*, it could be inferred that the decision not to allow managers to observe tutors in their own department was fuelled by a lack of trust in their integrity to assess them without bias on account of their 'competitive' nature. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that an *inter*-departmental rather than an *intra*-departmental model of OTL is not uncommon in colleges as it is argued that it minimises observer bias in the assessment process. A similar rationale underpins the decision of some colleges to employ external consultants to carry out OTL on an annual basis.

At a later point during the interview, the issue of trust resurfaced in the context of the College's approach to ungraded OTL carried out by mentors, and it was interesting to note that in this instance Graham revealed a very different conceptualisation of the observer–observee relationship:

Researcher: The people that are coaches or mentors and carry out peer observations, are they a completely separate group to the observers that carry out the formal observations?

Graham: Oh, yes! I've kept that separation and would protect it with my life! Mentors need to be trusted so there is no point where they would say 'that was a grade four'.

There was a curious contrast to how Graham viewed the two contexts/models of OTL, which illustrated some of the paradoxes and tensions associated with the Millennium approach. On the one hand, he insinuated that managers were too competitive to be trusted to observe their own staff as part of the graded OTL scheme and thus were deliberately prevented from contributing to that part of the QI cycle. On the other hand, he acknowledged the importance of trust in establishing a positive relationship between mentors and the tutors to whom they were assigned when carrying out peer OTL.

Graham further revealed how the allocation of mentors was seen as a punitive measure as it only occurred in the event of a grade three or four, thus the notion of trust seemed tainted from the outset and was further compromised by the pressure on the observee and mentor to raise the level of performance by at least one grade within a six-week period:

> Our policy is that every teacher will be observed twice in the academic year. The second observation is waived if the teacher achieves a grade one or grade two in the first observation, so you get your one or two and you're done for the year, you can breathe a sigh of relief. The big tension is with the threes because the three gets you, 'Oh no, not one of those mentors!' They get a grade three and they get allocated a mentor so it's almost like the mentor has become the punishment and this worries me.

Following Ofsted's proclamation that 'satisfactory is not good enough' any more (Ofsted 2008, 4) and the subsequent re-branding of a grade three from 'satisfactory' to 'requires improvement', the response of Millennium and other colleges has been to assign mentors to work with those tutors awarded a grade three or four in order to help them to raise their level of performance and consequently improve the overall college grade profile.

Graham's comments above indicated that the allocation of a mentor was seen as a punitive consequence rather than as an opportunity to further develop one's professional practice. This was hardly surprising given the 'high stakes' nature (Boardman and Woodruff 2004) of graded OTL and the subsequent pressure for tutors awarded a grade three or four to 'up their performance' (Graham) within a short timescale.

It was difficult to pinpoint the underlying principles behind Millennium's approach to OTL and whether the merger had contributed to creating what seemed a contradictory picture, compared to, for example, that of Middle England. Having said that, Graham's comments implied that the role of managers during graded OTL was largely that of judges rather than active collaborators in the coaching and development of tutors. It appeared that the latter was the domain of mentors, and only then in the event of those tutors who were graded as a three or four.

The observer perspective

Abdul, Molly and Cristina were three experienced observers who, prior to the merger, formed part of a close-knit team on one campus, all having worked mainly on ITT and CPD programmes for many years. A common theme in their joint interview was how the merger had revealed differences in working cultures and conflicting approaches to OTL across the new campuses. They referred to differences in approach and beliefs between the different campuses. Their 'approach' to OTL was based on the belief that it was a 'shared partnership', the focus of which was 'developmental' and 'constructive', similar to Tilstone's (1998) notion of 'partnership observation'.

Given their background in ITT and CPD, one might argue that it was understandable that they had a natural 'empathy' with the teachers on their campus. Besides, having worked in such a close-knit team for so long on the smallest of four campuses suggested they might have been in a better position than some of their colleagues from much larger campuses to develop a personalised relationship with their colleagues. Notwithstanding these suppositions, a strong message to come across in interview was that despite the changes resulting from the merger, they were determined not to compromise their professional values and beliefs in their role as observers.

As an example of this Molly talked about how as a team they had always prioritised OTL appointments regardless of other managerial commitments, whereas their fellow observers at other campuses appeared to regard them as less important and

would cancel them with little or no notice. All three suggested that the model of OTL in use at Millennium's two main campuses was designed to satisfy systems of performance management and accountability rather than the developmental needs of tutors. Abdul exemplified this in talking about the 'difference in paperwork' and how, under the new systems of Millennium, the forms were 'more prescriptive' and indicative of what he referred to as 'a return to the bad old days of observation forms with four million tick boxes'.

However, rather than abandoning their previous approach they looked for ways to retain its core principles whilst also complying with these new systems and practices, as commented in the following extract:

Abdul: I'm fighting it because regardless of what people above tell me I should be doing, I'm still going to be doing the observations in a supportive way. I can write it up in any way they want but I'm still going to carry out the process in a supportive way.

Researcher: Do you feel any conflict in what you're being asked to do and the way in which you're, to use your words, you're 'fighting it'?

Molly: Shall I answer that for you? I think we do if we're honest. We work so closely as a team with the same philosophy and understandings of what we're trying to achieve and how, and I think if you ask us to define our roles, *support* would have been very high up the list and I think now it's more as Abdul says, it's more about appraisal now. We almost seem to be going back to the days where we're measuring what has been going on rather than improving what can come.

The determination of these observers not to compromise their commitment to maintaining the formative focus of OTL in the face of a wider institutional move towards using it as an accountability mechanism exemplified what Shain and Gleeson (1999) referred to as 'strategic compliance'. By acting as 'strategic compliers', they were able to preserve their pedagogic principles, whilst still fulfilling the requirements of college systems of accountability.

Closely related to the notion of strategic compliance is Wallace and Hoyle's (2005) term, 'principled infidelity'. For these observers, principled infidelity was a way of managing the tensions between policy and practice and the pressures of managerialism in a newly formed college. Their comments revealed a conflict between their professional values and the expectations and requirements of the managerialist college systems. What was clear from their comments was that they found themselves having to adjust to what Abdul referred to as an 'intense level of micro-management' that they had not been used to, which suggested they were able to operate with more autonomy under the previous systems and in high-trust working contexts (Avis 2003).

Cristina talked about how the new systems had 'put things into silos' with regard to roles and responsibilities. Abdul provides an example of this in the following extract:

Abdul: In terms of observation, we were told just last weekend that as mentors we would now not be on the observation team so they now very much see the two roles as being completely different.

Researcher: Do you want to expand on what you mean by that as in what 'they' see as different?

Abdul: That the college management now see that if you are having a coaching or mentoring role then you should not be on the formal observation team.

One of the consequences of 'put[ting] things into silos', as Cristina stated, was that it made it more difficult to achieve the 'joined up thinking' between elements of the QI cycle that Paula referred to above, as opportunities for working collaboratively and sharing practice across the College were reduced. Abdul's comments also linked into Graham's conceptualisation of the observer–observee relationship, discussed above. What these two models of OTL revealed was a clear delineation in power and authority where the responsibility for judgement was preserved for senior managers and the 'repair work', alluded to by Abdul below, became the mentor's responsibility:

I think what unnerves me is that you've got a grade four and you will be observed within six weeks so there is a reliance there on the fact that you can turn someone around in six weeks and, if not, well fair enough, we don't care and we're going to take you down the incompetency route.

Abdul's use of the term to 'turn someone around in six weeks' provided an insight into the way in which the senior management of Millennium perceived the mentor's role. It was almost as if the mentor was required to take on the mantle of *repair technician* as s/he was tasked with repairing the *faulty goods* and re-circulating them into the system once they had passed the approved *safety standards*. As Abdul pointed out, unless the observee was able to improve their grade in the follow-up OTL six weeks later, they were likely to be faced with disciplinary procedures. Interestingly, in the case of Millennium, graded OTL seemed to operate largely on a punitive basis as not only were tutors faced with the threat of disciplinary procedures, but also the loss of their annual salary increment. Thus graded OTL was being used as a form of performance-related pay.

Finally, another area of OTL practice that the three observers were keen to discuss was the disclosure of grades and how prior to the merger they had trialled a model in which grades were removed from the assessment:

Abdul: We did try to disassociate formal observations from appraisal in terms of trying to make all of our formal observations more formative and we managed to get the lesson observation grade taken off the appraisal form for a while. So, clearly, we have now moved completely away from that again and everything is performance driven and that's where I think that's where we made all of our advances in improving the quality of teaching by getting people on side, being formative as opposed to punitive.

Researcher: What was the rationale behind that move away from the previous system?

Abdul: We started to not give numerical grades for observations as we felt people concentrated on the number not the feedback and we felt that that worked really well but then the Principal decided one day that Ofsted wouldn't like that and everything came to a halt so we're obviously back with numerical grades now.

> Molly: Yes and we did it for just under a year and the impact was quite startling. The quality of learning that was going on rose because staff listened to the developmental feedback rather than focusing on 'oh I've got a three'. We had got staff on side with observations and they were no longer terrorised of having someone in the classroom. They became far more accepting.

Their account gave the impression that removing the grade from the OTL process was liberating and helped to break down some of the negative barriers (i.e., anxiety, suspicion, etc.) associated with graded OTL. It enabled them as observers to gain the trust of tutors and to engage in meaningful, collaborative work, which subsequently led to improvements in the quality of teaching. By concentrating on the feedback and not the grade, the formative aspect of the OTL process took on a greater significance and tutors were more disposed to engaging in professional dialogue about their practice.

The observee perspective

Donna, Anne and Gavin were tutors with varying periods of service at Millennium. Donna and Anne were both employed as full-time tutors of basic skills, whereas Gavin, a full-time farmer, taught agricultural studies on a part-time basis. Although they were interviewed separately (Donna and Anne in a paired interview and Gavin individually), common themes emerged in their responses. For example, all three manifested a sense of unease and frustration regarding some of the changes that had occurred as a result of the merger. Gavin seemed less concerned than Donna and Anne, as he stressed that his livelihood did not depend on his teaching at the College.

Donna and Anne talked about how the working cultures and ethos of what was, in their words, a 'positive', 'close-knit' college had been affected by the merger. They talked about experiencing a changeover to a more 'business-like', performative approach to OTL and recounted the decision of management to publish the names of staff whose lessons were graded as a one during the last round of formal OTL across the College as an example:

> Donna: There was an outbreak of emails congratulating people on getting grade ones which I thought was bad, very unsupportive from the management team.
>
> Researcher: Just to individuals?
>
> Donna: No! It was an all staff email thanking them 'blah, blah, blah' with congratulations and 'you too can aspire to be like' …
>
> Researcher: So those individuals who got grade ones were named?
>
> Donna: Yes! Well the people who got the grade ones were mainly embarrassed to be named and they didn't want people to know so straight away they took away their right to confidentiality by publishing their names, although thinking about it there were also a few who were walking round as if they were the 'bee's knees' and no surprise that they're the ones who are crap teachers anyway. People who didn't get a grade one, like myself, then felt somehow inferior to these people. It made me question whether or not I'm up to the job … if you don't see your name in this

> space the inference is that you're not as good as them, which isn't good really because it's kind of divisive for a whole team and if you've got members in your own team then it makes them feel uncomfortable.

Donna argued that the 'divisive' repercussions of disclosing grades could be felt on both an individual and collective level, and such practice was therefore seen to militate against the fostering of cooperative working relationships between tutors. Besides, in confirming the views of the observers discussed previously, Donna went on to describe how OTL was 'something that is done to you' and hence a less supportive experience for tutors under the new regime, as the extract below reveals. There was a distinct lack of collaboration and ownership of the OTL process in the way Donna described her recent experience as an observee and little evidence of how it linked up to tutors' wider CPD. Similarly, Gavin talked about how the feedback had become 'less supportive now' than in previous years. The two responses below highlighted some of the tensions surrounding the use of OTL at Millennium:

Researcher: How would you describe your colleagues' attitudes towards observation?

Donna: I don't know anybody who is happy about them. They're all pretty much the same about them when they know they're coming … just glad to get it over and done with I think.

Gavin: It does highlight the weak areas but it's just how they're dealt with that's the main problem and the fact that certainly here you feel like you're under threat when you have your observation; it's quite an upsetting time to be fair.

At the end of both interviews all three observees were asked if they had any ideas as to how OTL might be made more beneficial to them and their colleagues. They all emphasised the importance of it being conducted as a 'supportive' process, once again reinforcing the values of the previous team of observers.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed contrasting approaches to professionalism and professional learning through the use of OTL in two colleges, Middle England and Millennium. Each college's approach to OTL has been examined through the narratives of three groups of participants. Table 1 categorises the key features associated with the differing approaches to OTL in evidence in these two colleges according to a 'restrictive–expansive continuum'.

The way in which staff experienced and engaged with OTL in these two colleges seemed to be heavily influenced by the learning cultures of the college itself. The commitment of the college SMT to promote particular notions of professionalism was crucial in establishing an institutional ethos towards OTL, which was cascaded, both implicitly and explicitly, to observers and observees.

Restrictive approaches to OTL displayed a clear delineation of power as to who controlled the agenda and the production of data, which was based on hierarchical seniority. Whereas in expansive approaches, the power differential between observer and observee was less hierarchically marked and seemed to embrace a more

Table 1.   Restrictive–expansive continuum of approaches to OTL.

Restrictive approaches to OTL	Expansive approaches to OTL
• Emphasis on *measuring* teaching and learning by allocating individual grades from Ofsted 4-point scale • Emphasis on summative aspects of OTL • Observees have no input in which lesson is observed nor the focus • Random allocation of observers to different subject areas • 'Fetishisation' of the observed lesson – forms crux of judgements about professional competence and capability • OTL is disconnected from other college systems of CPD, often the domain of 'Quality Unit' • Limited opportunity for observee input or ownership in OTL process • Clear delineation of power between observer and observee based on hierarchical seniority • Observer as 'judgement maker' • OTL provokes increased levels of stress and anxiety	• Emphasis on *improving* teaching and learning, often ungraded or grade seen as of minor importance • Emphasis on formative aspects of OTL as part of CPD • Greater autonomy for observees to decide the lesson and focus of OTL • Observer often a specialist in the subject area of the observee • OTL is seen as one means of collecting evidence about classroom practice and teacher performance • Convergence across CPD and QA units of colleges, OTL is part of multiple communities of practice • Balanced distribution of power in which observee's voice is valued • Power differential between observer and observee less hierarchically marked • Observer as supportive mentor • OTL welcomed as an opportunity for reciprocal professional learning

Notes: OTL = observation of teaching and learning, CPD = continuous professional development, QA = quality assurance.

balanced, collaborative distribution of power in which the observee's voice was regarded as valid as the observer's.

The findings from Middle England suggested a broad triangulation of interpretations across all three groups. Overall, OTL was seen as a supportive, formative process based on a desire to promote collaboration among colleagues. These views reflected some of the characteristics associated with expansive notions of professional learning highlighted in the work of Fuller and Unwin (2003). For example, in the context of personal development they identified the importance of 'belonging to multiple communities of practice' (417). Such instances of multiple communities of practice at Middle England were embodied in the 'Passport to Success' scheme, 'Mr Cute' and its Study Centres.

In contrast, restrictive approaches emphasised the summative outcome as the *raison d'être* of OTL, thus leading to a *fetishisation* of the observed lesson. The formative element was often either absent from the OTL process or given very limited treatment. In the case of Millennium, it also tended to be disconnected and dealt with as part of a separate, fragmented exercise in which those tutors who were evaluated as a grade three or four were treated as individual problems. In many ways, such restrictive approaches to OTL encapsulated Freire's (2005) interpretation of the punitive use of teacher evaluation that, 'we evaluate to punish and almost never to

improve teachers' practice. In other words, we evaluate to punish and not to educate' (13).

There was a pressure to perform on an individual level, exacerbating the high-stakes nature of the assessment and often militating against the fostering of collaborative, collegial relationships between observer and observee. In such instances, both parties found their roles demarcated and prescribed for them by performance management systems designed primarily to collect auditable evidence, allowing little opportunity to influence the focus or running of the OTL process. Nonetheless, some of the observers' comments at Millennium College exemplified Wallace and Hoyle's (2005) notion of principled infidelity and illustrated their determination to resist the dominant discourses of managerialism and performativity.

So, is it possible to arrive at an integrated model of OTL that meets the demands of performative quality assurance (QA) systems and the CPD needs of its teachers? Or does this require two separate models, each with differing purposes? The findings from this research underline that such integration is not unproblematic. One of the biggest obstacles would appear to be the issue of grading and the importance attached to it. Where restrictive approaches were evident, the reliance on and importance attached to OTL grades as key indicators of professional competence seemed to correlate with low levels of trust and professional autonomy. Yet when the grading element was removed, this appeared to promote improved levels of trust between colleagues and helped to break down some of the negative associations surrounding the use of OTL.

Perhaps then, the answer lies not in seeking to create a dual purpose model in which expansive approaches are integrated into a predominantly performative initiative, but one that prioritises teacher learning above all else. Such a move would undoubtedly go against the grain of current normalised models of graded OTL and signify a bold step in re-defining its use in the sector. Whether or not colleges are prepared to take such a step remains to be seen, but equally, ignoring the distorting and counterproductive consequences of this initiative is surely not an option for policy makers and practitioners alike committed to the ongoing improvement of teaching and learning in FE.

Notes on contributor

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