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Subverting the pseudo-science of inspection with research-informed practice and pedagogic principles: an ungraded approach to the evaluation of teachers

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Abstract

This chapter recounts the experience of a partnership between a university and local further education (FE) providers during an Ofsted inspection of its Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes for post-compulsory teachers. Building on an internal position paper written at the time of the inspection in 2013, the chapter examines how the partnership defended its decision to adopt an ungraded approach to the evaluation of its student teachers and in so doing shares some of the key principles of the philosophy underpinning its position. Given the subsequent shift in Ofsted policy to remove the grading of individual lesson observations from inspections, this is a timely chapter as it discusses some of the challenges faced by an ITE programme in resisting the normalised use of grading scales to assess its student teachers. In sharing this story, the chapter exposes the reductive nature of inspection judgements and casts doubt on the validity and reliability of its assessment framework. It also offers hope to teacher education programmes that seek to protect and prioritise sustainable teacher growth over the pseudo-scientific practice of performative measurement.

Key words: observation, inspection, teacher evaluation, teacher development

Introduction

Few areas of practice have caused as much debate and discontent amongst teachers in colleges and schools in recent years as that of lesson observation, particularly graded

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observations and the way in which they have been used as summative assessments to rank teachers’ classroom performance. Recent research in the field has recounted the normalisation of graded lesson observations over the last few decades, highlighting Ofsted’s hegemonic influence and control over education policy and practice (e.g. O’Leary 2013, Gleeson et al 2015). At the same time, they have been critiqued for embodying a pseudo-scientific approach to measuring performance, as well as giving rise to a range of counterproductive consequences that ultimately militate against professional learning and teacher improvement (e.g. Edgington 2016; O’Leary and Wood 2016).

Lesson observation has a longstanding association as a multi-purpose mechanism in education, playing an important role in the training, assessment and development of teachers throughout their careers. In recent years though, it has come to be viewed quite narrowly by policy makers, inspectors and employers in colleges and schools in England as an assessment tool for monitoring and measuring teacher performance. This policy position exemplifies a core maxim of the epistemology and methodology of neoliberal approaches to accountability and teacher improvement that have dominated the English education system over the last three decades. A maxim that attempts to measure all forms of human activity, epitomised in the oft-quoted saying that ‘you can’t manage what you can’t measure’, or, in this case, ‘you can’t improve what you can’t measure’ (McKinsey and Company 2007).

Graded lesson observations exemplify what Ball (2012) refers to as the neo-liberal ‘moral technologies’ used to engender a culture of institutional performativity. Ball describes performativity as ‘a form of hands-off management that uses comparisons and judgements in place of interventions and direction’ (p. 31). Whilst comparisons and judgements are

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certainly inherent to graded observations, they are also a form of intervention as they involve observing teachers’ practice and decisions being made about the professional capabilities of those teachers based on what the observer witnesses during the observed lesson. There are parallels here to the French philosopher Michel Foucault’s discussion of the ‘examination’.

Foucault (1977: 184) uses the notion of the ‘examination’ to exemplify a mechanism that measures performance through the ‘power of normalisation’, which ‘imposes homogeneity but individualises by making it possible to measure gaps’. In this case, the ‘homogeneity’ referred to by Foucault is regulated by the need for observed lessons to conform to specific assessment criteria of what constitutes good or effective practice, along with the inclusion of the thematic priorities of others’ agendas such as embedding English and maths, equality and diversity, safeguarding etc into observed lessons. Those that are able to demonstrate this normalised practice are deemed members of a homogenous community, whereas those outliers whose assessed performances reveal ‘gaps’ are required to undergo additional training and (re)education to ensure that they meet the appropriate standards when they are next observed. But this so-called process of standardisation is a spurious one that oversimplifies the complexity of teaching and teachers’ work as others have argued (e.g. O’Leary and Wood 2017). It leads to a reductive view of the process of teaching, which assumes that all aspects of classroom practice can be uniformly identified, categorised and assessed in predictable and proportionate ways. This same reductive view is enshrined in Ofsted’s inspection framework.

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Contextual background to the inspection

Unlike the vast majority of other university ITE providers in England, the post-compulsory education (PCE) department at the University of Wolverhampton (UoW) did not use graded observations on its programmes. The underlying rationale for adopting an ungraded approach to the assessment of its student teachers did not emerge arbitrarily but was developed collaboratively over a sustained period of time. This approach was underpinned by a core set of principles and shared understandings about the purpose and value of the PCE ITE programmes, as well as being informed by empirical research into the use and impact of lesson observations in the Further Education (FE) sector and on-going discussions with its partners and student teachers. For those readers who may not be familiar with the policy landscape at that time, it is important to stress that the UoW’s approach was considered as maverick by some as it went against the grain of normalised models of observation. The team was therefore aware that the PCE programme would be subjected to heightened scrutiny and interrogation by Ofsted when it was announced that all of the UoW’s ITE programmes were to be inspected in March 2013, especially given that both its primary and secondary programmes used graded observations.

The tone was set from the moment the inspection team arrived on the first day. The lead inspector’s opening gambit was to ask the PCE management team to rate the quality of its programmes against Ofsted’s 4-point scale¹. Visibly disgruntled that the team had chosen not

¹ The 4-point scale used for Ofsted inspections at the time was as follows: 1 = outstanding; 2 = good; 3 = satisfactory; 4 = inadequate.

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to apply this grading scale in its self-evaluation document (SED)², despite the fact that providers were not obliged to do so, the lead inspector seemed determined to assert his authority from the outset and in so doing echoed the McKinsey report maxim referred to earlier when he commented that he found it ‘extremely difficult to demonstrate evidence of progress’ without using some kind of numerical scale. So this inevitably begs the question, why did the partnership decide to go against the grain and adopt this stance?

It is important to emphasise that resistance to embracing Ofsted’s ‘dominant discourses’ (Foucault 1980) and normalised practice was not based on any wilful refusal to comply or obey their authority as the regulators of quality for ITE provision, but driven by more fundamental concerns regarding the legitimacy and reliability of Ofsted’s assessment framework and the subsequent impact of that on teachers in training. Needless to say the partnership’s epistemological and methodological positioning did not sit easily with the inspection team as it presented them with certain challenges that they were unaccustomed to.

Evaluating the ‘performance’ of teachers

It was a strongly held view across the partnership that the use of a metrics-based approach was neither the most appropriate nor the most effective means of fostering student teachers’ development, nor indeed of measuring the level of performance required for them to meet the ‘pass’ threshold criteria of its programmes. The partnership staff comprised largely experienced teacher educators who were comfortable and confident of being able to make judgements about the progress and performance of their students against the pass/fail

² The self-evaluation document (SED) was a self-assessment report that all ITE providers were required to complete and submit to Ofsted at the end of each year. It represented an important source of evidence and reference tool for the inspection team before and during the inspection.

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assessment framework used on the programmes. In some ways this might be considered akin to the notion of ‘fitness to practise’ used by other professions such as health, though not in the form of a reductive checklist of a set of competences to be crudely evidenced during observations as was the case with the application of observation assessment criteria in most institutions. Instead, the partnership’s criteria were used more as a shared frame of reference of multi-layered elements that could be drawn on flexibly and interpreted in a contextually specific way to capture the holistic richness of professional practice. In short, the assessment criteria sought to encapsulate the core knowledge, skills, behaviours and attitudes expected of these student teachers to demonstrate their professional capabilities to practise as independent teachers.

This ‘fitness to practise’ was initially mapped against the professional standards in use at the time in the FE sector (LLUK 2006) and subsequently against the Education and Training Foundation’s (ETF) revised standards (ETF 2014). As the PCE partnership had been actively engaged with these standards through year on year collaborative work to revise and refine their application to its ITE programmes, a shared ownership of the assessment by those working on the programme had emerged over time and was subject to ongoing refinement. In contrast, it was not felt that the Ofsted 4-point scale could be applied with the same rigour, reliability and meaningfulness to assess students’ attainment as the partnership’s existing assessment framework and criteria, whereby students were either judged to have satisfied the criteria or not. Whilst all those teacher educators working on the programmes were clear as to what constituted a pass/fail and were confident in applying these criteria with a high degree of accuracy and consistency, the same could not be said about the interpretation and application of Ofsted’s 4-point scale. There were three key reasons as to why this was the

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case and why the partnership was determined to defend its position on this during the inspection.

Firstly, the criteria used to assess student teachers on its programmes were the product of years of intense, collaborative work of those teacher educators, during the course of which those involved had crafted and taken ownership of the criteria in such a way that they were able to engage with and apply the criteria meaningfully. Secondly, Ofsted’s 4-point scale was/is purely a ranking system rather than an assessment framework with an accompanying set of contextualised criteria. What this meant in practical terms was that specific grade descriptors were so generic and vague to be worthless as an assessment tool, thus increasing the level of observer subjectivity. And thirdly, a growing trend was beginning to emerge across the sector of links made between the grades awarded during observations and evaluative judgements of the professional competence and performance of individuals per se. Or to put it more simply, teachers were being labelled as ‘grade 1/2/3/4,’ teachers, despite claims by institutions that it was the lesson that was being graded and not the individual. Witnessing the impact of such practice on experienced practitioners’ professional identity and self-esteem, this was something that the partnership was mindful of not subjecting its student teachers to so early on in their careers.

In their study into the grading of student teachers on teaching practice placements in Scotland, Cope et al (2003: 682) found that the success of such practice depended on 'a clearly reliable and valid system of assessment of the practice of teaching' and concluded that 'the evidence available suggests that this does not currently exist'. This is not a phenomenon specific to observation as a method of assessment, but reflects widely held beliefs among key

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researchers in the field of assessment such as Gipps (1994: 167), who argued three decades ago that ‘assessment is not an exact science and we must stop presenting it as such.’ The danger, of course, is that the inherent limitations of practice such as numerically grading performance are often overlooked and the resulting judgments are given far more weight and authority than they can realistically claim to have or indeed deserve. Thus one of the consequences of applying systems like graded observations is that the grade carries with it an absolutist judgement about the individual teacher’s classroom competence and performance that belies the isolated and episodic nature of the observation itself. In the case of performance management observations that typically occur on an annual basis in most FE providers, this means that teachers carry with them the label of their allocated grade for at least a year until they are observed again, as evidenced in findings from the largest study into lesson observation in FE and the English education system in recent years (UCU 2013).

Prioritising teacher development

The UoW’s ITE programmes were/are built on a developmental philosophy in which the student teacher’s growth was/is prioritised. Staff working on the programmes were/are committed to helping their students to develop their pedagogic skills and subject knowledge base. It was therefore their belief that judging them against a performative, numerical grading scale of 1-4 would compromise that commitment and jeopardise the supportive focus of the teacher educator and mentor’s relationship with their students. The partnership also benefitted from being involved in and discussing the latest research into lesson observation as one of the university members of staff specialised in this particular area.

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As mentioned above, recent research into the use of graded observation in FE revealed how it had become normalised as a performative tool of managerialist systems fixated with attempting to measure teacher performance rather than actually improving it. The teacher educators and mentors in the PCE partnership saw their primary responsibility as that of helping to nurture their student teachers as effective practitioners rather than having to rank their performance according to a series of loaded labels (i.e. ‘outstanding’, ‘inadequate’ etc.) that were principally designed to satisfy the needs of external agencies such as Ofsted within the marketised FE landscape. This emphasis on measuring teacher performance was also seen as responsible for what Ball (2003) refers to as ‘inauthenticity’ in teacher behaviour and classroom performance during assessed observations. This is typically manifested in the delivery of the rehearsed or showcase lesson as the high stakes nature of such observations results in a reluctance to want to take risks for fear of being given a low grade. Teachers are thus aware of the need to ‘play the game’, which can result in them following a prescriptive template of ‘good practice’ during assessed observations. Yet being prepared to experiment with new ways of doing things in the classroom and taking risks in one’s teaching is widely acknowledged as an important constituent of the development of both the novice and experienced teacher (e.g. IfL 2012).

Furthermore, findings from two separate studies on observation in FE revealed some of the distorting and counterproductive consequences of grading on in-service teachers’ identity and professionalism (e.g. O’Leary 2013; UCU 2013). Staff in the PCE partnership at the UoW, many of whom were FE teachers themselves, were determined to protect their student teachers from such consequences during their time on the programme. This did not mean, however, that they avoided discussing the practice of grading teacher performance with them

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or confronting some of the challenging themes and issues associated with it. On the contrary, this was a topic that was addressed explicitly through professional development modules and wider discussions about assessment and professionalism as part of the on-going critically reflective dialogues that occurred between teacher educators, mentors and students throughout the programme.

Developing critically reflective teachers

The university’s PCE ITE programmes were/are underpinned by the notion of critical reflection. Brookfield (1995) argues that what makes critically reflective teaching ‘critical’ is an understanding of the concept of power in a wider socio-educational context and recognition of the hegemonic assumptions that influence and shape a teacher’s practices. The PCE partnership viewed the use of graded observations as an example of one such hegemonic assumption. Thus the purported outcomes of graded observations (i.e. improving the quality of teaching and learning, promoting a culture of continuous improvement amongst staff etc.) were not necessarily the actual outcomes as experienced by those involved in the observation process itself. Added to this was the thorny issue of measurement.

During the inspection, it became apparent that the PCE partnership’s ungraded approach was problematic for Ofsted. When the lead inspector was directly asked at a feedback meeting with the partnership if the use of a grading scale was considered an obligatory element of being able to measure teachers’ progress and attainment, he categorically stated that was not the case nor did Ofsted prescribe such policy. However, this was subsequently contradicted in the final report with the statement that as the partnership did not grade, it was considered ‘difficult to measure student progress from year to year or the value that the training added in

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each cohort’. In spite of the presentation of a wealth of interwoven sources of qualitative evidence (e.g. tutor/mentor/peer evaluations, self-evaluations, integrated action/development plans, critically reflective accounts) illustrating these student teachers’ journeys throughout their programmes of study, the inspection team was reluctant and/or even unable to conceptualise the notion of improvement unless the outcome was expressed in the form of a number. One possible explanation for this may be because reading such qualitative accounts is more time consuming and much less straight forward than relying on the reductive simplicity of allocating a number to something, however spurious that number might be. Another explanation may be that the ontological, epistemological and methodological positioning of the inspectorate’s assessment framework predisposes it to a conceptual intransigence when it comes to evaluating teaching. This reveals the extent to which ‘managerialist positivism’ (Smith and O’Leary 2013) has become an orthodoxy and Ofsted its agent of enforcement. Notwithstanding these challenges, the partnership team was resolute in defending its practice and emphasised how the broad range of evidence captured in the combination of formative and summative assessments provided a rich tapestry of these student teachers’ progress and attainment throughout the programme and ultimately one that was more meaningful than the allocation of a reductive number.

Developments since the inspection

In the year following the inspection, Ofsted announced a policy shift, recommending the discontinuation of the grading of individual lessons observed during inspections (Cladingbowl 2014). I was directly involved in discussions with Ofsted’s National Director for Schools at that time, Michael Cladingbowl, about this policy shift prior to its

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implementation. A position paper written by the Ofsted Director for Schools, explained the rationale for the change in policy:

Like many others, I have strong views about inspection and the role of inspector observation in it. I believe, for example, that inspectors must always visit classrooms and see teachers and children working. Classrooms, after all, are where the main business of a school is transacted. It is also important to remember that we can give a different grade for teaching than we do for overall achievement, particularly where a school is improving but test or examination results have not caught up. But none of this means that inspectors need to ascribe a numerical grade to the teaching they see in each classroom they visit. Nor does it mean aggregating individual teaching grades to arrive at an overall view of teaching. Far from it. Evaluating teaching in a school should include looking across a range of children’s work (Cladingbowl 2014: 2)

There is no doubt that Ofsted’s decision to remove grading from individual observations during inspections was met with widespread approval by teachers. This reaction was unsurprising given how graded observations had become one of the most controversial areas of practice for the profession in recent years (e.g. O’Leary & Brooks 2014). Yet the timing of Ofsted’s shift in position was interesting, as it arguably occurred at a point when the inspectorate was eager to improve its public image by engaging more with the teaching profession in the wake of growing criticism of its credibility and legitimacy as a regulator of quality and standards in colleges and schools from the profession itself and even the Secretary of State for Education at the time.

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Three years have passed since this shift in policy, but the extent to which it has led to the kind of substantive change in observation practice in colleges and schools anticipated by the profession remains unclear and unconvincing to date. Whilst there have been some encouraging developments reported across sectors (e.g. O’Leary 2016), many teachers maintain that Ofsted’s decision to remove grading has failed to result in a meaningful shift in the mind-sets of senior managers and leaders as to the underlying use(s) and purpose(s) of observation, reinforcing the idea that its use as a form of summative assessment is a dominant, deeply engrained practice that has proven resistant to change. But given the popularity of Ofsted’s policy shift and mounting research evidence in the field of observation highlighting the shortcomings of performative approaches, it begs the question as to why change has not happened more quickly and on a wider scale.

Changing thinking and practice that has become normalised and engrained over decades does not happen overnight and invariably takes a long time. And sometimes no matter how compelling the evidence presented, some people remain resistant to change. There are those who have become institutionalised into associating observation with a performance ranking exercise, regardless of the purpose or approach. They are either unable and/or unwilling to conceptualise the use of observation outside of a performative context and see an umbilical link between classroom performance and attempts to measure it. Thus simply asking observers not to grade lessons any more without addressing the more fundamental issue of how they conceptualise and carry out their role in practice becomes little more than a superficial change.

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As I made clear to Ofsted’s Director in our discussions at the time, a change in policy does not necessarily equate to a change in practice and/or thinking. It was clear to me that this change in positioning had not been thought through carefully by Ofsted and was, in reality, little more than window dressing as well as an attempt to placate a disgruntled profession. Furthermore, it remains a policy decision that is fraught with inconsistencies and contradictions.

Despite declaring graded observations as no longer being fit for purpose in inspections, Ofsted continues to grade teaching, learning and assessment as a whole against its 4-point scale in inspections. Surely if the grading of individual lessons has been deemed unnecessary and inadequate, why should it be any different for making an overall judgement? In a similar vein, whilst it defends its decision to scrap graded observations from inspections, when asked what its stance is on those institutions that continue to grade, it contends that senior managers and leaders in colleges/schools are free to determine their own policies and it is not in Ofsted’s remit to tell them what (not) to do. It is ironic but equally contradictory that an agency that has played such a central role in shaping the education policy agenda over the last twenty five years should revert to adopting a position of neutrality on this matter. Such a position suggests a lack of clarity and confusion as to its role and remit. It cannot be denied that Ofsted has had an indelible impact on the discourse and cultures of teaching and learning in colleges and schools since the 1990s but what has become apparent is that its inspection methodology is out of touch with what we know about capturing and promoting effective teaching and learning.

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