Breathing new life into the observation of teaching and learning in higher education: moving from the performative to the informative

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**Abstract**: Excellence in higher education (HE) teaching has become a policy priority of governments worldwide in recent years. In the United Kingdom, for example, the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework in 2016 heralded an unprecedented focus on the quality of teaching. Set against the backdrop of such policy developments and wider global interest in HE teaching, this paper discusses the conceptualisation and implementation of an innovative approach to observing teaching and learning as part of a faculty development project in an English university. It examines the attitudes, perceptions and experiences of academic staff involved. In reconceptualising and reconfiguring the application of observation as a method by removing it from an assessment domain, the paper argues that this approach has uncovered new opportunities for using observation as a catalyst to develop collegial understanding of what constitutes effective teaching and learning and how best to improve and share practice meaningfully and sustainably.

Keywords: higher education, peer observation, collaboration, teaching, learning, teaching excellence, coaching

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# Introduction

Classroom observation has long occupied a prominent place in the formal assessment and development of teachers in primary, secondary and further/tertiary education globally. In recent decades it has become predominantly associated with the performance management of teachers in these education sectors, with a reliance on its use as a performative tool of summative assessment with which to monitor and measure teacher effectiveness (e.g. O’Leary 2013, 2014). In contrast, its use in higher education (HE) has traditionally been less commonplace, with practice less developed across the sector. Peer-based models of observation have largely accounted for engagement among HE staff to date, though this has varied markedly within and across institutions and countries (e.g. Hendry and Oliver 2012). However, with teaching excellence now firmly on the policy agenda of governments worldwide, the use of observation is increasing in HE. In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, following the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), observation is increasingly employed as a quality assurance tool to gather information on teaching standards and to evidence staff performance (e.g. O’Leary, Cui and French 2018). It is in the context of these policy developments and the wider global interest in understanding and improving teaching and learning in HE that this paper is situated. Drawing on a recent faculty development project involving academic staff from a modern English university, the paper discusses the conceptualisation, implementation and evaluation of an innovative, research-informed approach to the use of the observation of teaching and learning.

The first section of this paper explores some of the literature on the peer review or observation of HE teaching as well as that of coaching, with these two fields framing the conceptual underpinnings of our approach and its operationalisation. The second section of the paper moves on to discuss the methodology of the project. From its conceptualisation to subsequent implementation and evaluation, this section provides an outline of the origins and development of our approach, its rationale and its application. The final section discusses project findings that relate to staff attitudes, perceptions and experiences of this innovation.

## Peer review of higher education teaching

The use of peer review in HE teaching can differ markedly within and across institutions and countries. In comparison to the peer review of research, arguably a more well-established and familiar process to academics internationally, the peer review of teaching is generally less developed or systematic. For example, Wingrove et al’s (2018) study highlights how academics are used to their performance in research being measured but less so when it comes to teaching. The differences between these two processes is unsurprising given the historic importance attached to research and the priority it has traditionally held over that of teaching in the HE sector.

There is conflation with peer review of HE teaching and peer observation; both are commonly used for formative and summative purposes (Bell and Mladenic 2008; Sachs and Parsell 2014). Traditionally peer observation has operated largely on an informal, voluntary basis, but more recently it has become part of formal programmes of professional study for staff new to teaching in HE. An example of this is the postgraduate certificate in learning and teaching in the English HE sector, a compulsory qualification that new staff are expected to complete in order to satisfy their probationary requirements. In addition, it has increasingly been used as a tool of accountability for evaluating teaching quality and standards across programmes.

Despite the widespread use of peer observation, it is not a term or practice that is universally or consistently interpreted and applied in HE, differing significantly from one setting to another as a result of variables such as context, ethos, purpose, method, participants and their roles etc, (e.g. Fullerton 2003; McMahon, Barrett and O’Neill 2007). In the case of the project discussed in this paper, our conceptualisation and application of the term ‘peer observation’ is best described as ‘a collaborative, reciprocal, model of observation where peers get together to observe each other’s practice’ and where ‘the observation is not regarded as an end in itself but as a springboard for sharing ideas and stimulating reflective dialogue’ (O’Leary and Price 2016, 114-115). We also found Tilstone’s (2012, 59) term ‘partnership observation’ useful in encapsulating the notions of equality, collaboration and collegiality that underpin the approach adopted in our project.

For Tilstone (2012, 60), the fundamental elements of any successful partnership are ‘trust, commitment, common understanding and the identification of individual needs’. Similarly, other studies in the field of peer observation have identified the importance of trust and confidentiality between participants as being central to the success of peer relationships and the process as a whole (e.g. Gosling 2002; Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005; Shortland 2004). The nature of relationships within peer observation is thus vital to the success and sustainability of any approach and is paramount to encouraging authentic engagement and commitment to developing thinking and practice. We worked hard to achieve and to protect these elements when creating our faculty scheme and the preparation and training of staff involved, as discussed further in the project methodology below.

There is contention about the value of peer observation and the degree of formality associated with its use and underpinning purpose (Lomas and Kinchin 2006). The more informal the approach, the more prone it can arguably leave itself open to accusations of a lack of criticality and rigour, with questionable value for those involved. Yet equally, high levels of formality can be considered to endorse performance management rather than performance enhancement agendas and thus may not necessarily increase the meaningfulness and/or value of the activity (e.g. Thomson, Bell and Hendry 2015). One might also argue that the greater the degree of formal processes introduced, the more onerous involvement can become for all parties, thus threatening to reduce its overall effectiveness and impact. That said, the application of a systematic rather than a procedurally formal approach to peer observation can conceivably enhance its success and sustainability. As Buskist, Ismail and Groccia (2014, 50) maintain, ‘successful peer review is the product of planned and intentional discussion of pedagogy with the teacher and detailed analysis of the teacher’s pedagogical practices and how those practices impact student learning’. Thus there is clearly a balance to establish in adopting a systematic approach, whilst allowing room for flexibility and spontaneity.

In a small-scale study of a peer observation scheme in a university in Ireland, McMahon, Barrett and O’Neill (2007, 505) found that their research participants were in no doubt that having control over the five key dimensions of choice of observer, focus of observation, form and method of feedback, resultant data flow and the next steps encouraged them to focus on improvement of practice rather than demonstration of existing good practice. Similarly, in our project, being able to exercise professional agency over these five dimensions proved crucial to ensuring staff engagement with our approach from the outset but equally for it to remain sustainable. Wingrove et al. (2018), amongst others, have also highlighted the importance of an ethos of collegiality and respect for peer observation to be successful and sustainable when comparing the experiences of HE academics in Australia and England.

## The role of coaching in peer observation

To further develop the non-evaluative approach to observation, we drew upon the theory and practice of coaching relationships as a model for observer-observee interaction. There is considerable variance in the literature regarding a definition of coaching and even less agreement on the difference between *coaching* and *mentoring* (e.g. Garvey, Stokes and Megginson 2018; Hargreaves 2010). Mentoring is often linked with ‘knowledge transfer’ from a more experienced to a less experienced staff member (Pleschová and McAlpine 2015), whereas coaching is more often associated with the role of a non-judgemental observer, who, rather than providing direct advice, facilitates the coachee’s own exploration of the challenges they experience (Costa and Garmston 2016). For the purposes of this project we therefore adopted the term ‘coaching’ with a focus on learning relationships underpinned by an ethos of inquiry and a willingness to explore unasked questions (Bokeno 2009; Fletcher 2012). The model embodied in our approach is closest to ‘peer coaching’ where staff with relatively equal levels of experience and status work collaboratively to provide a formative experience for coachees (Ladyshewsky 2014; Parker, Kram and Hall 2013).

Throughout the literature, inquiry is identified as a central tenet of a coaching approach. Whitmore (2002) advises that coaches’ primary verbal interaction should be interrogative in the form of questions. Similarly, Bokeno (2009) underscores the need to ask open questions that suspend beliefs and assumptions about the correct way to do things. The use of questions encourages coachees’ deeper reflection and problem-solving abilities, promoting self-reflection to explore one’s thinking, beliefs, and assumptions (Costa and Garmston 2016; Parsloe and Leedham 2009). ‘Questions can enable teachers to cast a new lens over their landscape, to make the familiar strange’ (Charteris and Smardon 2014, 16). While providing direct advice can arguably create dependence and undermine original thinking, coaching questions encourage the coachee to take responsibility and become self-empowered and self-directed to discover their own solutions (Costa and Garmston 2016). Whitmore (2012) emphasises that a coach doesn’t need to be a subject expert; their function should be more of a detached awareness raiser than a provider of solutions. The role of the coach is to develop dialogic interaction (e.g. Bokeno and Gantt 2000; Charteris and Smardon 2014) and to invite a colleague to see themselves in a new light (Costa and Garmston 2016). Coaching questions are thus a means to achieve transformative, as opposed to transmissive, professional development for educators (Kennedy 2014).

A non-evaluative approach to observation highlights the value of observers as coaches. Having severed the link between observation as an assessment of individual performance, coachees are able to develop their own reflective skills and increase their self-efficacy (Ladyshewsky 2014). Nonetheless, many workplaces are increasingly dominated by cultures of performativity, where observers can find it challenging to refrain from making judgements about what they see. As Costa and Garmston (2016, 4) argue, ‘coaches must undergo a paradigm shift from teaching others to helping others learn from situations; from holding power to empowering others; from telling to inquiring.’ This last point was a crucial focus in the observer training programme we developed and is discussed below.

As highlighted in the discussion on peer observation above, there is also broad agreement in the coaching literature that good rapport and a relationship of trust are necessary for the ethos of inquiry to develop and succeed. Coachees are only likely to feel safe to explore their own practice and to experiment if the fear of reprisal is removed (e.g. Costa and Garmston 2016; Cox 2012). In her study of peer coaching in a HE faculty, Cox (2012) found that the success of the coaching relationship was predicated on the development of trust. The notion of trust was not restricted to an individual level between colleagues, but extended to an organisational level, incorporating employees’ trust in the organisation’s motives. Thus efforts need to be made to minimise the elements of distrust such as fear, scepticism, cynicism, wariness, watchfulness and vigilance (Lewicki, Tomlinson, and Gillespie 2006). Where an organisation monitors a coaching scheme for performance management purposes, there is the danger that these characteristics may creep in (Cox 2012). Lofthouse and Leat (2013) argue that the development of peer coaching in organisations dominated by cultures of performativity is highly problematic because the systems, policies and practices of such organisational cultures tend to militate against the development of trust and reflection, both of which are considered core ingredients for successful coaching relationships to thrive.

Jewett and MacPhee (2012) also raise concerns about performative associations with the term ‘observation’ and instead prefer ‘event’. But Western (2012) suggests coaches should reclaim ‘observation’ in the spirit of Žižek (1992), who encourages observers to ‘look awry’ in order to reframe and question normative practices. When used in this way, observation can act as a catalyst for dialogue and reflection (Lofthouse and Hall 2014). We too acknowledge the difficulty associated with the term ‘observation’, which can trigger associations with judgements of the quality of teaching and/or teacher performance. While we decided to retain the term ‘observation’ in our project, we chose to reconceptualise and reconfigure it from an assessment tool to a method of educational inquiry for gathering situated evidence of professional practice, as discussed in more detail below.

Some writers argue that the use of non-judgemental language within coaching conversations can foster independent thought; this can help to maintain the agency of coachees, often generating personalised and innovative thought by preserving the coachee’s words and the coach asking questions that contain fewer presuppositions (e.g. Arnold 2009). This resonates with the view that the observer aspires to provide an objective view of the session, reflecting with the observee as a mirror to inform thinking about future practice (Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005). It can also help to reduce any tendency towards evaluative or judgemental feedback, thus fostering a reciprocity of equality within professional partnerships based on mutual respect and trust (O’Leary 2014).

# Project context and methodology

## Project conceptualisation and implementation

The conceptualisation and implementation of observation in the project was underpinned by an exploratory rather than explanatory approach (Robson 2002). This is a crucial distinction in the epistemological and methodological positioning of the project. Both researchers had extensive experience of working with observation in a range of contexts and education sectors from supporting and assessing new entrants to teaching, coaching and mentoring experienced practitioners.

The project’s bespoke observation approach was designed to prioritise collaborative inquiry, critical reflection, professional dialogue and collegial development. Shaped and informed by current research, thinking and practice in the field (e.g. O’Leary and Wood 2017: UCU 2013), a key element to overcoming some of the limitations of conventional approaches to observation and reconceptualising it was to stop using it as a tool to assess performance. Instead, the decision was taken to use it as a data collection tool of exploratory inquiry into teaching practices among staff in the faculty, providing a platform for collaborative development. This was a crucial distinction to ensure a safe and nurturing environment for reflection and dialogue between staff.

Observation of teaching practice was conceptualised and applied as a common touchpoint and catalyst for dialogue between observer and observee. The Cycle of Peer Observation (CoPO, see **Figure 1**) was developed as process to facilitate effective dialogic interaction between observer and observee. Observers were instructed to compile a descriptive log/field notes of what they observed along with associated questions and/or reflective comments to discuss during the professional dialogue stage rather than make evaluative judgements. It was made clear to all staff that observers were not there to provide answers or solutions to all their questions but to support them as peers to reflect on their practice. Furthermore, all staff were instructed to anonymise the documentation generated during CoPO in order to protect their identities. Having received ethical approval, this documentation was stored securely and other than the participants themselves, access was limited to the two researchers.

All observers undertook an intensive one-day observation training programme and were required to organise a reciprocal observation with a fellow observer as a means of practising their skills before formally undertaking their roles. The first part of the training focused on staff discussing and critically reflecting on their understandings, perceptions and prior experiences of observation. We have since come to articulate this stage of the training as a process of *conceptual catharsis*, having learnt that unless academic staff are allowed to divest themselves of prior experiences and associations with observation in an assessment context, then expecting them to engage with a reconceptualised approach is likely to be more problematic and ultimately less successful. In short, encouraging teaching staff to detach observation from assessment and embrace it as an exploratory tool requires a significant shift individually and collectively, and it is important to integrate time for this in the training.

The second part of the training provided staff with opportunities to develop an understanding of the epistemological and methodological underpinnings of CoPO, to discuss the processes of the cycle, as well as practise some basic coaching and observation skills through a series of interactive tasks. For example, they practised carrying out non-judgemental observations via a selection of video clips of HE teaching and compared their observation notes and reflections with their peers. This was to help to develop an awareness of what different observers notice when they observe, reflect on their values of learning and teaching and how these values inform their observations and reflections. They also practiced conducting conversations using coaching questions.

A pilot study was conducted in 2015/16, comprising a sample of 10 observers and 23 observees. Participants’ experiences of the effectiveness and value of the approach, along with the procedural elements of the cycle were captured via an online survey and a pilot project review day. After analysing these data, amendments were made to elements of CoPO, which was subsequently implemented in full across the faculty in 2016/17. One change was asking observers to do their own post-observation reflective write-up as well as observees (see Stage 6 in **Figure 1** below). There was a consensus among observers that their own practice and professional learning was informed by observing others, reinforcing previous research in this area (e.g. Tenenberg 2016). In 2017/18 two accompanying guides for observers and observees were created to outline the rationale for each stage and provide anonymised documentation examples from staff who had completed the cycle. Thinking prompts for self-reflection were also developed based on feedback; these are an optional stimulus for those who find them a useful point of reference. Stage 7 was also introduced and is further discussed below.

## How the Cycle of Peer Observation (CoPO) works

As **Figure 1** shows, there are seven stages to CoPO. Stage 1 provides the observee with an opportunity to think holistically about their teaching through self-reflective writing, encouraging them to reflect on their strengths and identify areas for further professional learning. This self-reflection is shared with the observer and forms a catalyst for professional dialogue and in the pre-observation meeting (Stage 2), where they have the opportunity to establish a professional rapport and explore themes articulated by the observee in their self-reflection. Where appropriate, the observer uses coaching questions to establish an ethos of inquiry as the observee articulates their chosen observation focus, and both agree the logistical details of the observation.

**< Insert Figure 1 here>**

Stage 3 is the observation, which typically lasts about an hour. In contrast to assessment-based models of observation, observers are not required to use a proforma when taking notes as there is no checklist of behaviours or assessment criteria. They are simply asked to record what they see, with the understanding that they should avoid judgement and evaluation. Their goal is to act as ‘detached awareness raisers’ (Whitmore 2002, 42), a lens through which the observee can gain an additional view of the events of the observation and to use the observer’s notes as a springboard for collegial dialogue.

Following the observation, individual reflections (Stage 4) are carried out by both observer and observee. The observer further develops their observation notes to add questions and comments in preparation for the post-observation meeting (Stage 5). Both bring their observation notes and Stage 4 reflections to the Stage 5 discussion and relate these back to what was discussed in Stage 2 in terms of the agreed focus of the session. The observer draws upon non-judgmental coaching skills as they discuss the learning and teaching they experienced and observed, culminating in the observee’s formulation of teaching objectives which encapsulate the learning they have taken from the observation process and steps for developing their practice.

Stage 6 requires both observer and observee to complete their reflective write-ups independently. The aim is to capture the holistic experience of both parties of the cycle, making connections between this observation experience and their past learning and teaching experiences. The observee is also expected to document the objectives identified in the Stage 5 meeting and reflect on how they intend to move their teaching forward, along with the resources/support they might need to enable them to do so. Several months after the completion of their observations, both observers and observees are invited to a focus group with their peers (Stage 7). The purpose is to move the focus away from the observation as an episodic event by creating further opportunities for dialogic professional learning as they share the insights gained and the impact these have had on both their teaching and their students’ learning.

# Data collection and analysis

To evaluate staff perceptions and experiences of the conceptualisation and operationalisation of CoPO, the project drew on multiple sets of qualitative data. As a means of canvassing a breadth of participants’ perspectives across the faculty, an online survey provided the starting point for data collection. This was complemented by a range of other qualitative methods including interviews, focus groups, and documentation generated in the different stages of CoPO. As this was a 'live' project, it is important to stress that a pre-determined set of codes for analysis were not drawn up, but themes were allowed to emerge from the data in a ‘grounded’ approach though not grounded theory. These themes were complemented and informed by relevant literature and theory associated with the field of observing learning and teaching. Thus the analytical framework we adopted can broadly be seen as a relational content analysis approach.

# Findings and discussion

This final section discusses three key themes to emerge from the data regarding staff attitudes, perceptions and experiences of CoPO. These are:

* Challenges of changing normalised perceptions and interactions with observation
* The double-edged sword of time
* Restoring professional agency through CoPO

### **Challenges of changing normalised perceptions and interactions with observation**

Our experience resonates with the views of Costa and Garman (2014) that paradigm shifts take time. For some staff the *conceptual catharsis* we referred to above extended beyond the training and into CoPO. For example, the data revealed isolated cases of initial guardedness among a small group of observees. Despite assurances to the contrary, some expressed scepticism about the underlying purpose of CoPO and felt that it would still be used to monitor the quality of their teaching. One observer ‘sensed a nervousness in some colleagues about what to choose as their focus’ and as a result ‘a lot [of observees] still choose something they’re good at’. This was reinforced in the qualitative data from several observees, whose first reactions to hearing about the introduction of a new observation scheme in the faculty was to plan an ‘all singing, all dancing lesson’ on the premise that they ‘had to prove [their] worth’. However, in the following extract from a focus group, an observer from a teacher education programme shares how his colleague’s initial scepticism to CoPO dissipated once they began the cycle:

I had an initial exchange with a colleague about the observation cycle and their immediate response was, ʺOh God, how can we jump through this hoop as quickly and as painlessly as possible?ʺ … But then what was really interesting is that once they identified something that was really challenging to them in their teaching, the meetings we had both before and after the observation were really productive, focused and forward looking. And they ended up admitting that it had been a worthwhile exercise after all!

Some observers worked with observees who had been conditioned to view the main purpose of observation as summative assessments of their teaching (O’Leary 2013). Observers reported several examples where observees explicitly requested advice on improving their teaching, but rather than offer opinions and advice, they were able to maintain an ethos of inquiry which created the space for the observee to generate their own solutions. One midwifery lecturer still found this challenging: ‘I understood the process to be non-judgemental and this was achieved but to the extent where I actually craved some judgement and validation for what I was doing.’ This was certainly a recurring theme across different data sets where both observers and observees identified a desire from some staff to receive comments about the effectiveness of their teaching, driven by what largely seemed a need for validation that they were ‘doing a good job’. This raises interesting questions about the need for judgement and validation in HE professional practice. What opportunities are available for academic staff to receive positive affirmations of their teaching? Or, indeed, as we explore in the following section below, what opportunities are there for them to discuss learning and teaching?

It was clear that disassociating observation from its application as an assessment tool to monitor and measure the effectiveness of their teaching represented a significant challenge for some staff more so than others, particularly for those working in disciplines such as education where there is a longstanding association between observation and performance management/appraisal (Tilstone 2012). Having an awareness of these prior experiences helped to contextualise comments such as ‘I have often been paralysed by fear about observations’ or that their experience of observations in colleges and schools was that they were ‘box-ticking’ exercises, which were associations that were addressed in staff briefings and training.

While some observees may have craved judgement, some observers also found it difficult to withhold. One of the main challenges for observers was thus the adoption of a non-evaluative approach to observing. A senior nursing academic commented ‘the biggest challenge for me is not judging what I see and wanting to share over 15 years of experience.’ A review of the data from the observers’ notes (Stage 3) and their reflections on the post-observation discussion (Stage 6) revealed instances of a judgemental focus in their reporting style. Another observer from nursing commented on the difficulties involved in observing a session they felt required improvement:

I started the post-session briefing with only asking questions, not giving any criticism or suggestions … I found myself in a difficult situation, because my perception of the session and the student engagement was miles apart from that of the observee and it was difficult to communicate that there were improvements necessary.

The observer concluded their written reflection by listing nine suggestions for improvement that they subsequently shared with the observee. Whilst this practice was clearly at odds with the project’s methodological and axiological approach, it raises some important questions relating to judgemental observation approaches. On what basis is such judgement warranted? As a result of hierarchical standing? Expertise and/or experience in the field? By invitation from the observee? How observers should respond when witnessing ‘poor’ or ‘weak’ teaching in sessions emerged as a key discussion point in the evaluation of the pilot. There was agreement that such instances, however rare they may be, should not be ignored on the grounds of professional responsibility and a duty of care to students. Nevertheless, participants felt that CoPO was not the forum in which to deal with issues of competence and capability, as it could jeopardise the underpinning ethos of the scheme. Observers were advised to follow established organisational systems and procedures that were more suited to this.

Some observers also found it difficult to pose questions that seemed open and didn’t imply judgement. The main reason for this was twofold, both of which have repercussions for the further development of our approach. Firstly, with hindsight, the training and time devoted to practising coaching conversations and asking questions during the observer training programme was insufficient. And secondly, we realise now that it was unrealistic to expect observers to acquire this skill from the outset but requires sustained practice to develop proficiency.

While the adoption of a non-judgemental approach was clearly a challenge to some observers, others appeared to manage this more successfully and this was acknowledged by their observees:

It was very useful as the discussion, after the observation, was almost like I was watching a video recording of my lesson. We were able to take sections of the lesson where I had made a pedagogical decision—intuitively or deliberately—and then unpick it to discuss the impact of my decision on the students’ learning experience as well as allowing me the opportunity to reflect on my decisions which may impact on my future planning and delivery … This was about “observing” – not telling me where I went wrong and how I could make it better. My observer’s message was definitely more about us being equal professionals and not about one of us being better than the other.

The episodic nature of observing a single session dominated the focus of both observer and observee. In the first year, observee initial self-reflections focused almost exclusively on the observed session rather than a more holistic review of their practice. Although practice-based thinking prompts were distributed to observees as an optional tool, these did not seem to stimulate thinking beyond the scope of what they were planning to show the observer. Across schools and departments, most of the focus was on the observed session with less thought towards the implications for wider practice. This revealed the need for a more explicit focus on the relationship between the two in staff briefings and training. One of the key learning points from this has been the need for a consistency in lines of communication at all levels and ongoing dissemination, yet equally a flexibility in accommodating localised contexts and circumstances.

## The double-edged sword of time

Both observers and observees found allocating time for each stage of CoPO a significant challenge. With many part-time staff in a practice-based faculty where students are often out on placement for large periods of time, both observers and observees reported difficulties fitting in meetings around busy timetables. Despite good intentions from staff, the post-observation discussion (Stage 5) would sometimes take place weeks after the observation. Increased work demands are not new to HE staff and we recognise that time and dedication are needed to create meaningful professional dialogues. Equally when done properly, CoPO can be a time intensive process but we would argue that the return on the investment of staff time makes it a worthwhile investment. Furthermore, the adoption of a new workload allocation model by the faculty may allow the time commitment of observers and observees to be formally planned and recognised, thus valorising it even more.

The time of year an observation is scheduled emerged as an obstacle for some; there can be a rush to complete the observations at the tail end of the academic year when there can be little timetabled teaching to observe. Both observers and observees suggested that observations earlier in the academic cycle would have a greater impact on their practice. Nevertheless, this is not always possible, and later observations have prompted resourceful responses by some to move away from ‘traditional’ classroom observations to looking at wider areas of teaching practice, such as one-to-one tutorials and the use of e-learning. A broad understanding of teaching practice has been advocated throughout this project and some have embraced this. For example, two senior academic researchers chose to focus on a one-to-one doctoral supervision session, sharing meaningful reflections with each other about empathy while exploring the difficult balance a supervisor needs to maintain between providing pastoral care and offering academic challenge.

The other side of this double-edged sword of time was that some welcomed the introduction of CoPO because in their eyes it had created ‘protected time’ for collaborative reflection and discussion, as a lecturer from life sciences explains in the following extract:

One of the reasons why I like this scheme is that it protects time to allow you to observe your peers and spend time thinking about practice and talking about teaching and learning, which you wouldn’t normally get as we’re all so busy.

It seems somewhat ironic that opportunities for academic staff to come together to discuss and share ideas about the core business of the institution i.e. learning and teaching are heavily circumscribed. Yet as one senior academic from radiotherapy commented, ‘it’s the only time I’ve had to reflect and focus on my teaching in the 6 years I’ve been here’. The enthusiasm for CoPO manifested to date would suggest that there is clearly a demand and appetite for allowing academics more space and time to devote to discussing practice. In the words of an early years lecturer, ‘[CoPO] has given us the oxygen to breathe … when you’re given the oxygen, it helps to breathe new life into your thinking and your teaching.’

## Restoring professional agency through CoPO

Establishing rapport between observer and observee is essential to create an atmosphere of trust and confidence to openly discuss and reflect on practice, particularly for colleagues who may not know each other well. Observees overwhelmingly felt that the observers achieved this; the words they used repeatedly to describe their observer’s approach were ‘supportive’, ‘friendly’ and ‘professional’. Echoing Buskist, Ismail and Groccia’s (2014, 50) emphasis on the importance of structure and planning for ‘intentional discussion of pedagogy’, both observers and observees remarked on how CoPO provided a useful framework for focused discussion. In particular, they underlined the ‘vital role’ of the pre-observation meeting (Stage 2) in the process. It allows the observer to clarify the purpose of the observation and to dispel any myths that may exist about the performative nature of the process. An observer from radiotherapy commented:

The pre-observation meeting has been so important in agreeing and clarifying the focus and unpicking the observee’s thinking and rationale for their focus. It’s been interesting how deep some of those discussions about teaching have been too.

Equally, from the observees’ perspective, the pre-observation meeting ‘set the tone’ by encouraging them to take the lead in the discussion and its focus, while also helping to establish the roles, responsibilities and expectations of each party in the process.

Observees valued the professional trust given to them. As one teacher education lecturer commented, ‘the fact that we have the opportunity to choose our focus and not have to pander to others’ agendas is very empowering to me.’ Comments like this were common among observees across different data sets, reinforcing the importance of professional agency in the process and how this is valued by academics (e.g. McMahon, Barrett and O’Neill 2007).

The following astute remark by a nursing lecturer encapsulates the success of this project:

I specifically chose a session I wasn’t comfortable with and I found this process to be much more supportive than previous experiences … my observer wasn’t imposing their view of what they consider to be effective teaching on me and I really appreciated that because I think I’m probably the best person to know how to change [my teaching] … I just needed somebody to help me find the best way to do it.

She went on to describe how she used the observation as an opportunity to focus on an area of her teaching that she felt was ‘too didactic’, which had previously emerged as a problem based on student feedback and a lack of student engagement during sessions. As a result of her observation discussion, she trialled more interactive teaching approaches, which were very well received by students. She is now in the process of changing all her teaching sessions to promote more interaction on the basis of her observation experience.

Another spoke of being in a small team who all observed each other and that ‘the observations generated many conversations outside of this process... The whole ethos of the course has changed and the observation process was the catalyst for that.’

Like the staff in Tenenberg’s study (2016), observers found the process of observation, reflection and professional dialogue was also beneficial to their own practice: ‘It was really quite rewarding as an observer; I learnt more from the observee than they ever would have learned from me if I were forced into the role of trying to advise.’ Another said ‘being an observee made me reflect upon my own practice with greater breadth and question some things I do that have become unquestioned habits.’

To conclude, CoPO completed its second full iteration at the end of the academic year 2017/18, with approximately 300 academic staff across the faculty having undertaken at least one full cycle. Survey results suggest high levels of engagement and satisfaction with the new approach, with 93% of observee respondents (strongly) agreeing with the statement, ‘The observation cycle helped me reflect on my teaching and student learning’. When asked to use a slider scale to answer the question, ‘Was the observation process more informative/developmental or performative/judgemental?’,the average rating was 92/100 in favour of informative/developmental. This was echoed in the qualitative comments of staff, with one lecturer describing it as a *‘*genuinely democratic process that values individuals for the strengths they have, rather than an attempt to identify and criticise perceived weaknesses’and another that it was an ‘incredibly positive and supportive approach to observing and reflecting on our teaching and students’ learning’.

# Concluding comments

From its original conception, CoPO was designed with a clear ethos of encouraging collaborative inquiry, critical reflection and a commitment to using observation as a catalyst for professional dialogue between colleagues. The findings from the project discussed in this paper add weight to the argument that removing observation from the context of high-stakes assessments of individuals’ teaching performances can facilitate the creation of collegial cultures that encourage reflection and collaborative dialogue between academic staff (e.g. O’Leary and Wood 2017; UCU 2013). In reconceptualising and reconfiguring the use of observation by removing it from an assessment context, new possibilities have thus emerged for harnessing observation as a tool for developing collegial understanding about the reciprocal relationship between teaching and learning.

There have clearly been ongoing challenges for observers in adopting a non-evaluative approach to observing and this is an aspect of CoPO that requires further development. That said, the project has been successful in developing a supportive and non-performative model that faculty colleagues are willing to engage with. While the transition from a performative, assessment-based model of observation to an informative, inquiry-based model has certainly been more of a marathon than a sprint, our experience would suggest that it is a journey worth embarking upon. Findings from the project to date have supported the rationale for its creation that by removing observation from the context of assessment, a safe, low stakes environment for reflection and dialogue between academic staff can blossom. This in turn has facilitated staff to change and develop their practice. At the same time, it has also opened up new opportunities to engage with observation as a lens to inform and develop staff understanding of effective teaching and learning.

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