CHAPTER 6

Using innovative observation to improve teaching and learning: a collaboration between students and academic staff in higher education

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Abstract

This chapter explores the experiences of university teachers and students who participated in an innovative model of collaborative observation over two academic years. Drawing on qualitative data from several longitudinal case studies involving small groups of staff and students, we critically reflect on the key findings and implications for improving teaching and learning in higher education. The chapter reveals how these students and their teachers used a model of collaborative observation to develop a collective classroom consciousness about learning and its relationship with teaching. As an antidote to neo-liberal, commodified conceptualisations of teaching and learning that have historically dominated the use of observation in education, the participants' experiences captured here illustrate how our innovative model can provide a stimulating platform from which to co-develop collective classroom consciousness. This classroom consciousness can subsequently be used to inform and transform the learning and professional practice of students and their teachers meaningfully and sustainably.

Keywords

Higher education; teaching and learning; co-constructed observation; collaborative observation; innovation; teacher improvement; collaboration; classroom consciousness

Introduction and background

Improving teaching and learning through collaborative observation was an innovative project undertaken at Birmingham City University from 2016 to 2018, funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The project comprised five case studies of undergraduate programmes across a single faculty, with each case study including two academic staff and two student participants for each observation cycle. The five case studies included in the project were: 1) Adult Nursing; 2) Child Nursing; 3) Early Childhood Studies; 4) Primary Education and 5) Radiotherapy. This chapter was developed and co-written with the participants from three of the five case studies: Child Nursing, Adult Nursing and Radiotherapy. Participants from all five case studies were invited to collaborate in the co-writing of the chapter, though only those from the aforementioned three case studies chose to pursue this opportunity. It was therefore decided that the data included in this chapter would focus on these three case studies rather than all five that were involved in the project.

The project used the shared lens of classroom observation as a reciprocal reference point for exploring teaching and learning at course level. As part of the project, we developed our Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) (Figure 1). CoCO provided a common frame of reference for staff and students to collaborate as well as embodying the thinking and methodology that we wanted to in our approach to improving teaching and learning. We drew on the latest research and practice in the field of observation, learning from the pitfalls of how it has been previously misappropriated as a punitive performance management tool in education systems (e.g. O'Leary and Wood 2017).

< Insert Figure 1 'Cycle of Collaborative Observation' here>

The conceptual and methodological framework of our project design started with us reconceptualising and reconfiguring the way in which we planned for the project's participants to engage with observation as a method for studying and enhancing teaching and learning. Severing the umbilical link between observation and its use as a method of assessing teaching and teacher performance was central to this process. We were convinced that unless we were able to remove observation from the assessment context, this would jeopardise our efforts to capture situated examples of authentic teaching and learning and in turn to create a safe, trusting and collaborative environment for reflection and dialogue

between staff and students (e.g. O'Leary and Savage 2019). Similarly, when it came to student involvement, our approach put student voice and their active involvement in informing and shaping teaching and learning at the heart of this innovation.

In this chapter, we focus on exploring what it was like when students and staff worked collaboratively to learn about learning and teaching through two cycles of collaborative observation (CoCO), drawing on the rich body of longitudinal data generated during the project. A key concept to emerge from the focus on learning across the case studies was what we have come to refer to as 'classroom consciousness'. In coining this term, we took our inspiration from Bowden and Marton's (2004) notion of 'collective consciousness', applying this specifically to teaching and learning encounters in formal pedagogical spaces like the classroom. We conceptualised classroom consciousness as a shared, contextualised consciousness and understanding that emerges as a result of collective discussion between students and teachers of their respective teaching and learning intentions, assumptions, actions, reactions and mediation. Through this lens of classroom consciousness, we identified significant themes that emerged in the dialogic exchanges between participants that helped to illustrate how CoCO had provided them with the tools and a shared space to make sense of and articulate their learning experiences.

The first half of this chapter provides an overview of the project methodology, its participants and the areas of focus of each case study. The second half, the core of the chapter, presents the key findings and discussion from the three selected case studies. The paper concludes with reflections on the challenges and constraints that we encountered during the project and the implications of its findings for future research into teaching and learning in higher education, and improved practice too.

Methodology of the project

Over the course of the two iterations of CoCO (Figure 1), each case study produced a large volume of rich data, which included initial reflections from all student and staff participants, recordings of the pre- and post-observation meetings, observation field notes, individual reflective write-ups and recordings of evaluation meetings with the project researchers at the end of each cycle of observation. Instead of the project researchers analysing and commenting independently on each case study's experiences of CoCO, we felt it was more appropriate to invite the staff

participants to co-write this paper. This meant they were able to analyse their own data in the context of their courses and subject areas and provide us with critical commentaries on the teaching and learning experiences that occurred. Thus, through the co-production of this paper we were able to extend the ethos and practice of co-inquiry that underpinned the project's methodology. While we intended to invite students as co-authors, the logistics of bringing students together from three distinct courses proved impossible given their different timetables and clinical placement commitments.

We employed a two-phase approach to the data analysis for this study. Phase one involved each case study team and the project researchers working closely to familiarise themselves with the discrete data generated in each case study and to make sense of each case study's situated data. This was an important step as the data recorded were produced *during* the project in authentic and organic oral exchanges between participants, including observation notes and personal reflections. Other than the end of cycle evaluations, the researchers were not present, nor involved in any of the data collection. As this paper is a retrospective meta-analysis of the data recorded, it meant that for the researchers to make sense of the case study experiences and to ensure data analysis credibility, close collaboration with the participants was essential throughout the analysis.

Phase two involved the project researchers extending the data analysis across all three case studies to develop a set of common themes. The two researchers initially analysed the case study data independently, identifying overarching themes that collectively reflected key aspects of student-staff collaboration, which were then shared with the staff participants. Combining the analysis from both phases, we developed the themes discussed here. In the following section, a summary of each case study is included to highlight who the participants were, as well as the focus of the collaborative inquiries of each case study. This illuminates the critical aspects of each case study and helps to contextualise our subsequent analysis and discussion.

An overview of the case studies and the cycles

Staff members were recruited on a voluntary basis through a faculty-wide recruitment process. All participating staff were required to complete an observation training programme, delivered by the project team before undertaking CoCO with their peers and students. The project team provided project briefings for students on participating courses. Following

an invitation to participate in focus groups exploring their interest in and understanding of learning and teaching, students were invited to submit expressions of interest to take part in the project. Student participants were then selected from these expressions of interest, in consultation with staff teaching on the chosen courses. Like staff, all student participants completed an observation training programme delivered by the project team. Although student participants were voluntary, they were paid as research-assistants for their time for the duration of the project.

Bringing students and staff together to collaboratively observe, reflect upon and inquire into learning and teaching in their programme requires careful attention to ethical considerations. In a previous publication (O'Leary and Cui 2020), we outlined our ethical considerations which focused on the ethics of student-staff working relationships, the ethics of trust, impact on participating staff and students in their programme, along with the relationships and impact between participating staff and students as well as the rest of the programme. In practice, an overview of the project focus and a question-and-answer session was provided for staff and students from each of the modules selected for participation. This was an important ethical consideration as we were mindful that any students and staff involved in these modules might become subjects of the case study's discussion. Participants in each case study were briefed that in their observation notes, discussions and reflections, the identities of other students and staff should remain anonymous. The research adhered to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines for educational research (BERA 2011) and gained ethical approval through the ethics committee at the university where the research team was based.

Adult nursing

The BSc (Hons) Adult Nursing course is a three-year programme accredited by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). The two observation cycles took place during the second year of the programme. At this point, students have had opportunities to work alongside patients during clinical practice in either primary or secondary care settings to enhance their subject knowledge and understanding and build upon these experiences.

The Adult Nursing case study team included lecturers Lee and Stephanie and students Oliver and Jay. Lee was keen to participate in the project as he wanted to use the opportunity to work on large cohort

teaching, as he was new to teaching in higher education. Lee's first observation in Cycle 1 took place with a module that aimed to support student nurses in building upon previously taught theory and practice, encouraging an exploration of more complex nursing care for people living with acute and long term conditions. Each lecture was held in a large lecture theatre with approximately 100 students. Stephanie's Cycle 2 observation focused on staff peer coaching and giving peer feedback on teaching while students focused on their learning during the observation session.

Child nursing

The BSc (Hons) Child Nursing course shares similarities with the Adult Nursing course in that it prepares students for professional registration with the NMC as a children's nurse. Students are recruited from a variety of educational, social and cultural backgrounds, with many considered 'non-traditional' higher education students i.e. they don't tend to follow the conventional academic route of undergraduate students who progress from A Levels at high school to their first degree.

The members of the team included two lecturers, Nathalie and Ilana, and three students, Stacey (for both cycles), Aneesa (for Cycle 2) and another student (for Cycle 1) who did not carry on with the cohort after the first year.

Cycle 1 took place during the first module, focusing on children's nursing and was delivered after students had completed their first clinical placement, meaning they were able to reflect on their clinical experiences and explore their learning needs further through the module. Similar to Adult Nursing's first year programme, the taught sessions were with large cohorts in tiered lecture theatres or large classrooms. The lecturers were concerned about student engagement with complex ideas. They therefore decided to explore two differing approaches in such large classroom/lecture theatre settings: using gamification to introduce the students to early-childhood brain development; and using a flipped-classroom approach with group-work over two case studies. While the approaches differed, both Nathalie and Ilana wanted to explore with students how a lecturer's approach to introducing activities can impact on students' engagement with learning and similarly how feedback is managed can impact on students' propensity to reflect on their learning and continue it beyond the classroom.

Cycle 2 took place during Year 2 of the programme. Two contrasting sessions were observed. During Nathalie's session with sixty-four students on 'assisted reproductive techniques and parenting' she used

personal and professional anecdotes and videos to share different case studies and treatments. In a smaller workshop, Ilana used a range of interactive approaches (e.g. board game). Gamification was chosen as a teaching strategy as it was used in Cycle 1 because of its effectiveness. With the knowledge gained from Cycle 1, greater emphasis was placed on extracting the learning from the experience of the game.

Radiotherapy

The BSc (Hons) Radiotherapy is a well-established course running for over 20 years at the university. In contrast to the nursing courses, Radiotherapy has much smaller cohorts. The course is divided equally into university-based teaching and clinical placements. Students are recruited from a variety of educational backgrounds. Typically about one third of the intake are school leavers, with the rest made up of mature students from varied educational backgrounds.

Participants included two lecturers Nick and Mark and three students, Katie (for both cycles), Shaun (for Cycle 2) and another student (for Cycle 1) who did not carry on with the cohort after the first year. Mark and Nick were experienced lecturers who had worked as a team for over a decade. They had a history of higher education learning and teaching scholarly activities. For example, Nick is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, an award he received in recognition of his innovative approach to healthcare education. Cycle 1 focused on students' perspectives of whether the taught sessions brought the reality of training for hospital practices to life. Mark and Nick were keen to evaluate the active learning approaches they used. Both observed sessions were classroom-based workshops on human anatomy and physiology, with approximately thirty students working in groups and a practical session using the Virtual Environment for Radiotherapy (VERT) with small groups.

Students took the lead in deciding the focus of Cycle 2 and a collective agreement was reached to look at the impact of group dynamics and the social interactions among members of their peer group. The rationale for this choice of focus emerged from challenges they had previously experienced in working effectively with some of their peers in sessions that had been based on collaborative group work. They were interested in examining how students interacted with tutors and the effect these relationships had on their own learning. The observed sessions took place in a tiered lecture theatre with a group of twenty students, both following a small workshop-style format with tutor-led discussion.

Developing classroom consciousness between students and staff

In Cycle 1, each case study focused on understanding the impact of teaching on student learning, exploring key aspects of teaching such as pedagogical approaches, the classroom environment, resources etc. The lecturers decided the focus of the observations and led the discussions during the pre- and post- observation meetings. One of the outcomes to emerge from Cycle 1 across each case study was the development of students' understanding of the relationship between learning and teaching. While Cycle 1 observations focused largely on teaching, the experience of collectively observing, discussing and reflecting on learning and teaching on their respective courses resulted in the unearthing of their classroom consciousness, as the following extract from Katie's (Radiotherapy student) end of cycle reflection illuminates:

> The student observer process so far has been extremely insightful and made me think in more depth why lecturers do things in the techniques they do. It has made me understand that one technique is not suitable for all aspects of my course; for example being taught anatomy purely through PowerPoints and books would be extremely difficult to absorb and would not put the knowledge in to context however the human models and practical tasks gave a more natural way of learning.

One of the significant developments to occur across all case studies moving from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2 was the collective decision to shift the observation focus from *teaching* to *learning*. This shift in focus emerged as a suggestion during a project review day involving staff participants at the end of Cycle 1. After reading and discussing reflections by students, staff were keen to empower their students to take more responsibility for deciding the foci of Cycle 2 observations. This was then later agreed between staff and students in their respective case study meetings before starting Cycle 2.

Compared to Cycle 1, this shift in focus marked a key milestone in the project, leading to a greater depth of reciprocal awareness and understanding of classroom learning and teaching among students and staff. Across the case studies, it gave rise to a more even balance in the discursive interaction between participants. This was not only reflected in an increase in student talking time in Cycle 2 meetings compared to Cycle 1, but also in the depth of their critical thinking and reflections on learning and teaching.

In her work on the scholarship of teaching and teaching excellence, Kreber (2002) refers to a conception of teaching that is 'learning oriented'. We found this a helpful term and concept to explore the significance of this shift in focus from Cycle 1 to Cycle 2. Learning was placed at the forefront of all discussions in Cycle 2 with students encouraged to reflect on their experiences, views and feelings. As Jay (Adult Nursing student) commented, 'this cycle is a lot better, because it's just us, isn't it? So, we can just focus on us, our learning and if everybody individually focuses on themselves, we've got something to put together and collaborate on.' Both Jay and his peer Oliver agreed that focusing on their own learning in Cycle 2 'felt more natural' compared to having to discuss and evaluate their lecturers' teaching (as they did in Cycle 1 observation), which Jay maintained they were 'not qualified to judge'. Jay and Oliver's perceptions were representative of their peers in the other case studies insomuch as the shift to a learning-oriented focus also helped to remove some of the apprehension they felt in their roles as observers of their lecturers' teaching. For the lecturers, because the focus was driven by students in Cycle 2, this provided them with rich and timely insights into their students' learning. For example, in Radiotherapy where the Cycle 2 focus was on classroom dynamics, Nick (lecturer) highlighted how his participation in CoCO had made him reflect on the 'social aspect of the classroom', triggering novel perspectives on his students' learning:

> The most useful thing about this observation project to me is just working out the social aspect of the classroom. I've never had time to stop and think about it before … I don't remember having conversations about it when I was taught how to teach.

While the observation training for both students and staff emphasised how the observer's role was not to evaluate the teaching but to use observation as a tool of collaborative inquiry through which to explore teaching and learning, the focus on teaching in Cycle 1 meant that discussions often gravitated towards assessing the effectiveness of teaching. With the focus on learning, both parties were able to derive value that fed into their wider classroom consciousness of their learning/teaching and the relationship between the two. Stacey (Child Nursing student) remarked: 'I think that was a good thing because it's made me reflect more on myself and where I'm learning and what my learning is and am I learning?' Nick (Radiotherapy lecturer) commented: 'The feedback I want is "does this make your practice more relevant?" It's

not the process of being observed, it's the whole context of being observed.'

Analysis of the transcripts from the meetings across both cycles revealed a development of confidence and fluency among the student participants in their discursive exchanges and the manner in which they were able to articulate their thoughts. However, it is important to acknowledge that this may also have been partly due to the development of the student-teacher relationship as each group got to know each other better over the duration of the project, an aspect discussed further below.

The role of noticing in developing learning and classroom consciousness

Mason (2002, 33) defines noticing as to 'make a distinction, to create foreground and background, to distinguish a "thing" from its surroundings'. As a concept, noticing has been the subject of a wealth of academic research relating to learning and teaching since the 1980s, particularly in the fields of cognitive psychology and second language learning. In relation to the latter, Schmidt (1990, 1993) developed a 'Noticing Hypothesis', of which there was a 'stronger' and a 'weaker' version. The 'stronger' version of the hypothesis posited that noticing was a necessary condition for learning, whereas the 'weaker' version claimed that noticing was helpful but not a necessity for learning to occur. While the stronger version has been called into question by many researchers (e.g. Truscott 1998), the weaker version still has currency. It offers an interesting lens through which to view and make sense of one of the themes to emerge from the project data. In particular, in relation to the way in which engaging with CoCO impacted on participants' understanding of their respective subjects and the processes of learning and teaching.

The extract below is taken from the Child Nursing end of Cycle 2 evaluation meeting. Here Nathalie (lecturer) and Stacey (student) discuss the notion of building on and moving existing understanding forward. From a teaching perspective, Nathalie draws attention to the importance of presenting students with '*something unknown … something exceptional*' to challenge their existing assumptions but also as a deliberate technique to ensure that the '*new*' information stands out enough for them to notice what is different:

> Nathalie – There always needs to be something that gives a bit of a jolt, a bit of surprise, something unknown. Something that challenges something you've taken for granted. It might be

> something exceptional. So in this session, it was that there was this shocking statistic that really brought things out that was quite unexpected. So it took something that basically challenged an assumption that people had and then turned it on its head. So that very much made a difference as well … and the understanding and putting something into context as well.
>
> Researcher – So, do you think that noticing something memorable or different is an important part for you in terms of moving your understanding forward?
>
> Stacey – Yes, for me, for my learning, you think you've got an idea, and then this challenges it, so it sticks with me more because it was different to what I originally assumed because I've stood up and took notice of that fact, it kind of stays in my mind a little bit longer than 'this is this, this is that' where I might get distracted. But I go, 'What?' and it makes me stop and think, for my learning it will stay there a lot longer.

Nathalie's '*shocking statistic*' that challenged Stacey's knowledge base during the taught session by Ilana concerned the prevalence of the life-threatening condition sepsis and how it was responsible for more deaths in the UK each year than some of the most common forms of cancer. Stacey recognised that the prominent media presence of certain types of cancer was largely why she and her peers had assumed that they must be the leading cause of death. However, her realisation that sepsis was the cause of more deaths than specific types of cancer and that she knew very little about it caused her to reflect on how this had exposed a gap in her knowledge as a student nurse that she needed to fill. When reflecting further on this particular teaching/learning incident, Stacey acknowledged that it was only as a result of being presented with something that had challenged her knowledge base that she was more likely to notice it, which in turn caused her to reflect more deeply on its significance and how this needed to be mapped against her understanding of the subject area as a whole. In noticing and reflecting on the presentation of 'something unknown … something exceptional', Stacey embarked on a process of reflexivity which involved her questioning her existing knowledge and understanding of the topic while simultaneously assimilating the new information presented to her by her lecturers and discussed with her peers.

Viewed through a 'teaching lens', the above exchange provides an important insight into the teacher's 'pedagogical reasoning' (Shulman

1987). As Loughran (2019, 523) argues, it is by examining more closely teachers' pedagogical reasoning that we are able to gain an understanding of 'the complex and sophisticated knowledge of practice that influences what they do, how and why'. In discussions with their students and colleagues, lecturers also reveal their extensive bank of professional knowledge and experience on which they draw when making decisions in the planning and delivery of their teaching. Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) refer to this as 'professional capital'. The richness and complexity of the professional capital of the teachers involved in the project repeatedly emerged in the group discussions of the pre- and post-observation meetings along with the end of cycle evaluations. As remarked by some of the student participants in both the previous and following section, participating in CoCO gave them with an insight into their lecturers' pedagogical reasoning, which in turn provided them with an opportunity to reflect collaboratively on how this impacted on their learning. Thus CoCO created the conditions for the iterative development of classroom consciousness to occur between the two parties.

Viewed through a 'learning lens', another aspect of noticing to emerge from the student participants was how focusing on their learning and that of their peers provided them with a space in which to consider their learning behaviours and how these might impact on the effectiveness of their learning. In this next extract, Aneesa talks about taking '*ownership*' of her own learning, recognising particular learning habits and behaviours that she believes play an important part in shaping her learning experience:

> Nathalie – That ownership thing, what does that actually mean about taking more ownership?
> Aneesa – So, I think for me, I'm in control of how I learn. The ownership bit comes with, 'I'm here to learn' and every session is important so I have to kind of tell myself, 'No, you are going to sit at the front and you are going to try and take something away from this.' So, for me that's what ownership of my own learning is going to be … There was a session where I knew that this is something I'm going to base my assignments on. But I know it was a session I struggled with, so I thought, 'I'm not going to sit at the back because if I miss say even one point, I'm gone for the whole session.' … So that session made me sit at the front and I noticed that I actually did stay committed to the session throughout the whole thing.

Building collaborative relationships between students and staff

The relationships between the participants in each case study were critical to their collaborative learning. What brought the participants together were their interests in learning and teaching and a desire to work together to develop individual and collective understandings of learning and teaching on their respective courses. In relationships, the links that bind people together define the sort of connection they have (Duck, 1999). In this project, the mutual interests in pedagogy and learning in each case study team were what formed this meaningful bond. This is in contrast to the 'link' in the neo-liberal, commodified teaching and learning relationship which we critiqued in our previous publication (O'Leary and Cui 2020), where the teacher is the 'supplier' and the student the 'consumer'. Oliver (Adult Nursing Student) in his end of Cycle 2 reflection commented on what this pedagogical connection with his lecturers and his peers meant to him:

> The major benefit I've taken away is the chance to have an informal meeting with the people providing my education and an entire hour set aside to talk about my experience. I was both contributing to and benefiting from the best part of a new model of student-teacher collaboration. It felt like a team-based approach, and I had Jay as my constant peer and colleague to give me a chance to listen to the way other students experience, perceive and evaluate the same things I have.

The social relationships across case studies included the formal roles and commitments participants had as students and lecturers in their respective programmes, as well as their personal commitments to their collaborative partnership. Each participant took their formal role and commitment seriously in observing, questioning, critiquing and developing situated pedagogical practices in their classrooms. Besides, the nature of the collaborative partnerships seemed to yield more substantive personal connections between them. For the students, this was a new and different kind of relationship with their teachers, as Oliver explains during the pre-observation meeting with his lecturers and fellow student:

> I know that you are obviously human, but when you're a student and you're sitting in front of a lecturer, sometimes it's that barrier of 'I'm a student they're a lecturer' whereas all of a sudden when

> there's personal stories that come into it and their own little phrases and the way that they explain things, that adds to the idea that this is more of a peer relationship. We get more from that relationship than you would from just lecturer and students.

Students and staff clearly valued this personal connection with each other. Following on from the learning orientated lens (Kreber 2002) discussed in the previous section, we draw on Carl Rogers' work (2002) on interpersonal relationships in education to delve deeper into the nature of such personal connections. Rogers's conceptualisation of learner-centred education provides a useful frame of reference for situating our discussion about the relationship and orientation between learning and teaching.

From the beginning of CoCO, a gradual process of familiarisation unfolded between the participants. Cycle 1 interactions between staff and students started by focusing largely on procedural and technical aspects of observation. As the relationships developed, staff participants in each case study began more openly to share their insights on teaching (e.g. their pedagogical reasoning) and their assumptions of learning. This openness enabled the establishment of authenticity in the pedagogical relationships between participants. As Rogers (2002) observed, this means that teacher and learner are able to enter interactions being themselves, with a heightened awareness of their feelings and views. This is clearly reflected in Oliver's comment above and similar remarks from other students. In particular, this meant students were able to see teaching not just as a job their lecturers do as a 'curriculum instructor' (Rogers 2002) but as decisions and actions carried out consciously and deliberately by a person who has shared educational interests with them. As the lecturers became more open about their practices and views, this was reciprocated by the students who were candid in sharing their opinions and feelings. This authenticity provided a platform for students and staff to engage in an open inquiry of learning and teaching. As discussed above, one of the principles of CoCO is that participants exchange their views and listen to others without judgement. Building and maintaining the realness of the pedagogical relationship between students and lecturers meant both parties were disposed to exchanging personal feelings and views, acknowledging the different perspectives of others and learning from each other, leading to a collective enhancement of classroom consciousness.

Rogers (2002) highlighted how this kind of understanding and acceptance differs markedly from evaluative approaches that focus on a

'what works' methodology (Biesta 2007) in teaching and learning. For Rogers (2002, 30), a sensitive empathy develops in pedagogical relationships that are built on realness and acceptance, which then enable students to feel 'at last someone understands how it feels and seems to be me without wanting to analyse me or judge me. Now I can blossom and grow and learn.' Rogers' work focused on the impact teaching had on learning and he saw the nurturing of such relationships as the responsibility of the teacher. In our project, both students and lecturers embraced this responsibility. As a result, a shared empathy emerged where students and lecturers developed a reciprocal awareness and understanding of the processes of learning and teaching in their classroom and how these are experienced from each other's perspectives. Reflections by Aneesa (student) and Ilana (lecturer) from Child Nursing illustrate the power of such shared understanding in developing their classroom consciousness and pedagogical practices:

> This reflective cycle has enabled me as a student to work in collaboration with Ilana and Nathalie whereby we were all equal participants in research. This relationship has given me an incomparable insight into how much preparation and time goes into teaching and has encouraged me to make the most out of the lectures. I now have a better understanding of how I can benefit from different methods of teaching. (Aneesa)

> Participating in the process has impacted my teaching on a practical level. More importantly I've gained a deeper, shared understanding about learning and teaching as a result of the collaborative meetings with the students. This observation unlocked the potential for us to understand our students and thereby allowing us to meet their learning needs on a deeper level. However, learning still does depend on the students' willingness to participate in the process. By allowing students to become more aware of their own learning as a result of their participation in observation, consequently led to them being empowered to overcome self-identified barriers and leading to a better and more satisfactory teaching and learning experience for all. By enabling students to participate in the collaborative observation cycle, change does not only happen on one-dimensional level 'teacher growth', but becomes a multi-dimensional change by enabling 'student growth' and 'teacher-student growth'. (Ilana)

CoCO played a critical role in facilitating this dialectic relationship development. For each participant, the individual reflections at the beginning and end of the cycle gave them the space to develop their autonomous voices. In their reflections, each participant openly talked about their experiences and reflected on their feelings and views which then led to their questions on learning and teaching. When the participants came together at the pre- and post-observation meetings, they used their voices to negotiate and build the interconnecting part of their collaborative inquiry. In our project, as a shared point of reference, CoCO created the conditions for this dialectic relationship to flourish.

Challenges and constraints

It is important to acknowledge that while the collaborative partnerships between students and staff had a tangible impact on enhancing their reciprocal learning about learning and teaching, the project was not without its challenges and constraints. The first and arguably the most significant challenge was that of time and timetabling. Coordinating the scheduling of meetings and observations for each quartet over the two cycles of CoCO proved an ongoing challenge. The complex timetables and heavy teaching loads of participating staff across modules and year groups meant that the opportunities for each quartet to come together were limited. This was exacerbated by the fact that the case studies all involved practice-based courses where students spent a lot of their time outside of the university on placement, thus the window for observing taught sessions and meeting before and after the observation was heavily constrained.

Preparing students for the act of observing and making clear the remit of their roles was an initial challenge for many of the participants. Both students and staff undertook observation training which emphasised the non-judgmental aspect of their roles as observers and how the purpose of the observations was not to evaluate the teaching but to compile a descriptive log which would act as a stimulus for collective reflection and discussion. The student participants found it difficult at times knowing what to observe, what and how to record what they observed, along with articulating their reflections and experiences in the appropriate discourse. This highlighted how the act of observing and noticing requires the ability to recognise and identify significant incidents in the classroom and to

home in on such incidents. However, this challenge was noticeably lessened with the switch in focus from teaching to learning in Cycle 2. Reconfiguring the focus for students to reflect on and discuss with others (i.e. their peers, tutors and researchers) their learning provided an important platform from which to interrogate and unearth tacit practices and processes.

Engaging in critical reflection initially proved a challenge to some of the student participants, particularly during Cycle 1. With hindsight, this was something that as researchers we failed to anticipate. We had assumed that given reflection was something students on these practice-based courses would be expected to undertake as part of their placement experiences that they would be familiar with the process of reflective writing. However, it was clear that we had underestimated the complexity of the task and how challenging this would prove to be for many of the student participants during Cycle 1 where the focus was on them observing their lecturers' teaching. The switch in focus from observing teaching to their own learning in Cycle 2 seemed to make it easier for the students to engage in reflection. Added to this, as students engaged more with pedagogical discussions with their peers and lecturers, their classroom consciousness developed, which enhanced their understanding of and familiarity with pedagogical concepts and discourse and, in turn, led to a growth in their confidence in discussing and reflecting on learning and teaching.

Conclusion

An important finding to emerge from our research is that students and teachers learn about learning and teaching by interacting with their peers and with each other, by sharing their insights and experiences in collaborative and cooperative forums. As we argued in our previous publication (O'Leary and Cui 2020), teaching and learning at programme level are inherently socially situated practices. It therefore makes sense that any attempt to enhance understanding of and improve these practices is best served by allowing its key participants to be part of a collective community in which they are encouraged to engage in a process of dialectic pedagogical knowledge and relationship development. Affording students and teachers the opportunity to examine their understanding and experiences of teaching and learning and opening them up to dialogic exchange enables them to become aware of the strengths and areas for development in their practices. In the context of

teaching and learning, approaches like CoCO can help to create shared spaces in which students and lecturers can engage in reflexive pedagogical dialogue on their classroom learning and teaching. This leads to collective sense making which has meaning to both students and lecturers in understanding and developing their practices.

We began this project with a reconceptualisation of improving teaching and learning through a sustainable approach at course level involving the active participation of lecturers and students (O'Leary and Cui 2020). Throughout this project, we have seen how meaningful, authentic collaborations between lecturers and students can lead to the creation of new knowledge about learning and teaching that can be used to enhance their future learning and practices. Towards the end of the project, Ilana (Child Nursing lecturer) raised an important question: 'If collaborative partnerships between staff and students are fundamental to understanding learning then why are we not involving students more?' Ilana's question hits at the very heart of the reconceptualisation of student identity, responsibility and involvement in higher education teaching and learning that needs to occur if we are to further our understanding of the complex relationships and interactions between the two. The interpersonal relationships fostered during this project occurred over time in small groups of students and lecturers, both of whom were interested in learning and teaching. The mass participation in higher education presents a challenge for educators and students to find and sustain space and time for such meaningful collaborative engagement to occur at scale. But the benefits of such collaborative partnerships mean that it is a challenge worth undertaking.

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