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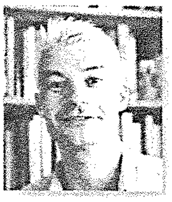
How I joined the Triads: the launch of a peer observation and review scheme at Oxford Brookes University Library



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January 2004 saw Oxford Brookes University Library launch a new scheme of peer observation and review to help subject staff –at all levels and on all sites– to develop their teaching abilities and assist them in the delivery of information skills programmes. Following training from the university's staff development unit, the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD), a proposed model (based very much on the tried and tested schemes listed at the end of this article) was discussed at a subject librarians/assistant subject librarians' meeting in March 2003. After some fine-tuning, a programme was agreed upon in October 2003, to run for one (calendar) year in the first instance, with a review at the end of 2004.

What follows is an overview of the adopted scheme. Although it is intended to be a flexible model and not over-prescriptive, it was felt that –if the programme is to be successful– as much guidance as possible should be made available from the outset. Hence, although philosophy and guiding principles are touched upon, most of what follows is essentially practical.

Why peer observation and review?

As with any new initiative, we felt it important to clarify the reasons for taking this approach, which would undeniably involve more work for already very busy subject staff and take them into new –and potentially scary– territory. Hence we started by asking the big question: why? Or, more to the point, two big questions: why evaluation and why peer observation and review?

Peer observation and review: evaluating information skills teaching

Why evaluate our information skills sessions? Put simply, if we do not evaluate how else are we to ensure that our planning and preparation has been correct, and the delivery and approach is appropriate? How else are we to ensure that we are using our valuable time wisely? Evaluation enables us to review, revise and develop a quality service.

A host of tools are available to help us evaluate our teaching sessions, including:

- informal chats/formal discussions with students
- on-going questioning
- pre- and post-testing
- end-of-presentation questionnaires
- personal reflection.

Observation by colleagues is just another way of evaluating our practices and subsequently informing the development of our teaching skills.

Peer observation and review: in context

So why adopt the peer observation and review process, given that we are already quite adept at using the other techniques listed above? Peer observation is very much part of the wider teaching culture and has become especially popular at Brookes in recent years. 1997's Dearing Report and (subsequently) the Quality Assurance Agency raised the need for peer review in teaching. Brookes responded with its Teaching and Learning Strategy (submitted to HEFCE in May 2000) which outlined plans to launch a university-wide Peer Observation of Teaching and Learning Scheme, to be implemented in July 2001. Today, peer review is a standing item for most subject field meetings. By adopting this approach, the library would be acting in tune with the wider University.

It was also envisaged that a peer observation and review programme would encourage the sharing of good practice. This is something already promoted by the library's information skills functional group but the sheer practicalities of doing this across three main sites (at Headington, Wheatley and Harcourt Hill) and four main subject groupings (business and computing is served at Wheatley; education, theology and performing arts courses are taught at Harcourt Hill; Headington is covered by two large subject teams -arts, social sciences and health care on one hand and science, technology and built environment on the other) means any technique that might assist in this would be most welcome. The one-to-one support of such a scheme is also in keeping with the mentor culture that the university is developing (see http://www.brookes.ac.uk/news/2003/october/nr_110_03/initial) and, on top of all this, it was felt that peer observation and review could offer a new and fun approach to learning.

Aims and objectives of the scheme

So what are we hoping to achieve with our scheme? Different peer observation and review programmes have different aims and objectives, though key themes seem common to most. The following are the agreed aims and objectives of the Brookes Library scheme:

Aim

- to stimulate improvements in teaching and learning for all staff and students involved.

Objectives

- to enhance the importance attached to the quality of teaching
- to increase staff awareness of the whole student experience
- to encourage all Subject Librarians/Assistant Subject Librarians to reflect on the effectiveness of their own teaching sessions and identify their developmental needs
- to foster discussion and sharing of best practice
- to identify strengths and build upon them
- to identify any weaknesses and put in place personal action plans to remedy them.

Guiding principles of the scheme

There is a danger/fear that peer observation and review can easily turn into a negative tool: a way of highlighting our shortcomings. To ensure the scheme provides a positive experience for all, the following guiding principles were agreed from the outset:

- all subject librarians/assistant subject librarians should be involved, irrespective of grade or experience
- the emphasis is on development rather than judgement
- the process is not connected to the Learning Resources or University personal development review or other formal appraisal schemes
- the process should enable us to try out new ideas and get feedback from colleagues
- we should look to get good ideas from colleagues (as both observed and observers) that should help us to develop personally
- the outcomes of teaching observation are confidential to the observed and the observer and any written records are the property of the person observed
- the Library has a system for recording that the observations have taken place
- the scheme will be reviewed on an annual basis by all those involved.

Groupings

A variety of different groupings are available for peer observation and review. Some of the most commonplace are:

- peer triads –staff are divided into groups of threes, each member of the group observes the other two teaching and provides individual feedback but the three can meet as a group to identify common issues/concerns if desired
- subject pairings with external sampling –review is carried out on a one-to-one basis, with a coordinator observing how sample groups are working
- internal panel –a member of a coordinating group observes a selection of staff and is observed him/herself
- mix of internal and external panel –as above but with additional observation from outside the department.

From our review of other schemes, it was decided that we opt for the triad approach, bringing together groups of mixed experience from different teams to offer the widest possible platform for development. It is hoped that this should provide the greatest long-term support and spread additional duties evenly.

Planning the programme

Before embarking on such a scheme, it is always preferable that those involved should take part in training to increase understanding of what peer observation and review entails, address concerns, and consider the processes involved. These topics were covered in OCSLD training sessions (held before the scheme was formulated) on 7 January and 12 March 2003. For new staff (joining post-launch) it was agreed that such training should be covered as part of the induction process, to be overseen by line managers.

Following on from this training, the programme was agreed and triad groupings allocated (with special consideration to mixing staff by subject team, site and level of experience). Full documentation outlining how the programme should work was issued to all members of the scheme at this point. It was recommended that the triad groups should meet in advance of the peer observation and review year (January – December 2004 in the first instance) to discuss the programme and -as early as possible- book meetings.

For every session observed and reviewed there should be three meetings:

- pre-observation meeting
- observation of teaching
- feedback session.

The groups of three (comprising staff members A, B and C) should work thus:

		Reviewer		
		A	B	C
Reviewed	A		A + B A + B A + B	A + C A + C A + C
	B	B + A B + A B + A		B + C B + C B + C
	C	C + A C + A C + A	C + B C + B C + B	

[Each cell represents the meetings involved in the process between the REVIEWED + REVIEWER.]

A triad approach was favoured partly because it would provide the opportunity for staff to observe (and be observed) by more than one person, thus hopefully enriching the process by allowing different viewpoints to be shared. It should be noted that (from experience) the key beneficiaries are often the observers who pick up tips from the observed as well as develop themselves in the 'mentor' role.

The triad groups are expected to plan and review their own programmes. It is also hoped that the groups might provide yet another support mechanism for staff, offering a platform for more informal help and assistance outside the structured meetings (perhaps even for topics outside the world of information skills teaching).

Workloads came up as a big concern during the planning process and it was recognised that the scheme must not become just another huge burden eating into the subject staff's already busy schedules. Thought would need to be given to just what should be observed: not every type or level of session could be accommodated. Staff were alerted to consider:

- sampling –not all teaching sessions can be covered so staff were urged to consider what sample and range they wanted to focus on
- length of sessions –if the teaching session is lengthy, staff should discuss how much and which elements would be observed.

As a rule of thumb, it was recommended a maximum of three hours should be allowed for the above process (up to one hour for each element: pre-meeting; observation; feedback session). Each individual will go through this twice as a reviewer and twice as the person reviewed. A maximum of twelve hours for the formal part of the scheme (plus any informal planning/review) is hence envisaged as the overall time commitment per person over the year. Planning ahead as much as possible will obviously make it easier to protect time for this. If problems arise, staff were asked to alert their line manager.

Pre-observation sessions

To get the most out of the programme, it is essential that there is a meeting between the observer and the observed (ideally face-to-face or by telephone if necessary) before the teaching session to establish how the session should be carried out and what the outcomes should be. It is intended that this will allow practical considerations to be addressed and generally make the experience more supportive.

Typically, the following should be considered at these meetings:

- the specific learning objectives for the session

- what types of teaching and learning activity would be taking place
- the size and nature of group and their academic level
- relationship of this session to the module/ programme of study and how the session relates to other information skills sessions the students may have received
- what specific aspect(s) of the teaching activity the observed wants the observer to concentrate on (e.g. something innovative or problematic in the past)
- where the observer should sit
- how the observer should be introduced/ explained to the students and level of permitted interaction with the students (especially important if a hands-on activity element is to be included)
- what form of record the observer should take (see below)
- where and when the feedback session will occur.

Observation checklist

Although the observer and the observed need to establish areas of focus in the pre-observation meeting, observation will typically cover:

- context relationship to the rest of the module/programme
- content and level
- structure of session opening, aims and objectives, sign-posting, closing
- learning resources suitability of venue, handouts and other materials, use of AV/IT
- teaching style audibility, enthusiasm and interest, clarity, pace and timing
- student participation, interaction and feedback.

To assist with this a sample check sheet has been issued to all staff participating in the scheme (Appendix 1).

Feedback session

As soon as possible following the observation –and definitely within a week– there should be a feedback meeting (between the observer and the observed) where the session is reflected upon and action plans drawn up if necessary. To make sure the process remains positive, consideration needs to be given to how feedback is provided, how reflection is encouraged, and how the session can generally be made supportive and developmental. To this end, the observers have undergone training and are reminded to be aware of tone of voice, language and body language to ensure the feedback is not perceived as confrontational or judgmental. Having said this, if the programme is to really aid development, concerns do need to be raised and not merely glossed over for the sake of nicety.

The right environment/structure should:

- firstly allow the person leading the session to describe the class and say how they felt the lesson went –including whether the observation process affected the session or not– before comment from the observer
- then allow the observer to begin by saying what went well, with relevant examples
- enable the observer to then move on to what was less successful –again with detailed examples– to open up discussion as to how improvements could be made
- focus on issues rather than personalities, finding developmental solutions rather than dwelling on problems.

Where developmental work is required, the observer and observed may wish to construct an action plan. This should remain confidential but the member of staff being reviewed may wish to raise some issues with their line manager if they feel they could benefit from time/additional resources to help them develop.

Again, a sample action plan has been provided (Appendix 2).

Reviewing the programme

To detail what has been achieved and review the effectiveness of the scheme, it is important that we record what has been undertaken. Each peer review group will be expected to submit a brief annual report detailing the observations (number and level, but not (confidential) observational comments) and listing agreed elements of good practice.

The sample log form is included as Appendix 3.

The outcomes of the scheme, suggestions for developments (including library-wide training opportunities) and the examples of good practice will be shared and considered at the appropriate subject librarians'/assistant subject librarians' meeting. In the first instance this will be at the beginning of 2005, with (if adopted) an annual planning cycle adopted from thereon.

Expect to hear more about Triad activities then!

PEER OBSERVATION AND REVIEW MODELS

The above is based largely on the following:

D. Gosling, *Guidelines for peer observation of learning and teaching*, London: University of East London, 2000

- possibly the 'Daddy' of schemes; available at www.escalate.ac.uk/exchange/PeerReview/download/gosling.pdf

In-house schemes from Oxford Brookes University's Schools of Architecture, Biological and Molecular Sciences, Computing and Mathematical Sciences, and Social Sciences and Law also proved useful, as did the University's Academic Policy and Quality Unit report *Peer teaching observation schemes.*

Other sources of help include:

University of Minnesota, Office of Human Resources: Center for Teaching and Learning Services, *Peer observation guidelines and recommendations (based on Peter Seldin's Changing practices in evaluating teaching and Ohio State University Handbook for Instructors)*

- reviews the strengths and weaknesses of peer observation and offers practical tips on running a peer observation and review scheme; available at http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teach/learn/peer_review/guidelines.html

Escalate, *Peer review*

- another comprehensive overview; available at http://www.escalate.ac.uk/exchange/PeerReview

Both these sites contain links to a whole host of useful documents from UK and US academic institutions and are well worth investigating.

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Appendix 1

Peer observation and review:
Observation notes

> IMPORTANT: These notes are confidential and the property of the observed, to whom they should be given at the end of the feedback session.

Pre-observation meeting:

Note here points raised in the pre-observation meeting, include areas to focus on in observation:

The session being observed:

Observer:	Member of staff:	Subject area:
Course:	Length of session:	Observational time:
Level / Year:	Number of students:	Type of session (talk, workshop, etc):

Elements to be observed

NOTE: Not all of these will be relevant; consider what was raised in the pre-observation meeting.

1. **Introduction:**

Were the objectives of the session made clear?
Were anticipated learning outcomes identified?
Did the session begin on time?
Was the structure of the session clear?

Comments:

2. **Planning and organisation:**

Was the session related to previous sessions / related to the rest of the course?
Was the structure set out at the start?
Did the session appear to be well-planned and organised?

Comments:

3. **Methods/approach:**

Were the methods / approach taken suitable to achieve the learning objectives?
What alternative approaches could have been taken?

Comments:

4. **Delivery and pace:**

Did the pace and delivery seem appropriate for the students present?
Were any aspects, in your opinion, dealt with too briefly / dealt with in too much detail?
Did the session feel rushed / drawn out?

Comments:

5. **Content:**

Where you feel qualified to comment, did the content seem accurate and up-to-date?
Were appropriate examples given?
Was the session pitched at the appropriate level for those students present?
Did the content match the students' needs?

Comments:

6. **Student participation:**

Were students invited to participate?
How was this managed?
Did it seem planned?
Did participation enable the teacher to check the students' understanding?

Comments:

7. **Learning resources:**

Were OHTs used?
Were they professionally produced?
Were they clear?
Were other resources used?
Did the students get handouts?
Were they well produced?
Was the relevance of handouts explained?
Did the resources contribute to –or detract from- the session?

Comments:

8. **Accommodation:**

Was the accommodation suitable for the session?
Were seating arrangements appropriate?

Comments:

9. **Overall style and ambience:**

Did the teacher appear confident in delivery?
Did s/he convey enthusiasm?
Was s/he clear and audible?
Did the session 'go well'?
Was there a good rapport with the students?
Did the tutor have good presentation skills?
Was the tutor in tune with the students?

Comments:

10. **Feedback:**

What student feedback was solicited?
How does feedback relate to the comments above?

Comments:

11. **Summary:**

Summarise the main points you wish to feedback to your colleague. Identify key strengths and areas that need further attention:

APPENDIX 2

Peer observation and review:
Action plan

IMPORTANT: These notes are confidential and the property of the observed.

Name:..

Observer: ....

Date:...

Strengths to build upon:

Agreed areas for further development:

Actions or training that would be helpful:
You may wish to discuss these with your line manager

Appendix 3

Peer observation and review scheme:
Annual report

Period covered:

Peer review group membership:

Observations undertaken:

Date	Time	Observer	Observed	Type of session

Good practice identified:

Comments about the scheme:

What has worked well? Comments:

What could be improved? Comments: