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Are Graded Lesson Observations the “Elephant” in Our Classrooms? An Exploration into the Views of In-Service Teacher Trainees on Lesson Observations

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Abstract

The title of this article is inspired by a teacher trainee who used this expression to refer to teaching observations undertaken by Teacher Educators on teacher training courses. The expression is suggestive of a problematic view of lesson observations. This article seeks to examine the perspectives of in-service teacher trainees on this issue.

Mixed research methods were used, focusing on real-life contexts and perspectives. The first research method involved a survey that aimed to determine trainees' perspectives and identify a sample of their views. A key feature of this survey was that it required that trainees provide a commentary in which they were asked to provide a rationale for their answers.

Some of the survey questions could be interpreted as leading questions, but these same questions were then totally re-framed during the focus groups using language indicative of an antithetical viewpoint to those asked during the survey. It was hoped that this would encourage a more dialectical debate and search for new perspectives and interpretations of the data. This is also a technique cited by Moore (2000) with regard to dialectical research and analysis. The use of a range of data collection methods and reasonable sample size (32) also helps to support the validity of the overall data.

The rationale was to gain an insight into trainees' perspectives on lesson observations. To do this, a survey was conducted, which was then followed up with two focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to open up a more exploratory discussion where contrasting opinions were encouraged. This research concluded with two in-depth interviews with teacher trainees to discuss their specific perspectives.

The purpose of the interviews was to review a range of strategies, which might be used to help observers support staff and teacher trainees to create more effective teaching and learning observations. The findings from this research highlighted key issues with regard to graded teaching and learning observations. A range of recommendations is offered to help. Some changes to the approach of initial teaching providers are suggested, in addition to opening spaces for trainees and teacher trainers to explore these issues. The trainees surveyed welcomed these suggestions.

Key Words

Observations; Teaching and Learning Observations; Quality Assurance; Grading Lessons; Performance; Initial Teacher Education.

Introduction

The reason that teacher training providers grade teacher trainees is in order to demonstrate the progress of trainees. This is a key requirement identified within the Initial Teacher Education inspection handbook for use from April 2015: '*Inspectors must test the ITE partnership's response to individual needs by observing how well it helps all trainees to become good or better teachers*' (Ofsted, 2015: p. 30). Grading has often been associated with managerial, rather than developmental, lesson observations. Therefore, one of the research questions that emerged was 'how does grading impact on trainees' perspective of the developmental role of observations on their course?'

It would be useful at this point to further define the difference between these two types of observation. Observations undertaken to manage performance can be described as managerial. Observations where experts seek to improve the competence of staff can be described as developmental. Grading is a feature of this managerial style of observation (Coffield, 2012).

This paper will necessarily involve exploring problematic and complex issues relevant to the debate and consider how the views of trainees can be used to inform further practice and research on in-service teacher training lesson observations.

A Summary of Methodologies and Methods

Mixed research methods were used to focus on real-life contexts and different perspectives. A pluralistic approach was chosen to draw from the strengths, and minimise the weaknesses, of quantitative versus qualitative research (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). This methodological approach is also suitable to investigate a problematic area (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2009: p. 9). A non-probability sample survey was utilised to explore views and open discussion through two focus groups and then to undertake two in-depth interviews with two experienced in-service teacher trainees. The survey was also used initially as a quick and inexpensive way of finding out the views of teacher trainees.

Trainees were asked to provide a rationale explaining their answer to each survey question. This rationale was potentially more informative as it provided a means to consider how trainees respond to the cultural milieu surrounding lesson observation. Some of the survey questions asked could be interpreted as leading, but these same questions were then re-framed during the focus groups using language indicative of an antithetical viewpoint. It was hoped that this would encourage a more dialectical debate and search for new interpretations. This technique is cited as helpful to explore alternate perspectives (Moore, 2000).

Semi-structured questioning started off by asking each of the survey questions using different language to encourage alternate viewpoints and discussion. This was carried out with two focus groups to enhance the data available. The open-ended discussion also allowed for new ways of interpreting a topic. These 32 trainees were a convenience sample in that they were all attending courses in Teacher Education at the two Further Education colleges where the researcher worked. All the views were significant from the point of view of triangulation in that they all worked in different colleges and training organisations. There were 20 female and 12 male

respondents, and they came from different cultures across West Yorkshire. The sample was representative of the trainees from our in-service teacher training provision in that almost every teacher trainee participated.

I also considered whether the findings were generalisable or whether they would only have relevance to the place of work in the study.

Rationale

In 2007, *How The World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out On Top* was published. This report cites that '*...the main driver*' to improvements in quality is '*...the quality of the teachers*' (Barber and Mourshed, 2007: p. 3). Kyriakides and Creemers (2008) also examined the effects of teacher performance over a period of four consecutive years and suggested that teacher efficacy can explain up to 34% of the variance in grading student achievement. Despite this, dislike, and even fear, of observation has been well documented among teaching staff (Aubusson et al, 2007; Borich, 2008; Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999). The mere mention of classroom observations can '*...provoke uneasiness, nervousness and tension amongst both in-service and pre-service teachers, in the belief that their professional competence is going to be questioned*' (Lasagabaster and Sierra, 2011: p. 3). The first research question was designed to determine whether trainees also had these concerns in response to observations undertaken as part of their course. The survey question asked: 'Do you feel uneasy regarding lesson observation and do you feel that your professional competence is going to be questioned?' The first question asked during the focus group was 'Do you feel comforted to know your competence is affirmed through teaching observations?' This contrasting question takes a totally antithetical position to the survey question and this technique is cited by Moore (2000) as helpful to explore two alternate perspectives. Although it is acknowledged that the approach in the survey could be interpreted as a leading questioning technique, the direction of questioning was dialectical in the focus groups to encourage trainees to feel comfortable expressing different views.

Another area to be explored was with regard to classifications of good practice (Coffield, 2012; Derrick, 2011; Sennett, 2008). One of the principal ideas that emerges is '*...if practice is systematically subordinated to the idealised perspective, then practice will quickly become restricted*' (Derrick, 2011: p. 11). These classifications of '*...good, best and excellent practice are ambiguous and difficult to quantify in all settings, with all occasions and all students*' (Coffield, 2012: p. 138). Trainees are subject to both developmental observations on their course and quality assurance observations in their workplace. Concerns regarding their grade could be made more acute by the scrutiny from quality assurance staff where they work on top of observations undertaken as part of their course. It is also possible that values and ideology associated with observations in their workplace could impact on their perspective of lesson observations on the course.

The Ofsted model of observation pushes teachers to aspire to the minimum grade of 'good'. Ofsted no longer uses the grade 'satisfactory', only 'requires improvement'. This grading system has been referred to as potentially '*contradictory*' (Edgington, 2013: pp. 138-145). The second survey question attempted to discover trainees' thoughts about the grading itself. The question asked: 'Do you think lesson observations should be graded?' Although this was a closed question, it was made

clear on the questionnaire that a rationale was required to explain the position of the trainee on this issue and so, in this way, it becomes a question with opportunities for a more open and expansive response.

Graded lesson observations could also be a restrictive workplace practice. Unwin and Fuller describe '*...restrictive*' practices as ones that discourage '*...innovation, risk-taking and creativity*' (Unwin and Fuller, 2003: pp. 1-10). Coffield (2012) suggests that these are reflected in managerial-style (graded) observations. They also encourage a focus on reproductive, rather than creative, learning processes in the classroom. Reproductive learning focuses '*...on a subject's mastery of certain given tasks or situations, on the refinement of task performance*' (Ellström, 2006: p. 44). This can be contrasted with developmental learning where the focus is on individual/collective development, and/or on more radical transformations of the prevailing situation, in addition to concerns regarding creativity (Ellström, 2006). Ball (2012) has also written about the way that measurable performance indicators re-orient learning away from social, emotional, or moral development because such indicators have no immediate performative value. Therefore, the third research question asked during the survey was: 'Do you believe teaching observations on the course discourage creative practice in favour of reproductive tasks and performance?' The first question asked during the focus group to encourage a contrasting perspective from the survey question was: 'Do you feel encouraged to be more creative during observed lesson observations?'

Researchers have '*...documented the multiple sources of variance in observational scores due to the sampling of lessons, differences among raters, and even the characteristics of the observational instrument itself*' (Hill, Charalambos and Kraft, 2012: pp. 57-58). Observers are not able to identify successful teaching (Strong et al, 2011). The findings of a study by Kane and Staiger (2012) involving 1,333 teachers and 900 trainers are significant. These trainers had all received training on lesson observation and all had their observing practice standardised. They found that one could only achieve a reasonable level of consistency in terms of grading when rating four different lessons with each one rated by a different observer. Therefore, it would be interesting to ascertain how trainees view the accuracy of lesson observations. The fourth question then asked: 'Do you think that the observer is always able to identify successful teaching within your classes?' The alternate question was asked of trainees during the focus group to re-frame the perspective of the original question: 'How can you show good teaching practice during an observation?'

Other factors that influence an observation are the time of day the observation takes place, the mood of the class, and the opinions of the observer. A large amount of rich contextual detail can also be lost during an observation (Shulman, 2004). The observer can also feel under pressure to articulate a developmental weakness from the observation (O'Leary, 2011). Richards and Farrell (2011) have written about how the presence of an observer in the classroom sometimes influences the nature of the lesson, making the lesson untypical of the teacher's usual style of teaching. Masters (1983) also highlights that the attention of the teacher switches from students to observer. The fifth survey research question was: 'Do trainees feel that the trajectory of their lesson is negatively impacted by the presence of an observer during a teaching observation?' The question was re-framed in the focus group to:

'What are the positive aspects of having an observer within the classroom during a lesson?' We then moved into a more general discussion on the impact of an observer, both positive and negative. This was led by the trainee teachers at this point.

The sixth question was formed because Ofsted demonstrates no tolerance for behaviour which stops learning taking place and, if observed, such classes are categorised as 'inadequate' (Ofsted, 2012). Some trainees have communicated to the Teacher Education team at our college that they believe they will receive better teaching grades if observed teaching their best-behaved classes. Therefore, the next research question was: 'Does grading of lesson observations discourage you from being observed by your teacher trainer in more challenging classes?' The contrasting two questions were then asked during the focus group: 'Do you find it supportive to be observed by your teacher trainer with difficult groups?' and 'Do you find the feedback could help you with these classes?'

The seventh question was formed from consideration of Coe's assertion that there is no robust research that says that teaching observations lead to improvements in teaching and learning (2013). Here it seems that Coe is discussing quality assurance observations, though he is not explicit about this. Therefore, the seventh research question was: 'Do trainees believe that teaching observations on the course help to improve their teaching? Please explain your answer'.

The focus groups and professional discussions with trainees added greater depth to the initial findings. The theoretical framework of multi-modality is helpful here in making sense of the difference between the exploratory nature of the survey, focus group and professional discussion phases of this research:

'It (multi-modality) focuses on analyzing and describing the full repertoire of meaning-making resources that people use (visual, spoken, gestural, written, three-dimensional and others, depending on the domain of representation) in different contexts, and on developing means that show how these are organized to make meaning'.

(Bezemer, 2012: online)

Therefore, between the survey, focus group and professional discussion, positioning of these different elements is formed to make a composition from the analysis of the position of each of the different modes of communication. The focus group and professional discussion transcription and observational notes were repeatedly viewed by the researcher along with the survey responses to analyse content, information and practices and to form a composition in terms of putting the element together in analyses. The researcher looked for emerging themes from the written survey and then encouraged contrasting perspectives through re-phrasing some of the questions from the original survey in the focus group. The focus group provided for more visual and spoken input in a different mode of communication to the survey and allowed trainees to lead the discussion into different areas which left the researcher to focus on how each of these three components were organised to generate meaning. The focus groups encouraged divergent perspectives and thinking. Leaving the trainees to lead the discussion after ten minutes also

encouraged dynamic exchange and development of new ideas and connections, and this was a useful research method for focus groups, as discussed by Morgan (1993).

Findings

Over half of all trainees surveyed (16) expressed concerns about observations, but almost 25% (7) of those surveyed made additional comments with the view that it was helpful for their competency to be examined with a view to its development. One example stated:

"I hope my competency is being looked at as what is the point if not. It can help me to address areas that might need improving".

(Stuart)

Almost half of the trainees sampled (15) thought that the trajectory of their lesson was impacted. However, some (3) trainees noted that this impact was not always negative:

"It is not negative as it gives me a chance to show off the tacit knowledge I have already gained as a teacher".

(Mary)

Many trainees (22) who answered the question regarding whether teaching observations shift the focus to more reproductive models of teaching and learning answered with a conditional response. Six trainees declined to answer this question which suggests that there is also some uncertainty or ambivalence in response to this question. The conditional responses centred on the particular circumstances for the lesson, for example the individual being observed or the particular class observed.

One trainee explained that:

"...it depends entirely on the individual. It is true that some teachers tend to use safer resources and then we know what the results will be".

(James)

Several teacher trainees wrote about how the nature of the subject specialism influenced this. One example was:

"I teach a very creative subject and I feel it is acceptable in this area to allow learners to experiment within my lesson and I feel learners understand this, but for learners in more competency based and vocational areas this may not be the case".

(Jo)

Some trainees noted that their teacher trainers had *"...suggested trying things out when the teacher trainer is present"* (Stuart).

Another made the point that:

"...it might depend on the guidance and beliefs of the teacher trainer as to whether he or she encourages you to experiment. We have been lucky that this experimentation is firmly entrenched on our course perhaps largely because of the people who run it".

(Mary)

Twenty-two trainees answered the question regarding grading with a conditional response. There was a prevalence of opinion with regard to favouring what one trainee called “*some measures of success*”. Sonya suggested that “*...grading itself was not helpful*”.

One trainee explained that she “*may not want to be graded in a particular class if the risk of something bad happening is too high. It doesn't help your morale*” (Jo).

Five teacher trainees suggested that grading should not be formalised within teacher training and that the grading rubric itself would be more useful just used as a general guide rather than signposting to each of the criteria.

It was significant that all trainees surveyed answered that they had found that observations on the course do help to improve their teaching. The reasons given varied from individual to individual. Some trainees wrote about improvements to “*confidence*” (Jane, Barbara and Rob) and getting help to “*deal with difficult situations*” (Rob, Lynne and Kevin). Others wrote about how observations help you to improve on your understanding of your own practice, for example, one trainee wrote about “*reflecting on the lesson from another point of view and highlighting ideas and issues that might pass un-noticed by you*” (Janet).

Some trainees noted reservations about the experience of being observed, for example one stated that “*it might be that I have had such a positive experience on the course because of the people who have observed me have been so positive about my teaching practice*” (Jane). This same trainee noted that:

“I am being so positive because the observers on my course understand my teaching context. It has not been expected, for example, that there be lots of IT used by learners in a Sugarcraft lesson where most of the learners do not possess a computer at home and have poor IT and literacy skills. Would Ofsted or a different observer have different expectations?”

(Jane)

Seven trainees also commented in the survey that they would like more teaching observations and less formalised reflective practice. This theme was reinforced by trainees within both the focus groups and structured interviews.

What Did the Focus Groups Say?

The two focus groups considered what it was like to be observed as a teacher. Trainees wanted to explore the issues because of the way in which they felt unclear regarding grading, and wanted to understand more to help them when observed by managers within their workplace or Ofsted in the future. The first focus group had ten trainees present and the discussion quickly turned to a critique of the culture of performativity. It was argued that grading was divisive and a matter of critical subjectivity. However, other trainees also noted that they wanted to be observed. The majority of the group said they would prefer more regular observations at different times and days during the week. This was to avoid a situation occurring where a small number of observations might be unrepresentative of their teaching practice.

Most of those present actually stated that they would also like a situation where, in Year 1, observations were not graded at all, in order that they could invite tutors to visit the most difficult of their classes to assist with them. Two trainees within the focus group also suggested the idea of co-teaching between the teacher and the trainee, and between different trainees themselves. It was suggested that with these two latter methods, they could be just as effective as teacher trainer observations in helping trainees improve.

The second focus group contained eight trainees. This group focused their discussion on how the assessment grading instrument was ineffective. Two trainees worked with 14 to 16 year olds excluded from mainstream schools and stated they felt the grading criteria used for their teaching observations were ineffective. Specific examples were given to illustrate their point, for example, the grading criterion surrounding behaviour for Initial Teacher Training of 'satisfactory' makes references to low-level behaviours causing concern. The trainees expressed the view that, in their institutional setting, only having low-level disruptive behaviours within a class would be the best behaviour that is possible within this institution and so, within this context, the assessment instrument is flawed. Outstanding practice must mean something very different to the guidance on the assessment instrument.

Another trainee who taught drama also suggested that it was not possible to integrate both maths and English into every drama lesson (Mary). She questioned the relevance of this grading criterion to each of her lessons. Several tutors spoke about the grading not taking into account the low ability students they have and said they believed they were disadvantaged in the grading process by their students. This view could also be supported by research. Coffield argues that of '*...the quality of the teaching and the quality of the student intake, the second is far more powerful*' (2012: p. 132).

A Professional Conversation With Two Experienced In-Service Trainee Teachers

Both trainees (James and Mary) wanted to discuss issues with regard to the usefulness of lesson observation as part of teacher training courses. It was suggested that, rather than writing an extended reflective journal, they would prefer to reflect briefly after each observation. The trainees used an existing pro forma for this purpose. A key concern was how the observations were used as part of the overall course and self-assessment grading at the end of the course.

In addition to this, one trainee suggested that the grading criteria would be better used as a general guide and left unticked (James). The other trainee asserted that it was mendacious to present graded observations as developmental:

"You are calling our course observations developmental, but you have grading tick-boxes that correspond with Ofsted that inform our final graded portfolio. This reminds me of work with my students where we call an exam a test because the word exam has negative connotations. The teachers all know it is both an exam and a test. We only use the word test to make them feel better, but it is still an exam and you are playing with words. I think this is a bit like the white elephant in our classroom. People

try and brush under the carpet the way that observations are graded and claim that all observations are developmental even when they are linked with competency and grading.”

(Mary, 2015)

Both trainees were concerned with regard to accuracy and fairness of the assessment decision in relation to grade boundaries. Both expressed the view that one person's 'outstanding' might be the same as another person's 'good'. Both trainees talked at length about the value of teachers encouraging them to experiment during observed lessons. James said that he felt less inclined to experiment despite this encouragement. The reason given for this was to achieve the highest grade possible during observed lessons.

Both trainees suggested that observations during the course should be undertaken by different observers. This was to allow for different viewpoints on their practice. They also suggested that, given the limited number of observations, any mistakes in their practice could be amplified out of proportion and that the course should involve a greater number of observations to provide a more balanced viewpoint. One of the trainees also stated that graded lesson observations helped prepare trainees for the workplace where this practice was normal (James). There was still confusion from both trainees regarding what good or outstanding performance actually meant in practice in relation to both Initial Teacher Training and how Ofsted uses these terms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The majority of trainees (22) in this study clearly valued grading in that it prepares them for the workplace where this practice is normal. Trainees need to be prepared for what to expect when observed outside of their Initial Teacher Education Award.

A conclusion drawn by one trainee within the focus groups is that a 'requires improvement' grade early on in the course could shatter the confidence of a new trainee. This could be a potential area for further research and investigation. One solution to this problem is that grading should be used tentatively in Year 1 of the course, and grading would not have to be used for every situation and occasion. There will be occasions where a grading criterion is not relevant, or where many of the boxes are not helpful. The assessment instrument should be used with discretion in these circumstances. The examples given by two trainees in work within pupil referral units, where the benchmark for normal behaviour needs to be different, illustrate this. The developmental commentary in this instance itself should be prioritised.

A question raised by one trainee within the focus groups is: 'If there is low-level disruption within a lesson, but the tutor demonstrates a consistent and skilful approach in response to this, yet the approach does not work because of issues outside of the control of the teacher, how should this be graded?'. One answer is that the lesson may be unsatisfactory. However, this issue becomes less important if that teacher is observed more regularly and with different classes as part of their teacher training. The teaching observations should be a representative sample of the trainee's teaching practice. The rationale to support this assertion comes from the suggestion of three trainees during the focus groups (Jo, James and Mary). This is an area that could be subjected to further scrutiny as part of future research.

Various trainees discussed the value of embedding the value of experimentation during lesson observations. One recommendation is that this idea should be systematically promoted by teacher trainers early on in the course. Teacher trainers also need to ensure that trainees are not downgraded for experimentation where the experiment does not work:

“Part of the art of being a teacher is knowing when to run with an idea - following a strict session plan for fear of not covering a key factor closes down the opportunity to pursue the interest of the class – especially frustrating if it’s something you’re interested in too! The problem is with regard to the observation grade feeding into our final self-evaluation grade at the end of the course. If the experiment doesn’t work do we have to be downgraded for trying?”

(Jack, 2015)

Teacher trainers must make it clear that experimentation is a valuable aspect of a teaching observation, that trainees should be encouraged to experiment, and that this should be taken into account by the teacher trainer and perhaps left ungraded in Year 1 of the course if the result would be discouraging to the trainee. It could also be made clear that if the result is not as expected from the experiment that this will not detrimentally impact upon their overall grading on the course. An issue that Jack’s comment raises is that perhaps it is not grading each individual observation that is the issue, but rather how this ‘feeds’ into the overall grading on the course. The trainees were not all worried about the individual grade for each observation, but were concerned with how each grade informed their self-assessment grading. It is argued that the only reason a trainee may be downgraded because of an experiment failing would be with regard to a lack of vision regarding what is possible. In Year 2 of the course, trainees should have developed some proficiency in their lesson planning with regard to what is possible.

Co-teaching between trainees and teacher trainers could also be introduced and formalised alongside traditional teaching observations. Teaching observations should also be more regular as part of the teacher training course. Trainees in the focus groups, and during the detailed professional conversation, also offered the view that there should be more regular teaching observations as part of their course.

Twelve trainees also showed an awareness and concern with regard to the accuracy of grading. It was suggested that different trainees should experience being observed by different teacher trainers. It is possible, for example, that an institution with four practising teacher trainers observing trainees who need four observations could be observed by all four teachers. Ideally, a large proportion of these observations would also be standardised by the presence of more than one observer. This could also be formalised by teacher training providers, but some allowances would need to be made at an operational level for institutions with a small number of teacher trainers.

The focus of lesson observations should be on the developmental commentary and in cases where it is not clear to the teacher trainer which grading criterion to tick when confronted by a series of grading boxes, you can leave a box without a tick.

The different options are Standards Met, Good, or Outstanding teaching in various different categories, for example, promoting equality and diversity. The selection can be left with a comment that the corresponding area can be developed on another occasion if it is not relevant. For example, the absence of all three skill areas of mathematics, ICT and English together in an art lesson should not mean the trainee is downgraded in this category for that session if all three skills are not relevant to the lesson. It can sometimes be the case that the trainee is focusing on one area, for example, literacy, and that ICT and numeracy skills are not developed within that session. Maths and ICT skills can be developed in later sessions for this trainee. We also need to try to ascertain what thinking informs the trainee actions rather than just judge the actions themselves. This conclusion is informed by earlier discussion of trainee concerns regarding the accuracy of grading decisions. The written rationale for their lesson plan and questioning the teacher trainee about their observed behaviour and meta-thinking are important to inform the grading to make every effort to ensure that the assessment is fair.

Four trainees within the focus groups suggested that there should be more discussion around reflection and challenging assumptions after teaching observations and grading as they still find the process difficult to understand. One answer to this is that it is mandated that teacher trainees discuss teaching observations, efficacy and the interpretation of grading early on the course. These issues can again be discussed as the trainees develop the theoretical underpinnings of their teaching practice. This is part of a meta-cognitive process. Most of the trainees involved in this research valued the use of lesson observations on their course as a way of reflecting on their own practice. Seventeen out of 18 trainees within the two focus groups agreed that their reflective abilities and meta-cognitive abilities in relation to teaching could be enhanced by a number of in-depth discussions regarding the problematic nature of teaching observations. It is suggested that teacher trainers need to work to create the right '*...social environments to support reflective discourse*' after these observations to facilitate this meta-cognition (Lin et al, 2005: p. 2). Teacher Educators need to learn how to enable these constructive discussions and facilitate meta-thinking between both observer and observee after an observation. There is little data regarding how teacher trainers learn how to hold these discussions. This is a potential area for further investigation.

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