

Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Award

Unit CA393 c - The Environment, Structure and Organisation of Higher Education:

Reflective Commentary

Introduction

Higher education has undergone considerable expansion in recent decades, however according to the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, those environmental factors that will affect the job of teaching in Higher Education over the next three years are likely to include changes among the providers of higher education, changes in the student population, the influence of international higher education and changes in the relationship between higher education, the state and society.¹ From this perspective then, one might choose to examine the role of the 'virtual campus'² or the local and regional role of higher education in line with the Dearing inquiry.³ However, rather than take issue with the ways in which XXXXX is moving towards a more flexible learning environment, or the way in which it engages with its regions, I am going to examine a recent organisational change in the peer observation of teaching scheme at XXXXX, paying particular attention to both the internal and external forces that have shaped that change.

Evidence

In September 1999, *The Times Higher Education Supplement* prompted a discussion over the rewards and merits of peer observation by asking whether it is either 'a useful tool to improve teaching or an excuse to spy on lecturers?'⁴ With this in mind then, I will draw on existing scholarship concerning peer observation of teaching and consider the objectives of peer observation at a range of institutions, before paying particular attention to the manner in which the XXXXX Committee at XXXXX have updated and implemented their current scheme.

Background

I was appointed at XXXXX just two weeks prior to the XXXXX peer observation meeting held on 29 March 2003. Although I myself had not been observed at this time, it was interesting to witness the proceedings. From this perspective then, I found it useful to look at

the ways in which the peer observation scheme operated and the reasons why the XXXXX chose to adopt this particular scheme.

One of the papers that was handed out as part of the peer observation meeting was a page entitled 'Planning a Peer Observation Scheme.' The paper demonstrated the many different kinds of peer observation schemes that existed, taking issue with the way in which each scheme operated and the tensions that each might address. For example, we are introduced to alternative schemes that can be understood as either formative or summative, confidential or public, flexible or fixed, voluntary or compulsory etc.⁵ It was suggested that starting a new peer review process with a small group would be advantageous due to the fact that it would allow the scheme to adapt and develop practices before encouraging other members of staff to join in as the scheme makes progress. However, the fact that the scheme at Bath Spa was to be introduced to a large 'start' group meant that the scheme would 'probably require more formal agreement' concerning the design, ethos, practices and material used.⁶

Peer Observation of Teaching

At a very general level, peer observation can be understood as a scheme that involves a range of teaching staff being both observed and the observer in the classroom. Reviewing the teaching process in this way should enable teachers in Higher Education to gain new ideas and fresh perspectives about teaching from colleagues, allowing them to consider the relationship between such teaching and student learning.⁷ Peer observation of teaching is increasingly used in Higher Education to enhance learning and teaching practice, and in order to respond positively to external review. After all, according to Larry Rowan, student evaluations do not provide a complete picture of teaching and learning in Higher Education. We are told that:

Although it is clear that students can reliably judge many aspects of a course and a teacher's methods, their perspective is necessarily limited to their personal experience as students. In the search for better ways to evaluate and improve teaching, many institutions are experimenting with systematic peer evaluations that include classroom observations and peer review of course materials. In a comprehensive evaluation program, the results of student evaluations and peer evaluations, along with course materials, are brought together in a teaching

portfolio that presents a reasonably complete picture of an individual's teaching competency.⁸

Therefore, while key authors on peer observation agree that such observation of teaching is a useful part of a peer evaluation process,⁹ so too, various Higher Education institutions recognise the value and importance of such a scheme. The University of Sussex's Learning and Teaching strategy identifies peer observation of teaching as an activity important both to enhancing the status of teaching and learning and to strengthening quality assurance processes.¹⁰ We are informed that the objectives of peer observation at this institution are to: i) help ensure that the University is providing a high quality educational experience for students, ii) encourage staff to reflect on effectiveness of their own teaching and to identify their development needs, iii) foster discussion and dissemination of best practice, iv) enhance the importance attached to the quality of teaching, v) identify any weaknesses and put in place an action plan to remedy them, vi) help inform both personal and subject group staff development planning and vii) to help staff prepare for QAAHE subject review.¹¹

Peer Observation at XXXXX

In subject reviews since XXXXX, the overall average for the Teaching, Learning and Assessment aspect of provision at XXXXX has been said to have improved, although it has remained one of the weaker aspects judged by reviewers.¹² From this estimation then, the QAA handbook for academic review states that 'using evidence related to curricular content and indirect evidence related to teaching, such as student feedback and internal peer review, academic reviewers should attempt to evaluate the breadth, depth, pace and challenge of curricular delivery.'¹³ In response to such reviews, the recent self-evaluation document states that the assurance of teaching quality through staff support and development operates at various complementary levels within the XXXXX, from centrally funded staff training schemes to School-operated forms of staff development.¹⁴ However, for the sake of this commentary, I will focus on the ways in which XXXXX has updated its peer observation of teaching scheme as a way of enhancing the quality of teaching and identifying development needs.

Prior to the 2003 peer observation of teaching, XXXXX had voluntary and private rather than compulsory and public systems of peer observation in place. However, with regard to the nature of the updated scheme we are informed that the XXXXX 'advocated a peer

observation scheme designed to enhance good practice by an exchange of views and counselled against one based on evaluation of teaching.’ With this in mind then, we are then told that for these reasons ‘the title peer observation of teaching was considered more appropriate than peer review of teaching and any link to appraisal was seen as counter-productive.’ More importantly however, was the fact that the XXXXX Committee was determined that a single system would be used, a version of what had been done in the former XXXXX faculty.¹⁵ From this perspective then, the aims of the peer observation scheme can be understood as i) encouraging the sharing of good practice among teaching staff, ii) identifying aspects of pedagogy that could usefully be improved, iii) finding appropriate ways of achieving improvements where needed, iv) promoting the active participation of all permanent members of teaching staff and, as far as possible, of hourly paid staff and v) assuring managers that the quality of teaching is being monitored and enhanced.¹⁶

These changes in the peer observation scheme have arisen for a variety of reasons including the internal desire for a single operational and regulated system, the pursuit of the XXXXX for the XXXXX accreditation and the result of the HEFCE ‘Rewarding and Developing Staff’ Human Resources strategy funding. Although the scheme could have been a confidential, informal and flexible process within a subject-specific context, the chosen system has been set as public, formal, fixed and generic. At this moment in time, I cannot assess how the scheme has been received. However, if one considers that change involves change, or rather that ‘initial plans and visions themselves change as they are implemented and adopted,’¹⁷ then only time will tell if this new scheme will be well received and well-regulated within the XXXXX.

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Notes

¹ Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. "Strategic Plan 2003-2005." http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutqaa/strategic_plan_2003/planning.htm (accessed 01/07/2003)

² As Europe moves towards a knowledge-based economy and society, social and technological changes are requiring new ways to access knowledge. New information and technology systems are resulting in new ways for flexible education and training. "Virtual campuses" are emerging. "Virtual learning environments" are being created by organising the learning environment in new ways, based on different technological configurations for learning and communicating between peers and teachers. Barajas Frutos, M. "Virtual Learning Environments for Higher Education." <http://www.pjb.co.uk/npl/bp34.htm>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

³ As befits the highly centralised system of governance which characterises the UK, most processes of public policy formation ignore the English regional dimension. However, such a criticism cannot be laid at the door of the Dearing Inquiry which devotes a whole chapter and one of its 14 supporting reports to the local and regional role of higher education. The report identifies as one of the purposes of higher education as serving "the need for an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge based economy at local, regional and national levels" but recognises that currently "the local and regional involvement of institutions is patchy" and "needs to turn to active and systematic engagement." Goddard, J. "The Local and Regional Role of Higher Education – Published in *Parliamentary Brief October 1997*." <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/curds/univ/pbr-18-8.htm>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

⁴ New Mexico State University. "Can Peer Observation Improve Teaching?" <http://www.lgu.ac.uk/deliberations/forum/peer-obs.html>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

⁵ Learning and Teaching Support Network. "Education Subject Centre: Advanced Learning and Teaching in Education." www.escalate.ac.uk. (accessed 01/07/2003) for an over-view of these different Peer observation schemes.

⁶ Staff handout for School of Historical and Cultural Studies Peer Observation Meeting (29/03/2003)

⁷ Cohen and McKeachie (1980) identified ten aspects of teaching that peers are most competent to evaluate about teaching. Articles on peer evaluation of teaching suggest that all of these aspects can be used during the peer review process including i) mastery of course content, ii) Selection of course content, iii) course organization, iv) appropriateness of course objectives, v) appropriateness of instructional materials, vi) appropriateness of evaluative devices, vii) appropriateness of methodology used to teach specific content areas, viii) commitment to teaching and concern for student learning, ix) student achievement, based on performance on exams and projects and x) support of departmental instructional efforts. A review of these aspects is facilitated by a teaching portfolio prepared by the instructor and made available to peer observers. Svinicki, M. "Preparing for Peer Observation." <http://www.utexas.edu/academic/cte/PeerObserve.html>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

⁸ University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "Peer Observation of Classroom Teaching." <http://ctl.unc.edu/fyc15.html>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

⁹ Braskamp, L and Ory, J. (1994). *Assessing Faculty Work: Enhancing Individual and Institutional Performance: Enhancing Individual and Institutional Performance*. New York: Jossey-Bass

¹⁰ University of Sussex. "Peer Observation of Teaching." <http://216.239.41.100/search?q=cache:NtV3qRyhZhEJ:www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/TLDU/peerpol.pdf+peer+observation+at+the+university+of+sussex&hl=en&ie=UTF-8>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

¹¹ University of Sussex. "Peer Observation of Teaching." <http://216.239.41.100/search?q=cache:NtV3qRyhZhEJ:www.sussex.ac.uk/Units/TLDU/peerpol.pdf+peer+observation+at+the+university+of+sussex&hl=en&ie=UTF-8>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

¹² Staff handout for School of Historical and Cultural Studies Peer Observation Meeting (29/03/2003)

¹³ Staff handout for School of Historical and Cultural Studies Peer Observation Meeting (29/03/2003)

¹⁴ Staff support and development at Bath Spa is multifaceted and multilayered. Inevitably, this raises the potential for unnecessary duplication and, where schools are operating independently of one another, missed opportunities for the maximum spread of good practice. On the other hand, the staff training needs of schools are necessarily related to their subject composition and mix, and may be quite specialised, as in the case of the schools of Music and Performing Arts, and Art and Design. We believe that our combination of central and ‘locally’ directed staff development and training ensures that the institution can respond to national developments, arising out of directives from bodies such as HEFCE and QAA, while at the same time attending to subject specific pedagogic issues. We are weak, however, on making accurate assessment of the impact of staff development activities (or, indeed, lack of impact) on outputs, in the form of students learning experiences. This is an area to which we will be paying closer attention. Bath Spa University College. “Peer Observation of Teaching.” <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/quality-and-standards/public/institutional-audit/sed/sed-sections/sed-15.htm>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

¹⁵ We are informed that the review of the Peer Observation Scheme has taken place as a result of two initiatives: ‘Firstly, the HEFCE “Rewarding and Developing Staff” HR Strategy funding requires all HEI’s, in order to secure the allocation of funding, to address six priority areas, two of which are Performance Management and Appraisal. The second initiative is the pursuit of the University College for the Investors in People accreditation. To ensure compliance with the standards relating to performance, feedback and staff development, a review of the Peer Observation Scheme was required.’ Gill, K. “Peer Observation of Teaching.” <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/quality-and-standards/public/quality-assurance-committees/academic-board/subcommittees-of-academic-board.htm/learning&teaching/l&tpapers-minutes/may-2002/116.doc>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

¹⁶ The scheme demand that ‘Heads of Schools establish sets of staff within their Schools, cutting across subject divisions’ and that ‘each set should have four to six members.’ From this perspective then, these arrangements are put in place so that everyone observes and everyone is observed but without what is termed reciprocal pairing. Issues to be addressed may be determined in several ways: the sets may agree issues in advance of any observations; the Head of School may ask for a specific issue, or issues, to be addressed; the Learning and Teaching Committee, School Boards and Subject Boards may identify issues; they may arise out of the process of observation. After completion of the round of observations, each set meets to discuss points of common interest that have been identified, to agree areas where improvement is desirable, and to consider how to best to achieve it. Each set agrees an annual report on its deliberations and submits this to the Head of School; the report deals with matters of general interest or concern without singling out individuals for comment. If the Head of School delegates responsibility for appraisals, s/he passes on a copy of the report to whoever is conducting appraisals of those in the set. Appraisees may request any specific help that the set or the observer has identified as desirable. Bath Spa University College. “Peer Observation Scheme.” <http://www.bathspa.ac.uk/quality-and-standards/public/quality-assurance-committees/academic-board/subcommittees-of-academic-board.htm/learning&teaching/l&tpapers-minutes/oct-2002/peer-obs-proposed-scheme.doc>. (accessed 01/07/2003)

¹⁷ Learning and Teaching Support Network. “Change Thinking, Change Practices.” <http://www.ltsn.ac.uk/genericcentre/index.asp?id=18747>. (accessed 01/07/2003)