1 Opening Virtual Doors:
Exploring Faculty Perspectives on Online Peer Observation of Teaching

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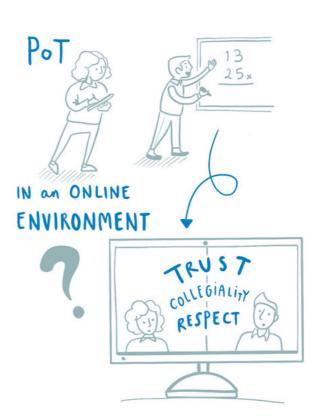
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Abstract

Peer Observation of Teaching (PoT) can provide a structured opportunity for professional dialogue by which observers and observees share and develop their perspectives on teaching experience and skills. Such professional conversations offer opportunities for both parties to gain a perspective on practices that may have been taken for granted. Over six months, participants (n=10) from three Irish Higher Education Institutions engaged in cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional PoT. Three years on from this, against the backdrop of the rapid adaptation of learning and teaching practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the same participants engaged in a focus group that explored their perspectives on, and experiences with, online PoT. Based on the findings from this focus group, coupled with the factors for success identified in the original project, this chapter considers the future of PoT in the online learning and teaching environment. It also discusses the key learnings and implications for both higher education teaching staff and educational developers.

Keywords

Online Peer Observation of Teaching, Professional Dialogue, Reflective Practice, Academic Development

Introduction

Professional dialogue on teaching and learning is considered beneficial for the development of teaching practice (Ashgar and Pilkington, 2017) and is noted as a space for professional learning where professionals listen carefully (ibid) to evoke reflection and think about practice. A mainstay of academic development work is community building (Gibbs, 2013; McCormack and Kennelly, 2011) and designing opportunities that enable professional dialogue to share, discuss and reflect on practice. To this end, Peer Observation of Teaching (PoT) that specifically supports a peer review and collegial approach can be a valuable tool to scaffold professional dialogue and reflection on practice. PoT is used widely as a structure to facilitate conversation about teaching (Donnelly, 2007; Hendry and Oliver, 2012) and in cross-institutional and cross-disciplinary teaching contexts (Crehan, O'Keeffe and Munro, 2017; Munro, O'Keeffe and Crehan, 2020).

At the time of writing, Higher Education (HE) is experiencing a rapid adoption of online learning and teaching practices due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Nordmann et al., 2020). This chapter explores how a model of PoT can continue to scaffold reflective dialogue about teaching and learning in the online teaching and learning environment. Drawing from previous research and new research exploring further participant perspectives, we discuss how professional dialogue about teaching and reflection on practice can be constructed and supported online. This research extends a previous longitudinal exploration of a cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional PoT process (Munro et al., 2020, Crehan et al., 2017). A previous exploration with participants reported that a cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional model of PoT can encourage reflective dialogue about teaching. Additionally, important insights into the conditions conducive to the nurturing of professional conversations about teaching and learning, as well as how peer observation contributes to the creation of safe and sustained dialogue between participants, were reported. This PoT process involved face-to-face teaching as well as the use of online live and recorded teaching, and participants noted a positive experience of technology-mediated dialogue about teaching.

With a focus on online teaching and learning in HE set to continue, it is timely to consider questions yet to be addressed with respect to the role that PoT might play in online contexts. For example, what does PoT mean in an online context? Should PoT in online environments be concerned with synchronous teaching only or should asynchronous approaches now be considered? What are observers giving feedback on in online PoT? How do participants feel about giving feedback on online teaching when they do not consider themselves to be experts in online teaching? How can academic developers best support the development of the trust, rapport and community essential to successful PoT, in online environments? In order to explore these questions, in December 2020 we invited those faculty who had participated in the initial face-to-face PoT to participate in a focus group that sought to explore their perspectives on, and experiences with PoT in online contexts.

Literature Review

PoT is a structured and supported process by which observers and observees can both offer and receive feedback on teaching practice, with a view to mutual development of their teaching experience and skills. Gosling (2002) identified three possible purposes for PoT: An Evaluation Model, a Development Model, and a Peer Review Model. The Developmental and Peer Review models encourage collegiality, trust, and mutual respect, aiming to foster reflection and critical discussion on what good teaching constitutes (Yiend, Weller and Kinchin, 2014), whilst the evaluation model is often equated with performance appraisal (McMahon et al., 2007). The Peer Review model has demonstrated potential benefits for both observers and observees. Benefits for observees include learning from feedback provided by the observer (Hendry and Oliver 2012), and gaining reassurance and confidence in one's abilities as an educator (Donnelly 2007, Whipp and Pengelley 2017). Observers report benefits derived from learning about new teaching and learning strategies, and being prompted to test these in their own practice (Hendry and Oliver, 2012), and from comparing and contrasting the observees' context with their own (Tenenberg, 2016). Through observing others' practice, observers also learn more about and reflect on their own practice (Sullivan, et al., 2012). More generally, such approaches to PoT can contribute to the development of collegiality among colleagues, encouraging teaching to be seen as a topic for communal discourse (Whipp and Pengelley, 2017).

Integral to the Peer Review model of PoT is its role in encouraging critical self-reflection (Hammersely-Fletcher and Orsmond, 2005; Peel, 2005). As Gosling (2002, p.38) explains:

> The spirit of collaborative peer observation is not that the peer claims expertise in observation but rather he or she is a colleague who operates in good faith to assist the teacher being observed to reflect on and consider teaching problems as interesting professional issues about which all teachers should be curious.

Kenny et al. (2014), implementing a peer review model of PoT, reported that the opportunity for reflection in a collective manner facilitated an appreciation of collegial professional development. The role of participants in peer observation as constructive, 'critical friends' are thus key to supporting both reflection and effective dialogue between participants (Carroll and O'Loughlin 2014). However, effort needs to be expended in creating the structures and environments in which such reflection and dialogue can flourish. For example, McCormack and Kennelly (2011) reported that three factors – connection, engagement and safety – facilitate the creation of 'conversation communities' (p.528).

PoT has been implemented in both disciplinary and cross-disciplinary contexts. Tenenberg (2016) argues that PoT is best applied in the context of a single discipline, arguing that it is essential that the observee has an understanding of the disciplinary context, the material being taught, and the signature pedagogies of the discipline. However, for Torres et al. (2017, p.824) "it can be precisely this disciplinary focus that sometimes hinders deep reflection about teaching practices". Cross-disciplinary PoT pairings can also move participants away from a primary focus on the disciplinary context and the material being taught, and towards a focus on the teaching approaches employed and on the students' engagement with same. Furthermore, cross-disciplinary PoT can facilitate exposure to pedagogical approaches outside those traditionally employed within one's home

discipline, and can allow for a more collaborative and equitable relationship in the PoT pairing (Torres et al., 2017). Although much of the literature on PoT is focused on PoT in the context of a single institution, reports of cross-institutional approaches to PoT are beginning to emerge in the literature. Advantages include the removal of issues of power and facilitating the unbundling of teaching from context (Crehan, et al., 2017; Munro et al, 2020; Walker and Forbes 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated that Higher Education institutions rapidly shift to teaching in a digital environment (Nordmann et al., 2020). In some cases, this involved fully online delivery either in synchronous or asynchronous contexts, or the development of hybrid or blended approaches. This move has placed a spotlight on the design, delivery and support of online teaching and digitally engaged learning. Such attention has focused on the practical and technical challenges for educators (Hodges et al., 2020). However, issues such as student engagement and educator presence are also of concern. Rapanta et al. (2020), in an exploratory study utilising expert interviews, focus on a tripartite framework of educator presence in the online environment: cognitive, social and facilitator. This requires educator consideration of, not only student preparedness to participate in the online learning experience but also the communication channels which best enhance interaction.

Prior to the pandemic, a small number of online PoT initiatives had been discussed in the literature. Reported benefits of online approaches to PoT include: the capability to participate in a cross-institutional PoT without having to travel to another location (West and Claus, 2019); the ability to have access to a wider range of teaching artefacts and resources (West and Claus, 2019); and the creation of opportunities for participants to gain insights particular to teaching in the online environment (Bennett and Santy, 2009; Harper and Nicolson, 2011). Challenges include difficulties in hearing or seeing parts of a lesson due to the limitations of technology (West and Claus, 2019); consideration of what constitutes 'good' online teaching (Swinglehurst and Greenhalgh, 2008); differing perspectives on of what is, and what is not, observable online (Bennett and Barp, 2008); and in the context of asynchronous online teaching, consideration for how best to select and isolate a 'chunk' of online learning and teaching as the focus for an online observation (Bennett and Barp, 2008). In addition, West and Claus (2019) report that initial interactions in online PoT were 'awkward' but do note that it is difficult to ascertain if this was due to the online format, or because the observers and observees had not had adequate time to build up a trust relationship prior to the first observation. Indeed, Walker (2015) has highlighted that building trust and rapport is crucial for successful online PoT.

Context

In 2017 three Irish Higher Education Institutions – Dublin City University (DCU), Maynooth University (MU) and the RCSI, University of Medicine & Health Sciences – initiated a collaborative cross-disciplinary and cross-institutional scheme of PoT. PoT had previously been implemented in each of the participating higher education institutions: in RCSI and MU as Peer Observation of Teaching, and in DCU as Classroom Coaching by a staff developer. The scheme's vision was to 'Open the Doors' of cross-disciplinary classrooms, with a view to fostering dialogue, collaboration and reflection about teaching and learning practices.

The process of peer observation was underpinned by Gosling's (2002) peer review model. Ten volunteers, with previous experience of observation of teaching and/or other academic development opportunities from a range of disciplinary backgrounds were supported through a PoT process underpinned by induction, dialogue and reflection on the experience. A subsequent evaluation identified the impact and outcomes of this innovation and hoped that the output would lead to enhancement of teaching and learning while fostering reflection on practice (Crehan et al. 2017; Munro, et al. 2020). Findings to date have highlighted the perceived benefits of Faculty viewing their teaching practice through a different lens, particularly in the cross-institutional context. Furthermore, there was an appetite for future cross-institutional cross-disciplinary observation of teaching schemes (ibid). We also uncovered themes which were perceived to underpin conditions conducive to fostering professional dialogue. Key enablers for authentic learning conversations to occur between practitioners included the cross-institutional/cross-disciplinary context; a phased approach to the reflective process and conversations, and the creation of a sense of safety and trust to facilitate open and authentic conversations. The role of the faculty developers as designers and co-reflectors in the process also scaffolded these enablers.

In 2020, conversations had continued with the original participants against the backdrop of rapid online adaptation of teaching and learning practices due to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Not surprisingly, some participants discussed how their peer observations and reflective dialogue experiences were digitally mediated and supported. The role of peer observation of teaching in the online environment was thus deemed to be worthy of further investigation. In light of the current necessary online pedagogical redesign processes in higher education, it appeared timely to reposition, revisit and view the process and our research through the lens of digital engagement. Thus, of interest in the current climate is the potential for, and optimal methods by which, to conduct and support PoT in online environments.

Method

Ethical approval was granted to hold an online focus group to seek insights into participants' experiences and perceptions of PoT in online environments. This one-hour focus group held online via MS Teams took place in December 2020. Six participants from the original PoT scheme participated, two from each of the partner institutions. Areas of exploration included:

> The challenges experienced in online POT.

> The benefits of online PoT (experienced or anticipated).

> How best to build trust and collegiality in the context of online PoT.

> If and how virtual PoT can be an authentic learning experience.

> The factors which may contribute to a successful online PoT.

The focus group recording was transcribed and anonymised. The transcript was then coded and analysed via Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Participants agreed that PoT online was worthy and a much needed developmental process to enhance the skills and knowledge for online teaching practices. As has already been noted, the focus group discussion took place during the rapid online adaptation of teaching and learning practices due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, and the participants were conscious of this context and the lens through which they might view the process of online PoT. Participant 2 shared that the "baptism of fire" context of online teaching and learning and "firefighting" pandemic conditions were not the same as purposefully designed digital learning experiences. Thus, the pandemic context of our online teaching and learning was consistently referenced by the participants. There was common appreciation that PoT carried out online was experienced differently and thus a variety of teaching foci came to light in the online environment. The online context impacted on teaching presence and influenced the building of trust and collegiality. To this end, specific support and guidance for online PoT was deemed necessary.

"There are different things that you need to do online": What makes online PoT different?

Participants referred to the newness of online teaching, and the similarities and differences between teaching in face-to-face contexts vs teaching online, and noted that this has implications for PoT online:

Participant 2: *"We're observing each other, but very passively to some degree, because we're all doing something very new or we've been mandated to do something very new."*

Participant 5: *"It's new. It's different. If you're an experienced lecturer, you know, you might be good in the classroom, but you mightn't be as, kind of, comfortable online […] Kind of a frank, honest meeting beforehand would be important."*

One of the participants suggested that online PoT may offer unique opportunities for rapid observation and learning from others' online teaching practice:

Participant 3: *"We have had so many discussions in our department about how to deal with this new online environment […] wouldn't peer observation be perfect to sit in for an hour to see what other people do and then you get actually a real-time experience of these innovations in teaching."*

Participants also highlighted that it may be difficult to conduct online PoT without a clear sense of what 'good' online teaching is, and what we are looking for in an online PoT:

Participant 2: *"I think there's still the same pedagogical arguments going on, or issues happening, but I think this kind of something unique, … in that what are we actually looking for online?"*

Participants drew comparisons between what is possible to observe online, versus what can be observed in a face-to-face PoT, both in terms of the actions of the teacher and their students. For example, it is more difficult to observe facial expressions and body language:

Participant 6: *"Another difference between my [Face-to-face peer observation] and my recent peer observation, […] was about facial expression and being able to see the person. I had to focus on this very small picture in the corner, which was very difficult."*

Participant 6: *"Most of the students had their cameras off so I could observe what a colleague was doing, but I couldn't observe at all how students were reacting."*

In addition, the same participant highlighted that body language which looks normal in a face-to-face context may not transfer to the online context:

Participant 6: *"Body language that looks very normal […] in the class, actually some of it looked weird on line [some Faculty] use hands a lot, and when […] you see it in class […] It's actually nice and engaging, but when you're watching it on the video. In a small box and all hands are here and they're missing all the time in front of the camera. It actually irritates."*

Teaching Presence

Many of the participants grieved the loss of the affective aspects and physical social presence of teaching. Focus group participants shared a sense of loss of the experience of "being" in the teaching space with their students. The retrospective observation of recorded lectures raised questions as to what it means to 'be' in and experience the teaching space of another, and whether it is possible to experience this after the fact. For example:

Participant 4: *"… there's a sort of temptation just to do it retrospectively, you know, because it's all being recorded."*

Participant 4: *"Looking back at [the recordings], as well as the as well as the comments my [Peer Observation] partner made, they weren't able to quite as easily understand What it felt like, you know, really to be there."*

The same participant went on to note that the silences and 'dead space' that are common in online teaching (Bennett and Barp, 2009; West and Claus, 2019) may be experienced differently after the fact, when listening to a recorded lecture or seminar than when experienced in real time:

> Participant 4: *"Where you're like, anyone, anyone at all? Would anyone like to answer my question? anybody? […] think that reads more awkwardly when you're watching it back."*

Participants also made reference to what was lost, or missing when observing online:

> Participant 2: *"When I went out to visit you [Redacted] in [Redacted], the movement in the class and all of those things are gone now, the physical, the presence … the social presence."*

Observing Teaching Online: What Matters?

Bennett and Barp (2008) in their study of the implementation of POT in the online learning environment argue that "many aspects of peer observation do not simply 'translate' directly online, and that this raises questions in relation to the foci of the observation process in an online environment. For a number of our participants, this was a central theme of their perceptions and was linked to their views on the authenticity of the experience and the necessary redefinition of what this means in an online PoT environment. There was a sense that the online context shifts the focus to technical and teacher performance aspects rather than student reactions and interaction.

> Participant 4: *"[My observer was] very well able to come in from the technical side" … the affective side is harder to […] deal with it […] and a lot more, procedural stuff becomes foregrounded than teaching."*

This was expressed as a frustration with being unable to gauge student reactions in the online context:

> Participant 6: *"It was a lecture on teams, so and most of the students had their cameras off so I could observe what a colleague was doing, but I couldn't observe at all how students were reacting and this is a challenge for online teaching for my colleague, because here she also doesn't know how students are reacting, but also I can't give any feedback on this."*

The online context was also perceived as shifting the focus of observation to one that foregrounds the procedural aspects. This was linked to the inability to gauge the affective aspects and the consequent tendency to focus on more technical aspects. Participant 4 narrated a perceived misalignment between the intended outcomes of a teaching session (which focused on complexity in decision-making) and the observation focus, as evidenced in the feedback conversation with the PoT partner:

> Participant 4: *"I was really concerned around clarity, because that is what I felt would be lost, so that's probably why we ended up discussing so much of the technical stuff about, you know, did the students know where to go? Did they understand the form that they needed to work through in their breakout group, and did they really understand it?"*

How we interact in online teaching contexts, and our perceptions of what is possible and, indeed appropriate, appear to underpin this sense of a change of focus. Participant 4 was cognisant of students' privacy and comfort:

> Participant 4: *"I'm quite respectful of the fact that I'm in their home in their bedroom. I don't know where I am in their house. I don't insist on cameras being on. I don't force them to try and engage."*

The same participant questioned whether this concern may influence the focus on more technical aspects in the observation.

Participants' sense and definitions of interaction in an online learning and teaching context were apparently intertwined with their views of what can be "observed" and what sense can be made of those observations. Aligned with the work of Gosling (2014) and Swinglehurst et al. (2008), this suggests a need to refocus and reframe the act of PoT in an online context, with a concomitant need for specific support and scaffolding structures.

Building Trust and Collegiality

In the initial PoT process, face-to-face observation of teaching was scaffolded with an induction away from normal day-to-day teaching duties, creating time and space for dialogue and reflection. Focus group participants noted that the 'immediacy' of the online context could diminish the time and space necessary for the dialogue and reflection that are so crucial to effective PoT. Participant 4 remarked that she "would not have felt comfortable if new to this and if didn't know observer" stressing that meeting beforehand and building trust within an observation partnership was key to the process. Participant 4 also drew attention to the "labour of getting to know somebody" while Participant 5 suggested that developing a relationship would be even more important in the online context but more challenging in terms of establishing the necessary rapport and trust.

Another participant noted that online PoT may be perceived to be a much more formal endeavour than when conducted face-to-face:

> Participant 2: *"It was a joy to see the campus and meet the people and so forth and build that relationship and friendship. There's an informality, and this, this is very formal."*

The need to establish a sense of collegiality and trust, and the perceived difficulties in achieving this in an online context led participants to reflect on supporting frameworks which might be necessary.

Participants identified a need for guidance and support specifically targeted to the online context and focusing on all aspects of the interaction from planning to communication and feedback. Participant 5 reported a very positive experience with an "experienced" observer who was able to focus and provide feedback on the substantive aspects of the teaching encounter and move beyond the purely technical focus. It was felt that modelling such an approach and providing exemplars of best practice would be particularly useful in acculturating peer observation partners to the specific parameters of the online context. The planning stage and the focus of observation was also perceived as requiring specific attention and support. Participant 1 commented that as everyone is acclimatising to teaching in the online space, there may be a concomitant need for even more specific guidance in relation to peer observation:

> Participant 1: "*So I'm thinking, if I was asking a colleague to observe me teach, would I be thinking well, what I really want is feedback on my engagement, my strategies for engagement in that synchronous space, so would I be better off recording a short 15 minute podcast, getting the students to observe it, and then just setting up asking for the observation of the strategies that we're focused on – the discussion of the reading or the podcast or whatever – so it might need to be much tighter in terms of that, and the planning might need to be focused more specifically on the particular pedagogy and the particular learning outcomes that I have for that session.*"

Conclusion

The focus group findings illustrated that PoT carried out online was experienced differently than when implemented face-to-face, highlighting a variety of teaching foci in the online environment. Teaching presence, building trust and collegiality came to the fore and specific support and guidance for online PoT was also highlighted. In the solely online environment, such as during this pandemic period, building relationships, respect and a sense of community among teaching colleagues becomes more nuanced and complex. Careful design over time of online community building (Whipp and Pengelley, 2017) is necessary and important to scaffold participants into a constructive social space for reflective dialogue about teaching. In the initial face-to-face PoT process, an induction event was held prior to partaking in the mutual observations of teaching (Crehan et al., 2017). The induction meeting comprised of ice breaking activities, conversations and information about the ethos of observation of teaching. Findings from Crehan et al. (2017) highlighted that, for the participants, an induction was an important part of the PoT process, whereby they could build trusting relationships underpinning the observation process. Induction was an opportunity to meet their peer observer and was key to supporting the development of dialogue between participants who became constructive and critical friends (Carroll and O'Loughlin 2014). It is clear that guidance and a support infrastructure are always important for those involved in PoT, but are even more relevant in the context of online observation. Such guidance will also require specific tailoring to the online context, and should include a clear focus on strategies for building collegiality and trust between observation partners correlating with

Bennett and Barp's (2009) findings on the management and structure of the online observation process. Honest and authentic conversations about both the opportunities and the limitations of online PoT should be a key aspect of this guidance, and there is evidently a key role for faculty developers in scaffolding and supporting these conversations (Gibbs, 2013).

What Constitutes Teaching in the Online Environment?

The focus group also highlighted a broadened conversation of what constitutes teaching in the online environment (Bennet and Barp, 2008; Bennett and Santy, 2009). The possibility of online PoT suggested that observation of teaching could take place through a variety of technologically-mediated ways, involving synchronous and asynchronous teaching activities. Technology-mediated observation of teaching widened out the possibilities for observing various forms of learning and teaching activities. Within the online context, more planning and a clear learning design would be needed for any component of teaching, also, in seeking feedback, the peers would need to ensure clarity in the need for feedback. While more planning might be involved, this ultimately would strengthen a peer reciprocal approach to observation, empowering participants by defining and planning teaching activities and seeking specific feedback.

In light of the substantial changes to educational practice over the past year, and the possibility of a greater focus in the future on blended and online learning approaches as a consistent element of curricula, educational developers need to consider the concomitant adaptations required in academic development. The manner in which we build community online among teaching staff to scaffold PoT will be key to these adaptations. Significantly, this study highlights the variety of teaching that can be observed in technologically mediated ways; however, asynchronous online teaching was not explored here and requires further investigation. To this end, whether PoT occurs face to face or in online circumstances, a carefully designed socially cohesive experience must be founded on building relationships, trust and supporting community building.

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