Sustained Classroom Observation: what does it reveal about changing teaching practices?

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Abstract

In the context of the tension between classroom observation as a form of empowerment and as an instrument of control, the partnership between three 16-19 Colleges and a University School of Education in delivering a programme of sustained observation over eight years is explicated. Drawing on the literature about Continuing Professional Development and the use of classroom observation as a developmental and inspection tool, the principles and processes that underpin the Programme are explained. Content analysis of 924 reports of classroom observations is undertaken to establish two areas where changes in practice can be relatively easily achieved and two areas that are more resistant.

Keywords

Classroom observation; empowerment; control; changing teacher practice; sustained observation; partnership

Introduction

Classroom observation has been a key technique in training pre-service and in-service teachers and in inspecting and making judgements about classroom performance. It therefore has a tradition of being both an instrument of continuing professional development (CPD) and of assessing and controlling teachers. This tension in the use of classroom observation is exacerbated by the way that it has normally been used in schools and colleges, that is, as ‘one-off’ events that capture the behaviour of teachers, trainee teachers and students at a moment in time. This paper explores a more sustained approach to classroom observation carried out over the past eight years by a partnership between three 16-19 educational institutions and a University School of Education and establishes its impact upon changing the behaviour of front-line teachers.

Continuing Professional Development and Inspection Frameworks

The intellectual context of classroom observation is located within the discourse of teacher professionalism and the relationships it has to teacher autonomy on the one hand and teacher accountability on the other. Kennedy (2007) highlighted the central contradiction in the concept of professionalism as it applied to teachers, which is that the idea of professionalism can be ‘used to empower or to control teachers’ (Kennedy 2007, 96). In this debate about what constitutes ‘teacher professionalism’, it is important to recognise that the use of the term ‘professionalism’ is a double-edged sword, not only used in an ideological fashion by politicians, commentators and

educational authorities to control what teachers do, but also by teachers themselves as they seek to retain some control over their work (Smyth et al. 2000).

As the emergence of a global economy increased the pressure on the education systems of individual countries to produce students with globally competitive skill sets (Bell and Hansbro 2007), Sachs (2001) argued that a form of managerial professionalism has emerged as the dominant discourse in education, championed by politicians and drawn from the world of business, with its emphasis on efficiency and compliance. This conception of professionalism therefore perceives teachers as fundamentally functionaries of the state, (Gale and Densmore 2003), who are accountable to the public for the achievement of targets set by the central authority. In contrast, but not equal in power, is an alternative discourse of professionalism, usually called democratic professionalism (Preston 1996), which seeks to engage communities in collaborative work with teachers and which struggles against the compliance culture of managerialism to create 'space' for teacher control over their work. While it is self-evident how an inspection framework serves a managerialist definition of professionalism, the role of continuing professional development is more ambiguous. The dominant discourse does seek to limit the autonomy of teachers by imposing a technicist skills-based conception of training, as evidenced in the UK by the emergence of similar sets of Teacher Standards in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, which are claimed to be a benchmark against which teachers can be judged against and trained towards achieving. By focusing on the effectiveness of teachers (in achieving nationally imposed and narrowly conceived targets for education), managerial professionalism acts to shape the way that teachers act, talk and think, both in a public capacity and in the classroom itself (Sachs 2003). The

inspectorial role of classroom observation in such a context is to check that teachers are performing at least at a minimum level of competence (Kennedy 2007). This has the effect of squeezing out more democratic, collaborative and alternative visions of what it means to be a teacher (Harber and Serf 2006).

Models of Continuing Professional Development are an even more complex arena of competing definitions, serving different interests (Coffield 2000), including social control in times of work conflict, through to self-actualisation by personal growth. Kennedy (2005) identified nine models of CPD, organised around three purposes. For example, a top-down training model was useful as a transmission mode for new knowledge, while an action research model was aimed at developing teachers' critical skills and increasing their impact on educational reforms and debates (the transformative purpose). Between these two sat transitional modes of CPD that could be adapted to either a technicist or an empowering agenda. Participants in CPD courses do recognise the contradictory purposes of engagement, seeing it as an opportunity for personal development, while at the same time acknowledging that the interests of the organisation are also being met (Friedman and Phillips 2004; Hustler et al. 2003; Peeke 2000). Teachers tend to conceptualise CPD therefore as actions which are done to them, usually through some form of event that is separate from everyday school activities (Hustler et al., 2003) and often with an agenda far from the professional development of individual teachers (see Fraser et al. 2007 on the English National Literacy Strategy CPD events). In addition, Gray and Bryce (2007) argued that efforts to reform teaching through CPD have been unsuccessful because 'they fail to acknowledge teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs and attitudes' (Gray and Bryce 2007, 172).

While most CPD is therefore experienced as a ‘one-off’ event, Eraut (2001) argued that the actual learning and development that may flow from such opportunities involves a significant period of professional practice subsequent to the formal CPD input. Similarly, in the United States, teachers reported that sustained hands-on CPD that deployed active modes of learning and was linked to classroom practice was the most effective model (Garet et al. 2001). This has implications for any classroom observation activity in schools, where observation purely for the purposes of checking basic competences is unlikely to result in changes in practice. More sustained observational programmes linked to reflective practice and agreed foci are more likely to promote the interplay between CPD events and improved professional practice (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002; Daley 2001). Moves towards a less transmissive mode of CPD, which seek to engage professional teachers in setting their own development agendas and exploit their expertise in everyday activity in schools rather than an ‘off-site’ venue, have an international dimension. Many countries are exploring new ways of delivering CPD that focus on empowering teachers through collaborative techniques of training that draw upon in-house expertise, as well as the external agent of change (Coolahan 2002).

Classroom Observation as a Tool for Development

Classroom observation has a long, but not necessarily welcome, history in teacher education and appraisal. Traditionally, it was first associated with pre-service training, then initial training in a first job, then competency procedures and only more latterly with inspection and quality assurance measures. Given this unfolding history,

classroom observation has also been a ‘site of struggle’ between teachers, anxious to preserve professional autonomy and fearful of a mechanism that is mainly associated with immaturity in teaching or with incompetence and the more managerialist approaches that see observation as a key element in teacher accountability – a guarantee that the job is being done ‘properly’ (Pianta and Hamre 2009). Classroom observation therefore is often resisted by teacher (Gottesman and Jennings 1994), who become anxious when being observed by others (Quirke 1996; Wang and Day 2001), whose main interest might not be the learning and teaching that is happening, but the achievement of performance indicators or establishing audit trails to assure inspection teams that currently approved practices are being implemented in the classroom (Fitzpatrick 1995; Cockburn 2005). The contradictory purposes that classroom observation can serve increases the anxiety and resistance of teachers, especially where the purpose is not clearly laid out (Hatton 2008). The pattern of observation and the status of the observer also inform teachers’ responses to it. Lam (2001) reported that where Principals or section heads were the main observers, teachers saw observation primarily as an issue of appraisal and not as a tool for professional development, which would be their preference.

The use of classroom observation as a research tool has also had a long history, especially in the United States (Roberson 1998). Roberson distinguishes between low-inference observations, where pre-determined behaviours are looked for and ‘checked off’ when observed, and high-inference observations where degrees of behaviour are identified and assigned a numerical value. She also identified a large range of rating scales and observation instruments that have been used, but cited the caution of Poster and Poster (1991) that any schedule should be sensitive to ‘the prevailing

circumstances of the individual educational setting' (Roberson 1998, 5). The focus of earlier observation schedules tended to be on specific teacher behaviours rather than the classroom as a whole (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 1990) such as the allocation of teacher's time to particular practices (Brophy and Evertson 1976). However, the research purpose of classroom observation is mainly unconnected with changing the behaviour of teachers directly, but rather a way of understanding and theorising about the behaviours that are observed. As such, they have mainly been used in an evaluative way and not as a transformative tool.

However, more recent programmes of classroom observation in the United States have been linked with improving attainment (Pianta and Hamre 2009) and have used large-scale standardised observation schedules to 'score' teacher performance along theoretically informed dimensions. For example, Pianta, La Paro and Hamre (2008) used CLASS (Classroom Assessment and Scoring System) to measure the quality of instruction, classroom organisation and emotional support in classrooms through rating particular elements. In the CLASS schedule, emotional support encompasses elements such as positive classroom climate and regard for student perspectives, while instructional support would include the quality of feedback and concept development. This approach is common in large-scale observation programmes, where schemes rate specific behaviours in terms of contribution to effective teaching (Brophy 1999; Pressley et al. 2003). As an indication that the main focus of these types of observation is the collection of data rather than to change teacher's practices directly, the creators of these scales are concerned primarily with issues such as content validity and inter-rater reliability (Van Tassel-Baska, Quek and Feng 2007) and not with impact. In most of these schedules the aim is not to change specific teacher's

practices in the classroom but to generate principles of good practice that may or may not be taken up by the teaching community at large. While the results of such studies provide fascinating insights into the generality of the classroom experience, for example, the inconsistency of most students' exposure to high-quality teaching (Pianta and Hamre 2009), it is not clear how these insights are translated into meaningful and effective professional development for any teachers. Indeed, it could be argued that the use of rating scales as identifiers of desirable or undesirable behaviour is reminiscent of observations by England's government Inspectors, where teacher actions are checked off as 'satisfactory', 'good' or 'outstanding', but with limited feedback whatever the outcome and certainly with no attempt to input into improving specific teacher's practice.

The role of classroom observation in the inspection of English schools and colleges has a similarly chequered history to the use of classroom observation as research tool. As O'Leary (2006) pointed out, in the Further Education sector (16-19 year olds and adult learners) the Inspection services claimed to be able to highlight good practice and therefore contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning (HMI/OFSTED 2002). However, the systematic use of classroom observation in Inspections has shifted between intensive and less intensive programmes and with reduced time given to any feedback to the observed, making it unclear how the observations can directly impact upon practice. O'Leary went on to argue that assessment-led classroom observations, such as those carried out by OFSTED, do not 'inform and improve current practice but simply make a judgement about the quality of teaching and learning being observed.' (O'Leary 2006, 192). Moreover, aspects of the Inspection of the classroom process make meaningful conclusions difficult. For example, observation of part of a teaching session rather than the whole may make for insecure

judgements. More fundamentally as Wajnryb (1992) pointed out, the existence of a number of desirable, but low-level teaching skills, as evidenced by a tally chart, does not of itself necessarily lead to good teaching.

Where classroom observation is used as part of a CPD programme or a peer support mechanism, then certain conditions have been established as being conducive to sustained learning. Peer coaching, as against observation by line managers, reduces the stress that many observers experience when being watched and is more likely to lead to learning (Joyce and Showers 2002). On the other hand, there is evidence that the support of senior management to programmes of observation aimed at changing classroom practice is central to the implementation of new classroom strategies, as without that assured support, teachers are reluctant to chance innovations (Soulsby and Swain 2003; OFSTED 2004). However, Cordingley et al. (2003) recorded positive results from programmes of observation that drew upon observers from outside the school, as long as there was support from within the school for continuing improvements in practice and opportunities for collaborating with others to be structured into development activities (Lovett and Gilmore 2003). Fielding et al. (2005) found that Higher Education Institutions were well regarded by teachers when they engaged with CPD programmes. Another crucial element of successful observation also seems to be that teachers have a sense of being part of the process. This is important in setting foci for an observation, rather than it just being imposed from above (Smith et al. 2004) and in the professional dialogues that follow the observation in the feedback. The importance of feedback is not just in its reporting on the observation, but in the opportunity it provides for reflection through dialogue between the observer and the observed. Without this reflective lens, it is more

difficult for teachers to ‘enact’ the changes in practice needed for professional growth (Clarke and Hollingsworth 2002).

If the aim of such CPD observation programmes is to transform teaching practices, then teachers also need to be shown how to transcend the ‘script’ for teaching that they learned in their own experience of a transmission mode of education (Loucks-Horsley et al. 2003). In approaching a transformative programme, teachers need to develop an open mind towards change, being willing to analyse strengths and weaknesses and committed to remedying practices through trying out new ways of doing things (Fielding et. al. 2005). One of the key reasons for the failure of some CPD programmes, as reported by New Zealand educationalists, was the inability of teachers to see how innovative practices could practically be introduced into the classroom (Bell and Gilbert 1996). They concluded that, for successful transformative CPD, the interests and beliefs of teachers need to be taken into consideration, that supportive relationships were vital to ensure risk-taking and professional relevance was needed to ensure attempts at implementation in the classroom, which was the arena in which teachers would enact any learning derived from observation (Reeves and Forde 2004).

The Observation Partnership

Being aware of the contradiction between ‘observation as inspection’ and ‘observation as CPD’, initial discussions between three 16-19 institutions and a University School of Education about the possibility of collaborating on a programme of observations focused on the principles that would underpin the Partnership. There

were several forces pulling in different directions; on one hand, there was a genuine desire to improve classroom practice in its own right, so that the students would receive an enhanced learning experience; on another, there was a perceived need, on management's behalf, to prepare teachers for Inspection, so that their performance would be the best it could; and a third thrust was the collection of performance 'scores' as data for Inspection and self-evaluation purposes. The over-arching aims of the partnership were therefore established as:

- To offer an independent commentary on the quality of learning and teaching, using external observers
- To support the self-assessment of learning and teaching, as part of staff development
- To prepare staff for Inspections
- To provide indicative grades for learning and teaching to contribute to quality assurance reports.

Beneath these aims, other principles of practice were established in order to gain the trust and cooperation of the teachers who would be observed. The first established was that Reports would be confidential to the individual and to the Senior Manager of the institution and would not be used as part of any appraisal process. However, teachers could use any reports as evidence of their teaching, for example, if preparing a case for promotion or where crossing a pay threshold was contingent on independent evidence of good teaching. Secondly, observations would be carried out, as much as possible, by teacher trainers in the School of Education, although staff in the institutions themselves would also be trained by the partnership in the system. The purpose of this was two-fold. Firstly, the institutions and the School of Education had

a long tradition of working together in training new teachers and indeed, many staff had been trained locally, so there was already a bond of trust existing between teachers and the trainers. Secondly, the broad experience of the trainers in observing large numbers of varied classrooms and many different strategies and their engagement in research on classrooms would avoid one of the dangers of in-house observation, which is the replication of a limited range of preferred strategies. The third principle was that the observed teachers should be engaged in the process as much as possible, for example, through the right to have a verbal debrief and discussion immediately following the observation (despite the timetabling difficulties that this presented), through advance warning of any observation and the provision of the observation schedule as part of that notice period, through the delivery of a substantive written report that had been standardised and through the right to request that the observer focus on any aspect of practice prior to the observation (Rose and Reynolds 2008).

Distinctive Aspects of the Observation Partnership

Once the principles had been agreed, negotiations between the partners shifted to the mechanics of the process. The key aspect of this was that all partners contributed to the development of the documentation and processes as equals, so that all parties could claim ownership of the scheme (Connolly and James 1998). An observation schedule was agreed, divided into 5 areas that were conceived, not as rigid categories, but as broad over-lapping areas of practice. The five areas were; Learning outcomes, Planning and preparation, Content and presentation, Assessment issues and Relationship to the learners. These were drawn from an examination of the literature

on classroom observation at that time and the experience of the teacher trainers. Each of the five areas was sub-divided (17 sections in total) and each sub-division contained a series of questions about the practice being observed. Again, these were intended to represent issues of practice and were not a 'tick chart' of good practice. For example, in the Assessment section, under 'Questioning', the following appeared:

- Are questions appropriately pitched and framed?
- Do questions promote formative assessment?
- Are students given time to develop their answers fully?
- Are misconceptions and mistakes corrected?
- Is there variety in the form of questioning that promotes learning?
- Are there opportunities for peer questioning?

As the Partnership unfolded, the schedule was revisited each year by a steering group and changes made where appropriate. For example, a section on 'written work' (hardly ever commented on) has been replaced by an 'Assessment for Learning' section, as that issue gained prominence.

The thorny question of the grading system was then discussed and established. The Partnership did not want to follow the UK's national Inspection grading system, as it was felt that this did not support the CPD aspect of the scheme and would increase resistance from members of staff (O'Leary 2006). Instead, the partnership wanted a developmental grading system that could encompass different levels of experience and career points. Therefore the baseline was originally set as 'The standard expected of a teacher at the end of their initial period of training', which has subsequently been upgraded to 'the end of their initial induction year' that is, after one year of teaching.

Thus, beginning teachers would be expected to be performing around that standard. Scoring below that standard could be a trigger for supportive work by the department or faculty. The three grades above the Induction level, were ‘experienced teacher standard’, which would be the expected level for all staff after a few years of teaching, ‘very good standard’ and ‘excellent standard’.

Each level of the grading system had criterion attached that would provide the rationale for awarding that grade. Each criterion had a numerical as well as a qualitative dimension. In doing the observations and writing the report, observers were trained each year to look for aspects of practice that **had** to be improved, so that either the learners’ experience was enhanced or in order to meet an inspection target. These were the issues that would appear as ‘points for action’ in the written report. The number of points for action and their dispersal across the five reporting areas were the main factors in awarding any level. For example, in the ‘very good’ level, the descriptor was ‘few problems, with one main area suggested for development’ and in the Experienced category, ‘a wide range of good practice identified, but with two or three issues in two or more Areas suggested as targets for development’.

However, the Partnership did not want the scheme just to be a deficit model of reporting, but rather to also identify what was good about the practice being observed and to encourage shifts in practice to enhance learning. The observers’ training was therefore focused, not just on awarding the correct level to a session, but also in singling out and recording what teachers were doing well. In addition, ‘points for consideration’ were included in the reporting document. These did not carry the same weight as ‘points for action’ but were suggestions for doing things differently or

adding to already good practice to maximise the benefits of an activity for the learners. The actions commended in both points for action and points for consideration had to be specific and detailed and not just pious wishes. The rationale for these was that, even if teachers considered the suggestions and rejected them for whatever reason, they were engaging in reflection about their teaching, which in itself has the potential to shift practice in the future (Cordingly et al. 2004).

In line with the principle of giving ownership of the process as much as possible to the teachers themselves, the guarantee to an immediate debrief would be an opportunity for a professional dialogue between observer and the observed, where the teacher could explain decisions that had been made in the classroom or offer alternative views of what had gone on. The debrief was therefore a crucial step in the compilation of the written report, which was to be delivered to the teacher and to the manager of the Partnership within the institution. The report was substantive, averaging about 3-4 sides and organised around the five Areas, with a level awarded at the end. In composing the reports, observers are required to refer to specific instances and examples wherever possible, so that any suggestions or targets for action are evidenced, not just asserted. To assure some reliability in the process of reporting and awarding, all reports are seen by the manager of the University side of the Partnership, who standardises judgements on the basis of the written report and the decisions made by the whole team on individual cases.

The scheme was also established as a developmental one through an agreement that the observations should run in the first instance for three years. This meant that individual teachers who had been observed more than once would be able to

demonstrate improvements in practice from one observation to the next, and, although this would not necessarily always lead to an improvement in the level awarded, the sustained professional relationship between observers and observed should assist an upward movements in individual levels. As the scheme has now been running for seven years, with only a few changes in observation personnel, the partnership has had to move observers around to prevent an 'over-cosy' relationship developing between specific pairings and assure the reliability of judgements that have been made.

The success of the partnership can be measured firstly, in its longevity. As far as we are aware, it is a unique observational partnership, which has built up a great deal of trust and robustness over the years. Though the scheme is reviewed each year by the managing committee, it has remained substantially the same and therefore has a continuity of experience that singles it out from other observations of classrooms and, in particular, from research-focused observation programmes that tend to be either short-lived and intense, or large-scale and longitudinal, with standardised check-list approaches (Pianta and Hamre 2009). The Partnership has built up a rich database of 924 detailed observation reports between 2002 and 2009. While a statistical analysis of the changing grades is possible, it would be difficult to establish firmly the impact of the observation programme on the quality of teaching and learning overall. This is because there are so many factors that militate against a robust statistical analysis. So, there has been a small increase in overall attainment over the seven years, with an upward movement from 'Experienced Teacher Standard' to 'Very Good Experienced Teacher Standard' and a smaller movement from 'Very Good' to 'Excellent Experienced Teacher Standard'. However, that broad finding hides a great deal of

‘churning’ from one year to the next. This movement up and down the grade levels occurs for a number of reasons. Firstly, new (and often newly trained) teachers come into the system each year and long established teachers retire or leave. Individual teacher’s levels may come down as well as remain the same or go up, because they are likely to be observed with a different class, often at a different level of programme or even in a different subject. Not all the teachers in an institution will be observed each year, so the cohort, chosen by the institutions themselves may represent a particular focus for that institution (all teachers in particular departments, all those coming up to threshold payments, all those who achieved a particular level in their previous observation etc.).

Given the difficulty of establishing the overall impact, a different approach to analysing the data generated by the programme is needed. Therefore, in this paper, a content analysis of the texts of these reports is the main focus, with particular, but not exclusive, attention paid to teachers who have had multiple observations. This allows an analysis of the changing practice of the observed teachers over the period of the programme. Thus, the changing subject of the points for action (and points for consideration) over the years will establish an understanding of which practices may be successfully changed through observation of the classroom and which may be more resistant to transformation, as well as giving insights into the process of enacting change in the classroom. In analysing this rich seam of data, four areas emerged that could be shown **either** to be open to changing practice **or** were more resistant to change. These were not the only areas of practice that could be reported (indeed, there are many), but these four appeared consistently, in all three institutions and across all subject boundaries.

Findings and discussion

Planning for learning

The first area to examine is that of ‘planning for learning’. At the start of the programme, session planning documents across all colleges, subjects and levels showed a similar propensity to include general statements of aims and/or objectives as the starting point for delivery. These often took the form of covering what would happen in the session in terms of a chronology of events or identifying what the teacher would be doing at various points in the session itself. An example of a comment from an observer in 2002 was:

‘You explained what was going to go on to the students and set out the purpose of the session clearly. However, in your lesson plan itself, the learning outcomes were not so clearly stated. You distinguish there between aims and objectives, but in both cases, they were more like a statement of activity (i.e. what was going to happen) rather than learning outcomes.’

This focus on the teacher and teacher activity was identified by the partnership as one that should be targeted in subsequent years, in order to move teachers towards thinking about student learning rather than teacher activity. What seemed to be at the time, a relatively straightforward process turned into a more protracted sequence of moves, in which two key stages had to be undergone. Initial points of action tended to offer practical strategies for developing a focus on student activity and learning:

‘Use a template for your lesson planning that divides activities for student and teacher into separate columns.’

The net effect of this was that, in the following year of observations, descriptions of student activity began to appear in session planning documents and/or statements about the learning that would take place, which concentrated solely on the knowledge that they would attain. While this represented a greater attention paid to student learning, the Partnership wanted to develop a more sophisticated use of learning outcomes that informed the whole of the planning document and the subsequent delivery in the session. Two key targets were agreed. The first was to maximise the range of learning outcomes that the teachers were already delivering in their sessions, but were unacknowledged either in the planning document itself or explicitly to students engaged in the session. The second target was to encourage the use of learning outcomes as triggers for deciding which strategies to adopt, which assessment tools to deploy and how learning could be acknowledged in some form of plenary activity. Specific points for action that focused on these targets obviously varied according to the session seen and which aspect of practice they were being connected to, but examples were (2003-2004):

‘Phrase learning outcomes in terms of what students will have achieved at the end of the session. Identify in an appropriate box on the session plan **the knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes** that will be developed.’ (my emphasis on the range of outcomes)

‘Develop the session plan so that the widest range of learning outcomes is identified. It might be useful to identify the Learning Outcomes in relation to what might be **expected of All/Most/Some of the class**. The students might need more practice and

support in articulating answers, preparing oral responses and more practice in listening to each other. Encourage students to speak more clearly, loudly and in sentences. Key skills need to be more widely acknowledged.’ (my emphasis on differentiation)

‘On your session plan, distinguish between activities and learning outcomes. **Share your expectations with the students and review with them at the end of the session.** Ensure your planning builds in ways of assessing what learning is taking place. This will mean allowing the students to be more involved in exploring the poem for themselves. (my emphasis on explicitness and checking achievement).’

In all cases, specific examples and suggestions were given as a steer to future development. For example (2004):

‘As the focus of this session was on the development of examination skills, it would have been useful to refer explicitly to examination skills in the learning outcomes. By being open about the specific skills being addressed, it transforms the session from practising particular questions to learning principles for approaching exam questions, which are much more transferable. These might include techniques for understanding questions (auditing a question), matching answers to mark allocations, identifying key points, what is meant by action words etc.’

As the partnership developed, the comments on learning outcomes shifted towards the positive, as the observed teachers responded to the advice given and began to make much more structured use of learning outcomes in their planning of sessions. This does not mean that the transformation was complete or universal (though it was interesting that newly qualified teachers were more adept at using learning outcomes

as a key planning tool) and refinements could still be offered. For example, from 2007:

‘The learning outcomes were identified on paper and were transmitted to the students, both on PowerPoint and verbally. The learning outcomes covered a range of knowledge and skills including skills for learning.

Point for consideration: as you had targeted the study skill of skim reading as an important part of this session, is it worth explicitly talking about this skill in a little more depth at the appropriate moment?’

and

‘You requested that the observation should focus on learning outcomes as that had been the main point for action in your last observation. Your documentation showed that you had taken this issue on board and you have identified the range of learning outcomes that your strategies were aimed at producing. Even better, you have built into your planning document the assessment opportunities and products of the learning that enable you to gauge how far these learning outcomes have been fulfilled by individual students. This was especially important when you had students at different points in the Scheme of Work.’

Assessment for learning

The second issue of assessment for learning was different in that the section on it in the schedule was introduced in 2006, as a response to government and inspectorate emphasis on it as a key element of good practice. It was thus a relatively new idea

which even long-established teachers would have to embrace. The focus of assessment for learning in the schedule was on the use of formative feedback, differentiation in responding to and assessing students' learning, the use of target-setting both by teachers and by students themselves. In analysing the comments made in the first round of observations that examined assessment for learning, it was clear that there was already a great deal of good practice in place, especially in feedback on written and oral work, but in wider classroom practice also. For example, from 2006

‘This was another strong feature in this session and there were many examples of using questions, framing tasks and giving the students responsibility for their own and other’s learning. For example, in the starter, you asked a question of a student which did not elicit an answer. You then asked the rest of the students to re-phrase the question for her to assist her understanding. As it happened, they did not deliver on this occasion, but the tactic is an excellent one for all the students. Again, when the young woman who was struggling asked you if she had coded correctly, you responded, ‘Try it and see’, passing the onus of judging success back to her. Again, when one of the lads said he had cracked a particularly difficult bit of coding, you said ‘Now show it to him’ meaning his paired worker. In the plenary, the checklist worked, even though they had not completed any of the stages (not because they had not been trying, but because the first stage was complex and included If statements!) because they, not you, came up with the idea of ‘half a tick’. It was their recognition that learning had taken place in a complex area of the specification.’

However, much of this practice was implicit and many comments in that year, such as the one above, were designed to make explicit the good practice that was evident. In other cases, there was a need identified for assessment for learning to become more firmly embedded in teacher practice:

‘There was implicit assessment of prior learning through the ‘Blockbuster’ quiz, but not everyone was able to fully participate in this activity and so the effects were marginal. You did not explore student understanding of the marking criteria for the tasks in unit 4, which was the main topic of the lesson.

Point for action: Make the exploration of the marking criteria an individual activity and allow the students *themselves* to highlight particularly important criteria and give their interpretations of exactly what is being assessed.’

By 2009, through a continued focus and specific advice being given, the balance of comments on assessment for learning had also shifted towards the positive, with more examples of teachers deploying strategies where students were learning from each other or being deployed to teach other students important aspects of learning, for example:

‘(Assessment for learning) was a central part of the session, using pairs of students to offer advice to each other on how to improve their booklets and then getting them into fours to share their ideas. There was also a public dimension, when you asked each of the groups to contribute one idea to the discussion. This worked extremely well in that the students were totally focused on the task for nearly all the time and did offer good ideas to each other. I thought the crucial factor in this success was that you explained carefully how everyone could benefit in terms of marks if they went about this task seriously. You provided appropriate support and encouragement for those who were less engaged, although these were few and far between.’

It is worth noting that the last example was not developed from specific advice given to the teacher in a previous observation but was an extension of her practice that

emerged from the professional dialogue about assessment for learning in the previous debrief session.

Questioning

The use of oral questions by teachers is a central part of their practice and is a multifaceted activity. In identifying questioning as a target for development initially, the Partnership was interested in promoting a move beyond the checking mechanism that was thought to be the main way that questions were being used. The situation found in the early days of the observation partnership presented a more complicated picture. Partly because questioning is so much ‘taken-for-granted’ by teachers, there was little evidence in the planning documents that question-and-answer sessions were planned for in any direct way, but were rather designated as a slot in the session plan, with few lines of questioning explicitly developed. Moreover, as a sort of ‘teacher reflex’, question-and-answer sessions were often included without establishing what purpose was to be achieved in asking questions. Many of the teachers in early observations displayed practices which nullified the benefits of the question-and – answer segments of the session. For example, from 2002,

‘Avoid jumping in to provide comments. Wait for students to think answers through.
Differentiate questions as appropriate.’

‘Resist the temptation to develop the responses from the group yourself; make them do the thinking.’

‘Your questions were better once you had got into the swing, as at the beginning you tended to take their responses as the answer you wanted to hear rather than what they actually said.’

When these aspects were pointed out to them, they often seemed surprised as it was an element of their practice that they had thought little about, but rather assumed that, as long as students were putting their hands up and answering the questions then they were being effective in their questioning.

Throughout the whole of the observation period, from 2002-2009, a more intractable obstacle to good questioning appeared consistently, and that was the use of simple checking questions on knowledge gained, rather than more probing, deeper questions that prompted students to articulate more sophisticated understanding. The former were identifiable by the shortness of the student response and the latter by more sustained contributions from the students.

‘Use a fuller range of types of questions that require students to understand, explain, evaluate, describe and not just respond with one or two word answers.’

While many of the teachers did develop their questioning techniques in some ways, for example, in not rushing to answer a question for the student who was having difficulty, the move towards a more nuanced use of different types of question was less noticeable, even over a number of years. For some teachers, it was possible to shift practice in the area of questioning substantially. This occurred particularly where the observed teacher requested the observer to focus on questioning in observations and where the teacher then planned to deliver a sufficient range of different types of

question until they became second nature. For example, in 2006, one such ICT teacher received the following comment:

‘(Questioning) is a strength of your performance in that you use questioning to great effect in drawing out the students to think about aspects of problems to be solved. You also spread the questions around the group so that all have to contribute, while you share your time with individual students in paired work equitably. For example, when the most advanced pair got stuck on the coding, you did not just tell them what the answer was but led them through the problem, drawing on their previous experience, until enlightenment came. You then praised them appropriately – and were they pleased? Their faces lit up.’

Student involvement

A key target for the Partnership right from the beginning was to shift the balance of any session from ‘teacher-talk’ to ‘student-centred’ activity. The participation of students in sessions was seen as important in engaging them positively in learning and therefore in increasing student performance in examinations. While individual teachers did show some change in the distribution of teacher or student-led activities over the period 2002-2009, there was still a tendency for teacher-talk to dominate. Even in paired or group activities teachers often intervened at early stages of student focused work, not in terms of behaviour management but in relation to the outcomes of tasks set. For example:

‘You set up group work and then did not allow them sufficient time to organise **themselves** into effective working units. Instead, you immediately intervened and directed individuals into particular group roles. Part of the benefit of group work is

that the students learn to collaborate amongst themselves and need some time to establish their own ways of working.’

For some teachers, the need to ‘not let go’ was evident through a number of observations and was legitimated cogently in debriefing through reference to the need for examination success or the requirement to complete the curriculum in a limited time. Where such teachers were not willing to explore alternative ways of doing these things that were more student-centred, then resistance to change became the dominant response to reported comments on this issue. On the other hand, where a teacher was prepared to establish over a period of time a culture of collaboration between teacher and student and between students, then the balance between the two approaches could be shifted to meet individual student needs more effectively. For example, in 2008:

‘There was sensitive use of a variety of strategies depending on where each individual was in relation to the Scheme of Work. There was a judicious mix between teacher-led and student-focused strategies. You made the (correct) decision to have pairs instead of threes, but by allowing them a computer each in their pairs, I thought at first that there would be little discussion between the pairs as they focused on their own screen. However, this was not the case as the pairs did engage with each other on the task, partly as a result of the atmosphere of cooperation you had obviously established as part of the ethos of the group, but also under your direction at some crucial points.’

Conclusion

In exploring these four aspects of practice, it can be seen that there are some elements of teaching that can be changed by a sustained programme of classroom observation

and some aspects that are more resistant. The evidence presented in the findings showed that teachers could change their routines and performance more easily in 'planning for learning' and 'assessment for learning' than in 'questioning' and 'student involvement'. In the case of the former two aspects, teachers' practices were susceptible to change, but for different reasons. The first aspect is where teachers already engage in much good practice but are unaware that they are fulfilling a particular requirement of 'Inspectorial' definitions of good teaching. They know what works, without ever necessarily articulating it, but when asked about their particular practice in the debriefing, they can explain the reasons for their choices, in relation to assessment for learning for example. Moreover, the explicit expression and acknowledgement of good practice does have further effects, in that, by reflecting on the 'why' they have chosen a particular form of practice, such teachers go on to develop their practice in that area as they seek to maximise the benefits of particular strategies. In particular, the increasing use of peer assessment was a notable development in this area.

The second aspect susceptible to teachers changing their practice is where practical and specific advice can be given to offer teachers an 'easy' way forward, though this is not necessarily a 'quick fix' solution. In the case of learning outcomes, this was achieved through two stages, as we have seen. The first stage was to shift the focus from the teacher to the student in terms of the planning process and the second was to integrate the identification of learning outcomes into the teaching and assessment strategies that would permit the achievement and consolidation of the learning, in ways that the teacher could be assured of. Though the second stage seems to be the more difficult of the two, the Partnership found that, once the connection between

learning, strategies and assessment had been established, teachers were adept at thinking through the inter-relationships and planning sessions that were varied sufficiently to deliver the different types of learning outcome and check that the learning had been absorbed.

There are also two aspects of teaching that teachers find more difficult (but not impossible) to change. The first is where the practice is so complex and nuanced that it is difficult for teachers to develop their practice across a number of fronts simultaneously. Thus, with questioning, there does seem to be some ‘natural performers’, who use questioning to promote deeper understanding as a matter of instinct and some who can develop their questioning in this direction with support and advice. However, for others, there needs to be further, more focused input into their questioning techniques beyond an observation programme (for example, through peer observation of good practitioners, or departmental development programmes that focus specifically on this issue) if progress is to be made.

The second aspect is where programmes of improvement come up against deeply ingrained habits and suppositions about the nature of teaching. Traditionally, teaching has been about delivering knowledge to students and there are resilient notions of the ‘proper’ way to teach that rely on a dominant teacher-focused mode of delivery. In a culture where long-established practices are seen as the most appropriate way of teaching (not least by students and their parents themselves) then effecting change can be very difficult. This is compounded in situations where success in public examinations is the main measurable outcome of the teaching establishment. The

pressure to 'get through the curriculum' and to achieve good grades creates a pressure on teachers to maintain control of teaching sessions in direct ways.

After seven years of operation, the Partnership believes that sustained observation offers a robust way of changing some classroom practices and in making inroads in others. It is the continuity of the programme that allows progress to be established and to ascertain where and how change can be effected. From the outset, the intention of the Partnership was to develop a form of 'democratic professionalism', in which a dialogue between observer and the observed would facilitate improvements in practice that would benefit both the teacher and their students. Those teachers who were open to the possibilities of change did engage with the process and, in subsequent observations, demonstrated improvements in their ability to engage, stretch and challenge their students. However, the existence of an external inspectorial regime constrained the development of that dialogue in some of the teachers being observed and led to a form of resistance that manifested itself as a 'going through the motions' of the observation process, while continuing with their usual ways of working. Given the sensitivities of teachers to being observed, the initial principle of reporting only to the senior management and to the observed teacher was a necessary one, but it has now outgrown its usefulness. The Partnership is moving towards a situation where the overall points for action in a department are shared, in order for members to develop plans together for moving forward on the more intractable issues of teaching and learning they face, and confronting the complexities and cultural obstacles that stand in the way of change. In this way, by building on the collaborative activities of the processes of observation, the Partnership is seeking to overcome any resistance.

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