Situating observations as part of a teaching portfolio

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Within higher education (HE), there has long been a debate about how best to conduct and situate observations of teachers in their practice. Added to this, there is the question of what is actually being observed. Lee Shulman (1987, p.20), for example, suggests that *"teachers cannot be adequately assessed by observing their teaching performance without reference to the content being taught"*. Such a sentence, simple as it may seem, essentially contains a loaded term, which is the inherent suggestion that teaching performance is something to be 'assessed'. This paper argues against that on the basis of research carried out in the context of academic English teaching within a business school in a British university setting.

Historically, assessment and appraisal have been key drivers for teacher observation. Recently, there has been an increasing emphasis on the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF), coupled with a greater expectation of all practitioners to have higher educational fellowship status. Though each of these is governed by a separate body, educators may feel as if they are under more professional scrutiny than ever before. For many professionals, this is new terrain. It can feel uncomfortable too, particularly as there is more to being an educator than classroom performance alone. Furthermore, the speed of change has added to feelings of unease. Compton (2016) points out that in some institutions there has been no real history of teacher observation, unlike in other educational sectors. Peer observations have been introduced in some institutions, but a question remains as to how constructive or developmental these really are.

Observations, by their very nature, should be developmental (Donaghue, 2003). Pierson and Borthwick (2010, p.130) argue that any successful evaluation of professional development involves *"observing and documenting teacher behaviours 'in the thick' of classroom practice."* Here, we can see the language of development rather than undertones of assessment and appraisal. Additionally, there has been a drive in such studies as Breen (2018) to recognise HE practitioners as educators rather than teachers. Within that study, a group of educators in a business school context had their lessons tracked over a period of time, with developments mapped against participation in a series of workshops related to technology in teaching. Through shifting the focus to personal development rather than performance, these educators were more comfortable with the whole concept of observation. Rather than worrying about being judged, they were comfortable with being given feedback for developmental reasons. The areas that were explored in the observations and subsequent feedback included usage of technological resources and the scaffolding of students in academic skills and discipline-specific knowledge.

As a consequence of this process of observation and tailored feedback, educators became more skilled in using a range of resources in their classrooms. Alongside this, they grew more comfortable with the discipline-specific aspect of teaching students in such areas as Business, Economics and Human Resource Management. The process of observation proved successful because of a focus on development over time rather than a brief snapshot of a single performance in the classroom. This is why I believe that a greater sense of

educational development needs to be built into the process of capturing vignettes of what educators consistently do in normal, everyday practice. Such an aspiration, however, may be difficult to attain in reality, unless a holistic approach is taken and the right environment created to facilitate developmental platforms.

At the moment, it can feel as if instruments such as the TEF are geared more towards measuring what people say they do than towards what they actually do in practice. That creates an environment where educators are afraid to let their guard down and so constantly portray their work in glowing terms because it can be professionally damaging not to do so. This has echoes of the way that many online learning projects were portrayed in the early days of technologies' becoming a force within education. There was a fear of admitting any issues, weaknesses or need for improvement, as if to do so were to weaken the whole argument for using technologies in the classroom, especially when a lot of money had been invested. This created a situation where many online projects were, at the outset, portrayed in a singularly glowing light, almost as *"trophies on the mantelpiece"* (Breen, 2007).

Teaching should not fall into the same trap, even in this age of the TEF. When confronted with questioning about their practice, many HE professionals might retreat into a defensive, default position. At its worst, this creates a work environment where everything is based upon surface impressions rather than a purposeful analysis of practice and how it can actually be improved. Such an environment is one where espoused practice outweighs and even contradicts actual practice, as first discussed in Argyris and Schön (1974) within the context of organisational development. When educators feel that they must constantly espouse or portray their practice in the best possible light, a culture then develops of shielding that practice from public view. Such a culture can be overcome by placing a greater emphasis upon the idea of lifelong development and of seeing teaching as part of a *"developmental continuum"* (Richards, 1998, p.48). This can be further assisted by recognition of the fact that being an educator is not limited to classroom performance alone. In this case, that was done by looking at the same time at developments in other areas of practice. Such areas included developments in usage and design of online learning materials.

There are other ways, too, of giving educators a sense that their practice is something more than that of 'lone ranger' in the classroom (Samaras and Gismondi, 1998, p.716). There is a need to help teachers to investigate *"their own practice"* and develop *"the reflective and analytic skills necessary to integrate this into a process of informed professional growth"* (Garton and Richards, 2007, p.8). Much of the literature on teacher development talks about the importance of having a personal philosophy or teaching epistemology and one of the most pertinent is that described by Steve Mann (2005, p.105), who states that teaching is best viewed as *"a continuous process of becoming"* that is part of a journey which *"can never be finished"*. Taking such a philosophy – not just at a personal but also an institutional level – creates an environment where teachers do not feel a need to be the finished article in the classroom and thus afraid to be judged.

However, if the creation of such an environment were straightforward, somebody would have taken the recipe, bottled and mass-produced it by now. Across contexts and continents, this has been a battle for educational developers, teacher developers or whatever term we wish to use for those working in such units. Yet there may already be practices within educational development that can lend themselves to creating a more

comfortable environment into which teacher observations can slot. Within the educational development literature, there appears to be a growing emphasis upon the usage of teaching portfolios as a tool for personal development. Perhaps it could even be called a platform for personal development. Within a business school context, this is particularly useful because it involves practitioners' enacting many of the values and ideas we are trying to instil in our students; e.g. *"personal branding"* (Peters, 1997) or employability skills (Paterson, 2018).

Teaching portfolios have been around for a long time, as described in McDonald *et al.* (2016) and are closely allied to the idea of educational developers' portfolios as conceptualised in Wright and Miller (2000). Both of these two very similar types of portfolio owe their origins to the Canadian-born idea of a teaching dossier or dossier d'enseignement (Shore and Caron, 1986). According to Wright (2016), this can serve as *"an internationally recognised means of recording one's profile and narrative as a teacher in higher education"* (McDonald *et al.*, 2016). A teaching portfolio, then, is not intended as a means of appraisal or assessment or even to enhance career prospects, but rather as a vehicle for self-analysis, reflection and the building up of a coherent and personalised narrative of our teaching journeys. Presently, there appears to be a greater usage of this concept in the North American context and various examples of such portfolios can be found online - here[1] and here[2].

Significantly, the emphasis here is as much on the personal as on the professional and there are a great many similarities with the way that portfolios and applications are compiled for admission to fellowship of the United Kingdom's Higher Education Academy, now known as 'Advance HE'. These portfolios include endorsements from students and colleagues, lists of courses taught and achievements, as well as instances or snapshots of practice which come together to give a sense of the educator and the person as a whole. Going back to the idea of having a personal philosophy of practice, the professional and the person are inseparable. When we step into the classroom as educators, we do not leave the people we are at the classroom door. My own research into teacher development[3] - in the context of developing technological knowledge as a means of bolstering pedagogic knowledge – revealed that teachers become more confident and more expert in their practice when they draw on their own interests, background knowledge and personal philosophies to shape learning. Emphasising personal aspects and developmental aspects can thus serve to help educators feel more comfortable about the whole process of observations.

When the observation is part of a developmental portfolio, the act of being observed is much more of a partnership than the old-style idea of somebody coming in, sitting at the back of a classroom and ticking off twenty things wrong with the lesson. Although peer observation is one alternative to such a stifling, criticism-inducing environment, there are limits to what these types of intervention can achieve. They may be suitable for initial teacher training courses, but not for the all-round development of educators in today's HE environment, particularly in the versatile and cutting-edge disciplines found within business schools. Looking at this from a Vygotskian perspective, development proceeds not in a straight line but in a spiral. In order for a spark of development to occur, sometimes it is necessary for educators to get guidance from those more expert in specific areas. Thus, in the study of

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[1] https://oklportfolio.wordpress.com/
[2] https://mytechclassroom.com/teaching-portfolio-examples/
[3] https://www.uwestminsterpress.co.uk/site/books/10.16997/book13/

academic English educators, I was, at the outset, more expert in using technologies in teaching. I was able to offer educators a commentary on their practice and ideas for development when observing them as an inside researcher and manager in the language centre of a business school where they worked. By getting such advice purely for reasons of development rather than appraisal, they could then reflect on their practice and integrate new ideas if needed. The philosophy here was that new knowledge or new ideas should not be imparted to educators. Rather, as in Wilson and Berne (1999, p.194), knowledge should be *"activated'* by making everyone equal participants in the learning process.

Admittedly, equality – in the context of observations – can be a vague term. It can even suggest a lack of self-awareness about such issues as agency and power relations. This is why there are so many other aspects of observations that need to be improved in universities and teaching contexts in general before educators can feel confident about the idea of observations as a developmental tool. Some may see the concept of portfolios as just another means of appraising people, of gathering evidence that then gets used for other purposes by some hidden hand, driven by marketisation. Possibly such portfolios could just become another instance of espoused practices outweighing actual practice, another exercise in packing the cabinet with trophies. Again, this is where the climate needs to change. Development is not a competition and observations are not part of some internal league table or – in sporting terms – a one-off knockout competition where someone's worth as a teacher is decided by their classroom performance on a single day. If development is seen as a team exercise, as a shared activity, then even teaching portfolios are not an individual product. They are the output of a lifetime's shared journey, a journey of equals jointly trying to navigate the ever-changing HE landscape.

Business schools are ideally placed to take the lead in encouraging this type of developmental climate within HE. For a start, they have to champion the notion that practitioners should not be judged on teaching alone, regardless of language used in the TEF. By recognising people as educators, we can give them a greater sense of value and, by creating a forum for the display of teaching portfolios, we give them a showcase for the full range of their educational achievements. Presently, such portfolios are more commonly used in the North American context, but there is scope for greater usage of them in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, too. Doing this just requires a cultural shift that places value on all aspects of practice, rather than appraising classroom performance alone. By this means, the act of observing a classroom becomes less threatening. Again, the choice of language is important here, because – going back to the work of Argyris and Schön (*op.cit.*) – the way we speak about our environment reveals a great deal about our values. For today's educators, it is essential that their practice is valued by the institutions they work for and that best practice is shared and celebrated, not simply used for the purposes of TEF ratings. The act of observing teachers and offering feedback on such observations should always be done primarily for the purpose of their educational development.

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