

# Observing teaching in HE: A case study of classroom observation within peer observation

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## Abstract

Observation of teaching involves the observer and the observed working together to observe and provide feedback on each other's teaching practice, the focus being on both parties learning from shared classroom experiences and thus developing 'good practice'. Teaching observation provides a holistic view of learning and teaching in the classroom and includes study of the interactions taking place between the teacher and students as well as among the students themselves. The process of recording the observed behaviours, typically uses one of two distinct methodologies - peer or classroom observation. Peer observation involves observers providing descriptive feedback to their peers on learning and teaching practice. By contrast, classroom observation involves a more systematic approach, typically involving quantitative or ethnographic studies.

Although research is published on peer observation within Higher Education (HE) and on classroom observation in schools, the potential benefits of applying classroom observation techniques within peer observation in HE to enhance teaching practice have yet to be explored in depth. This research concerns the proposition that using classroom observation methodologies might widen the scope of peer observation within the field of business education in HE. The use of selected systematic classroom observation tools within peer observation is hypothesised as leading to rigorous data collection and thus more detailed feedback to the person observed, together with a deeper understanding of the observation process for the observer. In turn, it is hypothesised that teaching practice may be enhanced for both parties.

The research study is underpinned by experiential learning theory with the context, methodologies, results and conclusions set within Kolb's (1984) learning cycle of experience, observation, conceptualisation and experimentation, underpinned by reflection. It focuses primarily upon the observer's perspective within teaching observation in recognition of the wealth of learning that an observer might experience via the understanding and practising of differing observation methodologies. It is presented from the perspective of the researcher acting as a participant in a formal peer observation scheme within a business school in a new university.

Classroom observation tools help to focus observers on aspects of teaching practice that might not have been recorded through peer observation alone. The research indicates that although classroom observation methodologies are not likely to provide

an automatic recipe for enhanced learning and development, they can provide a different perspective on the observation process and thus play a part in developing observers as reflective practitioners of teaching and learning. Discussion of the findings within the peer observation team can lead to changes in teaching practice by all - to the benefit of teaching quality. However, the benefits of using systematic classroom observation tools can become clouded within the feedback process. An inappropriate choice of methodology - and potentially unrepresentative data - may lead to de-motivating feedback, presenting a dilemma within observation practice in HE. The research demonstrates how the use of different observation tools can raise awareness of the fallibility of the observation process. In turn, this influences the observer's perceptions and understanding when being the subject of such observations.

**Keywords:** Observation; development; teaching practice; quality; feedback