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ARTICLE

Title of article: Online peer observation: its value in teacher professional development, support and wellbeing

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Online peer observation: its value in teacher professional development, support and wellbeing

This article discusses an online peer observation project conceived to enhance teacher positivity and creativity in synchronous virtual classrooms. Those involved work part-time at the Open University (OU) in a blended context, and came from two different groups distant from each other and geographically dispersed within their own group also. As a result of the project, participants perceived an increase in their confidence and greater willingness to experiment. They appreciated better how they fitted into the wider OU teaching community, built new professional friendships and flexible communities of practice and developed a better understanding of how to progress their own self-development.

Keywords: Peer observation, Language teacher development, Synchronous online voice teaching
Community of practice, Teacher confidence

Introduction

This project arose from concerns that we, as academic leaders of language teaching teams in the South West of England and Scotland respectively, had shared about teacher development in virtual classrooms. Teaching session observations had led us to concur that some teachers, confident and creative in face-to-face teaching, were displaying a more authoritarian, more guarded teaching persona in synchronous online sessions.

Although potentially a developmental stage for some, others were establishing this as their online teaching persona per se. We wanted to re-establish their confidence and creativity.

From 2002, the Open University (OU) had gradually introduced teaching via virtual classrooms using synchronous online voice conferencing, and since 2008 all its part-time language teachers^c deliver real-time group teaching sessions via an audio web conference tool, *Elluminate Live*, as one component of a blended model. Participants can speak to but not see one another, and use an interactive whiteboard, text chat and breakout rooms.

Training had been offered via a UK-wide programme, online and face-to-face. However, because of the large number and part-time nature of staff and the rapid need for training,, development sessions had been predicated on an ‘input’ model led by expert teaching ‘peers’ or teacher developers. No observation opportunities were included, so teachers had to try out new techniques without seeing them work in others’ teaching. The only professional feedback they received subsequently was from academic managers like ourselves, as part of the separate quality assurance observation framework, and if their observation was due.

Cosh (1999, p24) suggests that ‘Good teachers need not only knowledge but enthusiasm, confidence, self-value, and a desire to question, experiment, and grow professionally’. This seems particularly pertinent in the online environment, where the range of potential interactions via various tools renders teachers’ engagement with learners ‘more flexible, diverse and ... even more demanding...’ (Gallardo, Heiser & Nicolson, 2011, p.219). Teachers may experience technical problems or lose a sense of control over the teaching and learning process. In face-to-face sessions they have techniques to overcome difficulties, but an online tool such as Elluminate requires *additional* strategies. Some teachers may feel they are operating at novice level again, with the attendant insecurities this brings. Others may have doubts about the tool’s validity

^c Teachers at the Open University work part-time. They have contact with a geographically-defined cross-language team led by an academic manager in one of thirteen locations in the UK, and with a UK-wide specific course teaching team. Systematic contact with colleagues teaching on a different course in a different location is rare.

as a teaching mode, impacting on their enthusiasm and confidence. Others may want to impose too much control while they come to grips with their own fears and insecurities.

For *new* teachers, observation of colleagues is often a standard part of development, but for experienced teachers, this can be rare or non-existent. Peer observation allows teachers who find themselves in the position of novice again to benefit from exposure to varied approaches. As Donnelly (2007, p.120) points out, referring to Bandura (1986), experiencing a model vicariously can improve an individual's self-efficacy, the belief one can succeed in specific situations.

The project was initially conceived to last one year, but further funding has allowed it to continue, and it is now entering its fourth year. This paper describes the first two years, where the focus was on developing languages teachers within their language teaching community and enhancing their aspirations around teaching in virtual classrooms. (In the third year, we included teachers from another faculty and will evaluate this in a future article). Evaluating practice change *per se* has not been part of this project, the focus being around participants' perception of their own professional growth.

Research background

Our work in teaching and learning development operates in a situated learning context (Lave & Wenger, 1991), where social practice and dynamics are important in examining the learning process, here in teachers' professional learning. In situated learning also important is 'the social relation between the participants' (Eraut, 2003, p.56), linking to Schuck, Aubusson and Buchanan's point (2008, p.216) that 'emotional well being and personal relationships are essential to enhanced teaching practice'.

Our beliefs about teacher development are influenced by Wenger's community of practice (2000), which enables the building of knowledge in a cogent and supportive way amongst professionals. Peer development can be instrumental in developing such communities, as Byrne, Brown and Challen point out

(2010, p.218), since it relies on dialogue and emphasises collaboration. They also suggest (ibid. p.217), in accordance with Peel (2005), that *one-off* observations are of little value in engendering communities and that participants require active participation within a cohesive group to be fully engaged. We also adopted Byrne et al's approach (ibid. p.218) in creating opportunities for focussed and planned confidential conversations to foster development and encourage the sharing and understanding of problems and solutions, thereby creating the means for participants to develop as a community of practice.

Our approach to what good teaching entails is underpinned by Kumaravadivelu's 'principled pragmatism', advocated within his 'post-method condition' (1994, 2003, 2006). Here teachers need to base their decisions on what best meets the particularity of their situation, such as group dynamics, learning needs, the prevailing institutional framework and socio-cultural milieu, not predicating their approach on a single methodology but drawing on what is needed to suit circumstance (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p.171). This, he suggests, requires the teacher to move towards Giroux's (1988) 'transformative intellectual' role and beyond that of 'pure technician' and of Schön's (1983) 'reflective practitioner.'

Kubanyiova's concept of the teacher self (2009) has been useful in examining teacher positioning in the development and practice context. Her 'ought-to teacher self' is that which the teacher believes the institution or manager requires. Her 'ideal teacher self' is the teacher's own professional aspiration to what their ideal practice would be. Her 'feared teacher self' is the embodiment of practice teachers consider undesirable but might find themselves adopting.

Research on peer observation and development is growing, with varying models in operation. Research pre-2001 is perhaps less relevant to our position, for, as Swinglehurst, Russell and Greenhalgh (2008, p.384) indicate, prior to then peer observation, in the UK at least, was often driven by Quality Assurance Agency requirements as part of the academic performance review process. Although, as Shortland (2010, p.296) points out, it was meant to be non-judgemental, in having to assess development needs, it

inevitably acquired an evaluative base, the focus being on observer comment on performance rather than on true peer dialogue. As Barp and Bennett (2008, p.560) note ‘... it is when practised from a purely developmental perspective, independently of quality assurance processes, that teaching staff engage most enthusiastically and genuinely with peer observation...’. Research post-2001 is therefore more pertinent to us, particularly Gosling (2002), Donnelly (2007), Swinglehurst et al (2008), Byrne et al (2010), and Shortland (2010). Our project differs, however, from those in campus-based universities in that our participants did not know all of their peer observation colleagues beforehand.

Gosling (2002, p.5) offers three types of peer observation model: Evaluation model, Development model and Peer Review model. Byrne et al (2010, p.219) add the Peer Development (PD) model, which extends into observation of student support. Our project, focussing purely on teaching sessions, aligns best with Gosling’s original peer review model. We adopted a non-judgemental climate, as favoured by Byrne et al (2010) and Donnelly (2007, p.122). In line with Donnelly (ibid. p.122), building on Gosling’s aim to replace the idea of ‘giver and receiver’ or ‘top-down model’, we aimed for ‘a dialogue model in which both parties are regarded as equal and mutual beneficiaries of the process’ and an ethos that was ‘formative, developmental, collaborative, reflective and enabling of a personal exploration of practice’.

Byrne et al (2010, p.226) suggest that to avoid groups becoming introspective, self-satisfied, and by implication, uncritically accepting of habitual practice, they should be flexible and fluid. We recognised, however, that this needs to be balanced with sustained contact and building trust and collaboration by establishing communities of practice over an academic year, which may continue independently afterwards. Trust and co-operation are highlighted as important in peer observation by Gosling (2002), Byrne et al (2010, p.216), Schuck et al (2008, p.297) and Shortland (2010, p.297). Donnelly (2007, p.117) also points out that the climate of peer observation should be ‘... encouraging of open debate, and supportive of risk-taking’.

Project framework, ethics and method

The project has operated within our unique context. Part-time staff opt in to additional staff development opportunities, over and above contract time, some unpaid, some paid. Participation in projects varies because staffing configurations change regularly and part-time teachers have to prioritise their staff development choices in any one year. Participation was therefore voluntary, but, as Knowles (1975) suggests, a self-diagnosed need for learning is more motivating than an externally diagnosed requirement. Participants received a token sum to acknowledge time involved, so, whilst these teachers may have opted in because they recognised their own needs, we remain unsure of the impact of the small financial incentive

Participants undertook a series of peer observations and discussions during the academic year, and participated in a final team review meeting. The project took place online through virtual classrooms, email and shared documentation. Each team involved a mix of languages, levels and locations, and a team leader acted as facilitator. Team leaders were colleagues of equal standing, volunteers and paid an additional sum. We provided initial information and guidance, after which participants managed the process themselves. The project operated in four phases:

- (1) familiarisation of participants with the aims and objectives; an introduction to the protocols of working as a ‘critical friend/learning friend’ (see below);
- (2) observations and reflective discussions;
- (3) a review meeting led by the team leader, who sent a written report to the researchers;
- (4) individual feedback questionnaires sent to the researchers.

Aims and process

The aims of the project, shared with participants, were to encourage them to:

- develop professionally in a peer environment without line manager intervention;

- create new teacher communities across geographical boundaries;
- share practice in online teaching environments;
- openly discuss issues from the peer observation process in a confidential, supportive forum.

Participants were asked to undertake:

- a minimum of three observations (i.e. observe three other teachers once);
- peer teaching in a supportive spirit;
- constructive feedback after the observation, leading into a confidential reflective discussion;
- a full team discussion to reflect on their experience of the project.

Team Leaders were asked to:

- arrange an online meeting to organise observation times and discuss participants' approach to the project;
- keep a record of observation schedules;
- write a report on the review meeting, addressing suggested themes, e.g. overall response to the project, meeting of aims and objectives, observations, implications for future teaching, benefits gained.

Twenty-three staff participated, i.e. fifty per cent of language teaching staff in our two locations, of whom three participants took part in both years. In the first year, the twelve participants were divided into teams of four, but this meant that in each team all participants had to observe each other, which restricted choice and proved impossible because of timetable clashes., More choice was therefore introduced in the second year by

dividing the fourteen participants into teams of seven. In the second year, the term 'learning friend' replaced 'critical friend', as feedback indicated the latter implied that power was in the observer's hands whereas 'learning friend' stressed better the process' collaborative nature. The guidance document was also re-named 'Tips for providing feedback'. These changes better reflected the project purpose to allow *both* parties to self-develop by reflecting on their teaching in light of what was observed and fed back in open and supportive discussion.

Research Findings and Discussion

In the first year, there was a fifty per cent return rate of individual questionnaires, and in the second, a forty-three per cent return, so twelve returns overall, and a one hundred per cent submission of reports of the fully-attended team review meetings, so five reports. The data fell out naturally under a number of headings, partly because of the questionnaire structure, but also because of significant congruence in participant focus in individual and team feedback.

Motivation to participate

Motivations cited were both affective and practice-related. Some participants sought reassurance on technical issues, on how to adapt pedagogy or enhance practice. Others wanted to be more confident and enthusiastic and to feel less nervous and stressed about the online environment. Others again wanted contact with colleagues across a bigger geographical area, to feel part of a different team and overcome feelings of isolation.

Participants wanted to derive benefits from being observed and from observing, seeking feedback on their own performance and insight into how colleagues taught online. This is consonant with Schuck et al's view (2008, p.218) that: 'Observing others teach is a learning experience for both the observer and the

observed' and Gosling's view (2002, p.3) that 'The emphasis should be on both parties learning from the observation to get away from the one-way model, when the observer comments on the observed'. Some participants also sought a better understanding of the student perspective.

Participants' perception of gains from the project

As mentioned, there was general commonality in the gains expressed. Also, gains often coincided with participants' aspirations in joining the project. There were no aspirations that were not met as gains but there were additional gains.

Gains in self-confidence and self-belief

Participants appear to have developed confidence and belief in themselves, both in terms of their teaching and with regard to their ability to participate successfully in the project. Some participants, expecting a more focused, managerial approach, had struggled initially to understand the project aims and their role within it. Some had experienced anxieties that objectives were too loose. Others had felt they needed more guidance on what to observe, while others again would have appreciated a protocol for planning the observation itself. All of these are perhaps tied in with fears about the level of freedom given to work on their own development needs or around what 'ought-to' teacher self was required. However, through positive affirmation of practice and support from colleagues, all had come to appreciate this freedom, probably because of increased confidence and a developing sense of self-efficacy. This reflects the position we wanted participants to achieve with regard to self-development. As one team stated: '[We welcomed the fact that] it was quite open so we could set up our own observation points early on.' This chimed with Byrne et al's participant, Rose, (2010, p. 223) who valued the sense of autonomy afforded her by being able to decide on the focus.

Any fears that they might feel 'nervous' or 'intimidated' during observations or that it would be 'scary' to observe and be observed were allayed. The observations were 'not as daunting as ...expected' and

the experience ‘encouraging’, ‘reassuring’, ‘motivating’, ‘helpful’, ‘stimulating’ ‘inspiring’, ‘positive’ and ‘good fun’. The non-judgemental context may be key here and provide a parallel to Swinglehurst et al’s point (2008, p.386) that only when peer observation involves explicit evaluation, do participants find it ‘intrusive, judgmental, [...] nerve-wracking, stressful, threatening’. This is also in line with a responding participant in Byrne et al’s study (2010, p.223) who preferred a particular model because of its ‘Ethos of support rather than judgement’ giving ‘A better feel-good factor’. Feeling good about one’s teaching is not to suggest complacency. As Donnelly notes (2007, p.125), enhancing teachers’ self-assurance through peer support can lead to an increased ‘zest for further exploration of their practice’, while Cosh suggests (1999, p.24) that a commitment to mutual support is ‘... conducive to [teachers’] future confidence, and willingness to experiment...’

The benefit of peer presence during observations was highlighted in our project:

It was such a psychological relief to have a colleague there – it made me realise how lonely teaching can be, how “responsible” I feel for the tutorial going well or not... how the presence of a colleague can help me feel less nervous.

The gaining of moral support was also reported from a team meeting: ‘the topmost positive effect of the programme was the emotional support teachers can give each other’. Participants cited the development of ‘good relationships with colleagues’, a ‘climate of trust and friendship’, ‘the feeling of being comfortable with colleagues’ observations’ and ‘unexpected professional friendships’. The last chimes with Donnelly’s finding (2007, p.126) that friendships gained were one of the most important outcomes of her project.

Comments such as ‘useful to get to know different ways to face troubles’ and ‘helped me to keep going’ showed that some were finding the virtual classroom problematic. Teachers valued the freedom to express reservations about online teaching and discuss practice issues, with one group describing it as ‘refreshing to be able to share worries about the increasing use of technology in our languages courses with

people in the same situation' and 'a very welcome opportunity for informal chat about one's own work'. Gosling's view (2002, p.3) is that 'Historically, there have been a lack of 'safe' places where discussion about teaching can take place' and participants appeared to find a safe place here.

Participants also welcomed positive affirmation of their practice, with one realising 'I may be doing something good'. This echoed comments in Donnelly's study (2007, p.125): 'It was great to get some affirmative feedback and to ...know that I am on the right track' and 'it gave me reassurance that I could teach'. Another commented on the mutuality of practice support: 'I incorporated aspects from others in my tutorials and was told others want to use some of mine.'

Review meetings provided a larger forum for discussion and a summary of ideas from *all* observations, and also brought realisation that concerns were more widely shared amongst peers, so topics discussed were common to those raised in observations. It was interesting that one participant had frustrations about technical issues and another about the size of the group affecting the discussion. Whilst this is of concern in terms of ensuring productive outcomes, it does mirror issues teachers may face in online teaching sessions, thus providing a good modelling exercise.

Gains in belonging

The strength of feeling about a better sense of belonging was marked: first, the value of being a member of a team, in this case, their observation team; second, the impact of improved awareness of how participants fitted into the bigger picture of the language programme as a whole.

Many participants referred to their sense of relief at finding they are not alone but part of a team experiencing and sharing problems: 'Teaching is isolating and stressful', 'It is a good feeling that I am not alone' and 'Teachers and students can feel isolated and not exchange ideas and feedback – aspects which such a programme can help to overcome.' There was a sense of relief that others felt 'in the same boat' regarding

online environments and shared issues such as poor student attendance and problems with technology. The project led to awareness that colleagues teaching different courses in different places experience similar issues.

Byrne et al's participants (2010, p.225) highlighted 'a greater sense of being part of a learning community', and this was reflected by a participant in our project who described it as '[helping to] create a community of [teachers]'. Although we work hard in our geographical patches to build teams, and teachers have access to support forums for their course, clearly, for some, a more significant team spirit was achieved during the project through the regularity and synchronous nature of the peer observation team work, and, possibly, also, through the wider teacher grouping. Key to this may be the prolonged and focussed nature of the project, and that it involved a relatively small number of people in each team. The observation process was intense, requiring people to expose themselves to criticism and show vulnerabilities as well as to provide sensitive and constructive feedback. If successfully executed, all of this will contribute to the fostering of trust, critical in building effective teams and in creating professional bonds and mutual understanding.

Understanding the relative place of their course in the overall programme was a major gain for many. One stated it gave her 'an idea of what other courses covered' and another that it was 'important to see the big picture to understand my own course in the right perspective'. Another thought it 'useful to think of future levels I might be involved in teaching'. One participant highlighted the value of being able to see varying approaches to material design in different languages at the same level.

Gains in reflection and widening perspectives

Participants found that observing others' teaching approaches was beneficial in developing confidence in their own capabilities, in reflecting on and challenging existing preconceptions and in widening perspectives.

Donnelly (2007, p.125) states that 'it is important to remain receptive of other teacher styles and methods to

retain a level of experimentation within one's own repertoire'. This is particularly apt in this project, as it was sparked by us observing teachers' reliance on 'safe' activities in the virtual classroom. Being able to observe creative use of the software enabled participants to reflect on their own use of technology. Observation of others also allows reflection on the reasons behind a choice of approach and 'whether you are doing it better' (Donnelly, 2007, p125). One participant observed that a peer adhered to the same pair/group configurations, challenging her view that best practice involved constantly changing these. She appreciated that, in this group, students felt safe and worked well when the small group configuration was more static. This enhanced her understanding of particularity where every specific circumstance requires a specific reaction, with practice choice not being subject to any absolutism (Nicolson & Adams, 2010, p.38). This is similar to a participant in Schuck et al's study (2008, p.220) who found the success of another teacher's more didactic approach made her review her unquestioning adherence to pair and group work, irrespective of circumstance. One participant reported gains from seeing others 'bring a tutorial to life online'. She realised that creating relationships with students in a virtual class was not as difficult as she had found, and that online sessions need not lack spontaneity or have a less vibrant atmosphere than face-to-face sessions.

The *variety* of observations in our project was important in widening perspectives. Observing outside participants' own course level and language 'heightened the perception of underlying pedagogy' and 'made the observer look at the teaching more'. One participant said: 'I could concentrate on the way the lesson was handled rather than the content.' Participants highlighted that some problems are consistent regardless of language and level, whilst other issues, such as target language use, may be addressed differently. They also found it beneficial to compare how others taught a specific session with how they did: one, for example, gained a better appreciation of particularity by observing that what worked once for one group will not necessarily work for another. Some found the observation less intimidating when the observer had a different

language background, perhaps because the observer cannot judge them on their knowledge of or about the language or their teaching of a specific language point.

Participants found being observed by different colleagues enlightening, since ‘different observers have a different focus of interest’. It was ‘enriching to hear a variety of impressions’ and ‘good to have different styles of feedback’. One participant noted that focussing on accurate explanations and correct language whilst being observed has led her to focus on this now in her everyday work. Another described the importance of delivering every session ‘as if you are being observed’. Participants concluded that colleagues make more helpful comments than students, who ‘may be too polite in their feedback’.

A shift also occurred in the perception of the teacher’s role. One participant valued the realisation that although technology is imperfect and teaching sessions can ‘go wrong’, they can be rescued. Although some felt more in control in the face-to-face environment, in the online environment they considered their role more pivotal, since setting up activities and ensuring students are able to cope with technical requirements requires more teacher input. Recognition that they could cope with some sort of ‘failure’ indicated a move away from past views that they had to be expert in all aspects of the teaching process. Previously their inability to deal with such failures might have contributed to their ‘feared self’. They now accept they need not be perceived as infallible by students to be good teachers.

Some participants found that viewing the session from the students’ perspective increased empathy with students. One realised how easy it is for the teacher to upset, misunderstand or confuse students, and how difficult it is for the teacher to remedy this. Another discovered it can be ‘scary’ for a student to attend an online session, and another how students might leave either with a sense of achievement or feeling deflated. Some related this to power relations in the virtual classroom for, as Warnecke and Lominé point out, students ‘are not given access to the same range of tools as the [teacher]’ (2011, p135) and may be moved into a room without choice or be unable to select which screens to look at. Peer observation then has some overlapping

benefits with micro-teaching or mini-lessons with peers, which also give insight into the student position (Ellis, 2010, p.196). Another participant noted that having a teacher observer participating as a student can motivate students: 'It gives them confidence to see the observer struggling with the language.'

Increased awareness of the student experience caused participants to identify issues for consideration in teaching, namely, more awareness of student participation patterns, more attention to helping students feel participation is relevant, and more focus on what students are getting from sessions and on seeking feedback.

Practice Aspirations

Participants identified a number of practice aspirations. They would orient sessions more, and provide preparation and extension work outside the session. Some would revise approaches to grouping configuration, or use virtual breakout rooms more frequently. They would be more spontaneous, include more variety and more groupwork, and allow students more free speaking practice without teacher intervention. They would also be more aware of and allow silences.

A key aspiration was to promote better interaction by using a greater variety of presentation tools, more practical exercises, and better sequencing, grading and pacing of activities. Incorporating more creative and open-ended activities was an aspiration for some, although prepared through closed exercises to increase confidence. Passive student time could be reduced by having whiteboards pre-prepared. Materials provided by course writers needed to be adapted, as these were often 'too flat'. Visuals could be used both as cues and to enliven the session. Resources such as YouTube could also help. In technical terms, participants would now aspire to keep whiteboards well managed and uncluttered, to use the textchat box unobtrusively to correct spelling and to use the wand, the recording tool and the timer where useful.

Other Issues

A number of issues arose. First are those around our desire to encourage teacher self-development. If we had stated more explicitly at the outset that objectives and protocols were deliberately loose, so that participants could evolve these to suit their needs, this might have alleviated initial anxiety. However, it may be that working through slight discomfort is an important part of moving towards responsibility for one's own self-development. Managers and staff developers should perhaps also bear in mind participants' prior knowledge of session observation and consider what input is needed. Some might benefit from a description of observation approaches, e.g. focussing on a specific aspect, observing a set of key variables or watching the whole session and noting what strikes them. Most of our participants adopted the last approach, but this may have been because of unawareness of other options.

A second issue concerned participant availability. In both years it proved difficult to arrange observations with a particular participant, causing frustration for others. This perhaps arose because we expressly chose not to pair participants for reciprocal observations, and still believe that rigid pairing would reduce the breadth of insight gained from the variety of sessions observed and the range of partners with whom participants could engage. Stipulating a minimum number of times each participant should be observed as well as observe might be useful.

Thirdly, a crucial question is whether such a project would be as successful if made compulsory or if frequently repeated. Where it replaces an existing compulsory observation process, as in the case of Byrne et al, (2010), compulsory participation might work. Our project's popularity may, however, have been a result of the skill-development stage these teachers were at in online teaching in that it addressed a specific, immediate need. Would it be equally successful if teachers were already confident? In our context, where teachers are limited in contract time but expected to engage in a number of days of staff development annually, it may be better to encourage participation within this time rather than to compel.

Finally, there is a question as to whether such a project best remains subject area-specific or cross-discipline. There are clearly advantages in both, and which is chosen at a given time may depend on teachers' and institutional needs. Comparing the data from the first two years with the third year of cross-faculty working will be the next stage in drawing such conclusions.

Conclusion

At a time when 'good practice' is less than fully established in online teaching, practitioners from the very inexperienced to those deemed 'expert' can learn from each other. As Cosh (1999, p.25) points out, participants in peer observation can reassess their own teaching in the light of others' teaching, while Donnelly (2007, p.120) ventures that '[...] a reflective model of peer observation [...] can prevent teachers from becoming isolated and teaching from becoming routine and mundane.' Whilst not advocating that all language teachers should be in 'a permanent process of self-critique' (Blommaert, 2005, p.238), we nonetheless suggest that peer observation occupies a valuable place in heightening critical evaluation of practice and enhancement of teaching and learning.

This project may have met success because it allowed for safe peer discussion, the allaying of underlying insecurities and met a need for confidence-building, affirmation of practice and development of skills for a new environment. One participant stated that 'it was a tremendous experience', another that she 'felt sad when it was over' and a third that it had been 'an inspiring project'. A fourth described peer observation as 'a powerful tool' and a fifth suggested that 'there should be [such] regular projects to share ideas, worries, etc.' Feedback suggests that participants emerged more confident, more pedagogically aware and more willing to experiment in their teaching in virtual classrooms. They discovered their ability to self-develop and to establish flexible, transient communities of practice, which provide a safe environment in which to explore issues. The fact that three participants chose to participate a second time, presumably to continue their self-development as teachers in this online environment, supports this. Sharing experiences

within a group relatively homogeneous in competence and self-belief clearly led to mutual trust and support which enabled participants to progress. In this respect the constitution of groups as true peers is paramount to success.

The apparent success of this project has ensured its continuation and further development. As we enter the fourth year we are expanding the languages-specific model UK-wide across the Open University, thus opening it up to a larger number of language teachers. A cross-faculty version is planned this year in one location, extended to include more than two faculties. Elsewhere in the University, our peer observation model has been adopted and adapted by other faculties wishing to implement their own faculty-specific peer observation process, both online and, interestingly, also face-to-face.

Irrespective of the communities of practice academic managers may think they have created for teachers, teachers themselves know when they need new horizons to refresh and expand knowledge. We should more often extend the hand of trust and sense of professionalism to teachers in the search for greater integrity and self-motivation within the profession. As Cosh suggests, the experienced teacher should be treated as a 'professional, with autonomy and independence, and as the initiator of his/her own development, rather than as a skilled workman/workwoman dependent on development by others' (Cosh, 1999, p26), an all too regular occurrence in large institutional settings. A peer observation project such as this, constructed in the appropriate spirit, can go a long way to achieving this.

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