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## Online Peer Observation: An Exploration of a Cross-Discipline Observation Project

Margaret Nicolson and Felicity Harper  
*Open University*

In this article the authors compare two phases of an ongoing, annual online peer observation project at the Open University. Adopting a non-managerialist approach, the project aims to give teachers a renewed sense of collegiality, allowing them to take responsibility for aspects of their professional development and share practice points. While the first phase focused on a single discipline group in languages, the second brought together teachers in languages with teachers of Math, Computing, and Technology, all employing Elluminate Live as their online teaching platform. The authors comment on congruent and divergent gains emerging from the two phases.

With the increase in online teaching via virtual classrooms, teachers are expected to embrace new ways of teaching and pedagogic approaches appropriate for the context. Since 2005, and as part of the blended teaching model in operation for Open University (OU) language delivery, OU language teachers have had to engage with online classrooms using Elluminate for synchronous teaching sessions. Elluminate classrooms are audio-graphic and offer participants the opportunity to speak, use a whiteboard and textchat, and work in a main room or in breakout rooms.

The project, the outcomes of which this article examines, was originally set up because, as staff developers and managers of language teachers, we shared concerns that some teachers in our teams were displaying a more authoritarian, more guarded teaching persona and less creativity in their practice in these online classrooms than in their face-to-face teaching. We wanted teachers to regain confidence and creativity in the online environment, both for their own professional sense of worth and to enhance the student experience, and to do this via a practice-based, peer approach. The enthusiastic response to the project resulted in us making this an ongoing offering in staff development, and we are now into the fifth year.

Here we examine the first two phases of the project. The first phase (2009 and 2010) involved OU languages teachers across a variety of seven languages and four course levels. In the second phase (2011), OU languages teachers from those languages and levels worked with OU Math, Computing, and Technology (MCT) teachers who also used Elluminate to deliver teaching on six modules spanning two levels. We discuss the extent to which there was congruence or divergence in the gains expressed by participants in the languages-only phase of the project and the cross-faculty phase, and we consider the benefits to teachers participating in the respective strands. As our language teachers were at a different stage of development in each of the two phases of the project, we do not seek to make a direct comparison between the two strands, but

rather to explore potential explanations for congruence and divergence and to consider the respective value of subject-only and cross-subject peer observation endeavors.

### Research Influences

There exists a body of research work around peer observation projects, mostly from the 2000s, from which we have drawn ideas for our project. The project's focus on teaching sessions, its non-judgmental ethos, dialogue model and reliance on trust, collaboration and reflection aligns with Gosling's (2002) Peer Review model for peer observation, and also the ethos of peer observation projects reported by Byrne, Brown, and Challen (2010), Donnelly (2007), Schuck, Aubusson, and Buchanan (2008), and Shortland (2010). We also align with Bennett and Barp's (2008) view that projects of this kind work best when independent of any quality assurance process. In adopting the role of project enablers with an ensuing "hands-off" approach we were able to prevent any blurring of roles that our usual managerial position might have suggested to participants. Swinglehurst, Russell, and Greenhalgh (2008) noted that participants in their project felt that previous peer observation had failed to support them in their professional development, because it existed "either explicitly or implicitly within a framework of 'teaching as performance evaluation,' bringing with it an inevitable sense of judgment and accountability" (p. 386). We neither participated in observations nor saw the individual outcomes of them.

We acknowledge the importance of reflection (Schön, 1987) in this project, and agree with Johnson (2006) that it is when the professional development involves the site of practice along with teacher reflection that most meaningful change is brought about. However, we also acknowledge Kumaravadivelu's (1994, 2003, 2006) call for teachers to move beyond that of Schön's (1983) reflective

practitioner towards Giroux's (1988) concept of the transformative intellectual. This is necessary in the new and sometimes daunting online teaching world, where new teacher roles and new understandings of those roles are required (Gallardo, Heiser, & Nicolson, 2011). The concept of reflection via conversation is also important, for as Haigh (2005) noted, "both spontaneous, totally undirected conversations and 'guided' conversations can be productive contexts for professional learning" (p. 14). The origins of this project, as well as its framework, have relied on conversations as a key motivator.

Boud and Brew (2012) suggested that "practice development starts with a concern for the nature of a specific practice" (p. 8). Our own understanding of "practice" is as the overall professional armory drawn on to enact the activity, in this case teaching in a synchronous online environment. In this, we draw on Schatzki's (2001) summaries of what practice is: "skills, tacit knowledge and pre-suppositions, that underpin activities" or "arrays of human activity" (p. 2). In believing that practice relies on a spectrum of creative yet practicable ideas and principles examined and prioritized by the professional, we are influenced by Kumaravadivelu's (1994, 2003, 2006) writings on the post-method condition, particularity, and principled pragmatism, where the teacher assesses the needs of the particular group and context and acts accordingly in the planning, implementation and review stages.

As we adopt a social-constructivist approach, more broadly in line with Vygotsky's belief that learning is situated in a socio-cultural framework, we recognize the situated nature of professional development (Eraut, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1991) in that the effect of context, social interaction and dynamics are key in explaining outcomes. In examining the compelling link between such professional development and the practice domain, we have been influenced by the practice turn which, as Boud and Brew suggested (2012), "[conceptualizes] phenomena as connected, located and grounded in the practice of particular events and activities" (p. 5). Development within the site of practice based on true peer work avoids sole reliance on top-down theoretical domains. It also allows the replacement, as Gosling (2002) advocated, of the previous single roles of "giver" and "receiver," as protagonists will assume both roles both when observing and being observed.

Wenger's (1998) idea of the community of practice is crucial to the project, as a key aim is to encourage the formation of a new community for the duration of the project phase at least, if not for longer, where practice knowledge can be shared by professionals coming together via their practice setting in a structured way. However, in line with our view of practice, we endorse a community of practice notion that does not constrict,

either by suggesting that there is a single view of practice which involves slavish adherence to a methodology or the enactment of a rigid set of beliefs about teaching and learning (Guangwei, 2002; Howard, 1996; Nicolson & Adams, 2008, 2010). We also accept, in line with Turner (2001), that individuals will have different starting points for learning and will "acquire what they learn through different sets of experience and . . . satisfice according to different goals which may change over time and thus direct the path of experiences and learning in different ways" (p. 129).

### **Project Framework, Ethics, and Method**

In the OU context, part-time teaching staff opt voluntarily into staff development opportunities outside contract time and depending on need and availability. In our project, participants received a token sum to acknowledge time involved in the online observations and discussions during the year as well as a final team review meeting. One volunteer from each team acted as team leader and received an additional sum. We provided initial information and guidance, after which participants managed the process themselves. There were four stages involved: (1) Familiarization with the aims and objectives, which were 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; and
- familiarization with the protocols of working as a "critical friend/learning friend."

(2) Observations and reflective discussions, with participants involved in:

- a preparatory team meeting led by the team leader to organize observation times and discuss approaches to the project;
- a minimum of three observations (i.e., observe three other teachers once);
- peer observation in a supportive spirit; and
- constructive feedback after each observation, leading into a confidential reflective discussion.

(3) A full-team discussion to reflect on the project experience, with a written report of the meeting from the team leader for the researchers. Finally, (4)

Individual participant feedback questionnaires sent directly to the researchers.

In the languages-only phase, which ran for two consecutive years, 23 OU language teachers participated; three of them participated twice. In the cross-faculty phase, which ran for 1 year only, 16 OU teachers participated, nine from MCT and seven from Languages, of whom six language participants had taken part in one or both years of the earlier phase. In both phases, participants were divided into teams. Following feedback from the first year which had highlighted difficulties in arranging observations in the small teams of four we had convened, in the two subsequent years participants were divided into teams of eight.

The data for the first phase consisted of the qualitative feedback provided by participants in the individual questionnaires and the reports provided by the team leaders of the final team meeting. In the cross-faculty phase, these tools were supplemented by a 5-minute recording by the four language teachers who had taken part in both project phases in which they described and compared their experience of the language-focused and the cross-faculty phase.

#### **Evaluation of the Outcomes of the Two Phases**

In analyzing the data from the two phases, it became clear that there were both points of congruence and of divergence between phases. These points related to gains identified with regard to the stated aims and objectives, and to outcomes associated with our own aims to enhance the teachers' ability to self-develop. They are discussed separately in the two sections below.

#### **Sites of Comparison in Gains**

In the first phase of the project, we identified the following areas of gain against which we compared the outcomes of the second phase: (a) gains in self-confidence and self-belief in teaching, (b) gains in belonging, (c) gains in reflection and widening perspectives, and (d) gains in practice aspirations.

**Gains in self-confidence and self-belief in teaching.** In the initial languages-focused phase, there was evidence that teachers struggled with challenges around the new online environment. Participants talked of difficulties, of feelings of isolation and concerns with the teaching tool, and of their need to seek reassurance from the project to feel that they were capable of doing their job. They reported fear of the technology failing and fear of being perceived by students as incapable, both of which appeared to be linked to their self-perception. As a consequence of the project, however, they reported recognition of the fact that being

perceived by students as infallible is not fundamental for being considered a good teacher. In the subsequent cross-faculty phase, in contrast, all participants appeared to believe from the outset in their ability (ultimately) to use Elluminate successfully. Their focus was squarely on seeking confirmation of competence and improving online teaching by trying out ideas observed or suggested to them in observations of their own practice, and they reported enhancement of self-belief and confidence in their ability to function effectively in the online environment. Three participants cited that they had gained respectively: "reassurance that what I do is generally similar," "confidence in my use of Elluminate," and "more confidence in my own work."

For language teachers this difference in the attitude across the two phases may be attributable to the fact that, in the first phase, they were newer to the online environment and so had less confidence in their ability to function effectively online, to withstand problems with the tool or to successfully transfer and adapt face-to-face practice to the online environment. In contrast, by the time of the cross-faculty phase, they had already had at least 1 year's experience in teaching in Elluminate and had benefitted from the reassurance that participation in the languages-focused phase of peer observation had given them.

**Gains in belonging.** Gains in belonging were more marked in the languages-only phase than in the cross-faculty phase. In the initial languages-focused phase, the need for team-building and overcoming feelings of isolation was evident, as was appreciation of the benefits of seeing how their module fitted in to the wider language offering. In the cross-faculty phase, on the other hand, there was focus on the value of belonging to the team rather than on fitting into the bigger picture of course provision across the university. Participants found the interaction with colleagues from the same and other faculties useful, and they mentioned the supportive ethos. One participant noted, "The group was motivated and we were very encouraging with each other. That meant it was a pleasure to have an observer we were trusting." Another said she "got to know a number of nice colleagues rather better." Only one teacher mentioned the benefit of seeing their subject area as part of a wider university offering and a wider pattern of online teaching: "Good to see more of what the OU offers, I only really thought in terms of Languages as [having] virtual/online courses before." Perhaps the short-term nature of the community of practice formed in the cross-faculty phase was uppermost in participants' minds, knowing they would be unlikely to interact after the project.

**Gains in reflection and widening perspectives.** In both phases, participants found that viewing the session from the students' perspective increased empathy with

students. In the language-focused phase, one participant recognized the ease with which a teacher can upset, misunderstand or confuse students. In the cross-faculty phase, teachers did not have moderator status in the Elluminate rooms of the other faculty so saw the session exactly as a student sees it. One teacher, therefore, discovered that his students may not be seeing on the screen what he thinks he is showing them. One of the team meetings reported that this phase had inspired them to record and watch their own sessions in order to improve their own self-awareness.

In both phases, again, being able to observe creative use of the software enabled participants to reflect on their own use of technology, but the differences were more marked in the cross-faculty phase. Here, for example, MCT colleagues noted that Languages teachers made more use of the breakout rooms and had more interactivity in their sessions, while Languages teachers discovered that MCT teachers used applets and programs. Each group aspired to incorporate the other group's practices in their own teaching, which perhaps demonstrates that although the community of practice was shorter-lived, there were long-term practice benefits.

In the languages-focused phase, and as observers, participants commented on the value of comparing and contrasting teaching approaches around subject-specific pedagogic issues, such as the ways other tutors taught pronunciation and corrected (or did not correct) errors, and how teachers used slides to provide prompts for productive language. In addition, the languages-only phase encouraged teachers to explore their response to observing a teacher of the same module handling the same session differently, which allowed them to reflect on the reasons behind a choice of approach and its relative merits in context.

While the languages-focused phase offered this depth of analysis of subject-specific pedagogy, the cross-faculty approach appeared to offer a greater opportunity for observers in terms of widening perspectives. Participants clearly enjoyed and benefited from the wide range of teaching approaches, calling for more faculties to be involved in future projects. Comments included: "It was good to see how another subject worked"; "It was really interesting, a real eye-opener"; and, "Very good to see different ways of using Elluminate, different ways of interacting with the students, and also good to observe so that you can reflect on how it impacts on the students." There was a belief among participants that the differing approaches were dictated to an extent by the nature of the subject matter: "[It was useful] to note how we vary according to type of student and subject matter"; and,

[It was] useful to see how different the teaching materials are, not only because of the personality of

the teacher but also because of the different teaching subjects; and also to see the range of students and how they differ.

In terms of being observed and the subsequent discussion, in the language-focused phase, participants welcomed the fact that "different observers have a different focus of interest," and they found it "enriching to hear a variety of impressions." In the cross-faculty phase, one teacher commented on how interesting it was when two different observers made the same comment, which she subsequently successfully acted upon. A similar comment was made in both phases that teaching "as though you are being observed" makes for a better session. Approaches to feedback varied in both phases, and this variety was equally welcomed. There was some indication of a deeper focus on discussion of pedagogy in the language-focused phase as compared to the more wide-ranging discussions of the cross-faculty phase, incorporating, as one participant noted, "Elluminate functions, classroom management, teacher-led versus collaborative learning, face-to-face versus online tutorial preparation, [and] material design."

Overall, while the cross-faculty phase provided breadth, the languages-specific phase offered language teachers more opportunity for reflection on deeper pedagogical issues in language teaching, for example "planning and grading activities so [as to] increase students' confidence in speaking" and a need to "design specific pronunciation activities." Although discussions could be wide-ranging in the cross-faculty phase, the focus was more on practical aspects of online tutoring and general issues around session delivery: "The discussion of pedagogy was secondary to these technical issues"; and,

Since feedback [in the cross-faculty stage] was in general about the handling of the tools in Elluminate, [about] the interactions between the teacher and the learner group, and about the use of the whiteboard, the language was no problem at all.

**Gains in practice aspirations.** Increased awareness of the student experience together with observation of different approaches caused participants in both phases to identify issues for consideration in teaching. In the languages-focused phase, teachers honed in on language-specific considerations such as revising how they configure student groups, realizing the importance of silences and using the textchat for unobtrusive prompts or corrections, as well as more generic concerns such as increasing interactivity and use of breakout rooms and attending to sequencing of activities and pacing. Teachers were also keen to explore how to integrate pre and post-lesson materials. In the cross-faculty phase, intentions differed by

faculty, with most changes being the result of aspects observed in the other faculty. Language teachers were again concerned with integrating materials from outside the session, and they also aimed to improve the range of slide design, improve the balance between knowledge revision and practice exercises and increase the use of pointers and smileys. MCT teachers, on the other hand, were concerned to increase interaction instead of delivering mini-lectures, to make more use of breakout rooms, and to keep the student rather than the teaching platform (i.e., Elluminate) at the center of the session.

The fact that language teachers in the cross-faculty phase did not mention interaction and increased use of breakout rooms suggests they had by then become skilled at this. However, an alternative explanation is that among the participating language teachers there was no one who offered anything new around this whom colleagues wished to emulate, while for the MCT teachers, used to delivering mini-lectures, any model of increased interaction provided useful modeling.

#### **Discussion of the Respective Values of Cross-Faculty and Languages-Specific Phases in Enhancing Teachers' Ability to Self-Develop**

In terms of value gained in self-development in the respective phases, four key themes emerged: (a) the development of confidence in their ability to observe others, (b) the ability to challenge concepts of good practice, (c) the willingness to integrate new approaches into their practice, and (d) their awareness of their own self-development trajectory.

First is the issue of confidence. Teachers gained confidence in observation in both phases, both in reflecting on a session and in considering the underlying pedagogy, which allowed them to move beyond reflection to abstraction and on to reframing and applying in their own context. In the languages-only phase, teachers recognized that they could move from observing in the comfort zone of their own languages to observing effectively across languages with which they were unfamiliar: "When I observed a tutorial in a language I wasn't familiar with, I found I concentrated more on the layout and frame of the tutorial which was quite useful." This is not surprising, as within an institutional framework where expectations around what happens in a languages tutorial are prevalent, then certain conventions will be followed, irrespective of the language in question. In the cross-faculty phase, participants also recognized their ability to consider teaching approaches in completely unfamiliar subject areas. A languages teacher in this phase commented: "It was interesting to see that even if I don't understand much about a subject, I can still focus on the teaching and the method." Similarly,

participants realized that they could contribute to the development of others from a different background: "[It was] comforting as well when the 'friend' said they would try something new with their own group, whereas they would have had no idea how to do it before." Thus, the cross-faculty approach appeared to offer participants a further level of awareness of their capabilities as reflective practitioners. All of this can be considered a further developmental stage in critical reflection on approaches to methods and student support.

Secondly, in both phases, teachers developed their ability to challenge concepts of good practice within their own subject, precisely because of the practice context, as Boud and Brew (2012) advocated, rather than from a theoretical backdrop. They were able to theorize their practice, which in turn aids reflection and impacts on their own teaching. In the languages-focused phase, this challenge came from seeing other teachers successfully use approaches new to the observer or going against concepts of accepted wisdom. This enabled participants to recognize the importance of particularity (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, 2003, 2006), and to question their underlying assumptions and practice behaviors. As one participant stated, "I reflected on how we are always trying to improve methodology and how I might be using a mix of groupings for its own sake rather than staying with one pairing method that suits an individual group." In the cross-faculty phase, this was taken a stage further, as teachers came to recognize that, contrary to their initial perceptions that different subjects necessitated different approaches, there were novel features from other discipline areas that could be incorporated into their own teaching. This phase therefore extended horizons further and provided a higher level of challenge to assumptions of what is permissible and possible within teaching. Yero (2010) suggested that practice can become habitual: "Teachers' behaviours frequently spring not from higher level thinking processes but from habit" (p. 7). Habitual action is sometimes easier, requiring less effort than re-interrogating the way we do things. However, it may also spring from other things: an inward-looking pedagogy within the subject area itself, staff development restricted to the discipline rather than drawing on other subjects, and/or a lack of confidence among some teachers in critically engaging with the methodologies which have infused their training, where this training has appeared to be top-down. All of this can lead to constraints around what teachers feel able to do and a lack of confidence in trying new methods. For example, Communicative Language Teaching, as Savignon (2006) clarified, has been interpreted inappropriately as the need for pair and group work, a focus on oral work and, in some cases, a rejection of "metalinguistic awareness or knowledge of

rules of syntax, discourse, and social appropriateness” (p. 213), such that practicing language teachers endeavor to follow requirements that do not exist in the underpinning theory. Encouraging teachers to question the pre-suppositions and notions that underlie their practice contributes considerably to their development by asking them to step outside the familiar confines of tried and trusted methods. Participants’ willingness to try to incorporate techniques observed in different subject areas suggest that participants recognized that although practice may be initially influenced by the type of student and subject matter, this may be more a result of norms within the subject-teaching methodology than the existence of intrinsic limitations of appropriate methods. This suggests that participants have moved towards Schön’s (1983) reflective practitioner stance and added to their armory of professional strategies.

Thirdly, in both phases, participants expressed willingness to integrate new approaches observed into their teaching, requiring the ability to conceptualize how to do this and a desire to take risks. Techniques observed in similar situations can be fairly easily transferred and attempted with some confidence, but borrowing from another subject area may require even more insight and creativity. Both allow teachers to experiment with the construction of method paradigms within their subject area. Recognizing one’s ability to devise new approaches to subject teaching can create a greater sense of individual responsibility and may also serve to transform a teacher from recipient of a teaching methodology to contributor to the body of knowledge that informs concepts of good practice. Realizing that one has the ability to notice the underlying pedagogy in an unfamiliar subject, to reflect on its relevance to that subject and then to integrate it into one’s own teaching may then be said to show a higher level of self-development than doing so within a familiar subject area. This suggests that the second phase of the project achieved the aim of extending horizons further and developing greater creativity among participants.

Finally, teachers demonstrated a greater awareness through project participation of their own self-development trajectory. As one stated: “I feel like undertaking some self-observation, as I am not happy with some aspects of my teaching.” One of the teams went as far as to present self-development objectives for themselves:

- to participate in more staff development sessions on Elluminate,
- to keep on training,
- to keep on participating in Peer Observation Projects,
- to record own tutorials to observe ourselves for self-awareness during the teaching process,

- personal improvement of IT skills, [and]
- to use more the breakout rooms.

### **Value of Subject Versus Cross-Faculty Observation**

In ascertaining whether a subject-specific or cross-faculty model has more value, both in developing practice and in enhancing teachers’ ability to self-develop, consideration needs to be given to the aims of the project and how these relate to the needs of the cohort of teachers. These are given in Table 1.

To a certain extent, the choice of approach will depend on the stage of development of teachers involved. Where teachers are new to the online environment and lack the confidence and the skill to use a wide range of strategies generally associated with their subject, there is an argument that a subject-specific approach provides the best environment to develop skills. Here skill development may be presented with less challenge, and it may be easier to discern what can be transferred to participants’ own teaching. They will observe others experiencing success in a similar context and be able to share difficulties and frustrations. Discussions are likely to focus more on subject-specific issues, such as the best way to group students, how to sequence activities, and, in languages, how to ensure the right level of student participation for each individual, given the difficulties that speaking and understanding another language can present in addition to the new online environment. Conversations between subject specialists are likely to be grounded in a shared understanding of what they seek to achieve. This then allows increased creativity within the new environment and deeper engagement with subject teaching pedagogy per se. Much, of course, will be dependent on the nature of the observations. In some cases, teachers may be exposed to a limited repertoire of approaches that mimic their own, which, while potentially boosting confidence, do not simultaneously challenge practice. However, for those lacking confidence, even such confirmation of practice may provide a useful stage in development.

While a cross-faculty approach is unlikely to offer teachers the opportunity to engage in in-depth discussion around subject-specific pedagogical issues, it is probable that it will expose teachers to ideas about what might be possible beyond the strictures of learned and accepted teacher behaviors and practice. It can allow teachers more freedom to experiment, although this requires the inclusion of subjects that use a different approach. In our case, Math, Computing, and Technology teachers adopted a different delivery style from language teachers, centered around presentations and the use of different Elluminate features. Thus, a cross-faculty phase might be deemed more appropriate

Table 1  
*Value of Subject vs. Cross-Faculty Observation*

Aim	Languages-only phase	Cross-faculty phase
To develop professionally in a peer environment without line-manager intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of ability to               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ self-develop and use peer observation as means to this;</li> <li>◦ reflect on own and others' pedagogy in familiar contexts.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of ability to               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ self-develop and use peer observation as means to this;</li> <li>◦ reflect on own and others' pedagogy in familiar and different contexts.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
To create new teacher communities across geographical boundaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the duration of the project and beyond.</li> <li>• Benefits also of seeing how one fits into the curriculum offer of languages.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For the duration of the project; communities are unlikely to persist beyond.</li> <li>• Some benefit from recognition of what the institution offers and how one fits into it.</li> </ul>
To share practice in online teaching environments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to transfer ideas from observations to own teaching</li> <li>• Related to language-teaching pedagogy; deeper reflection on language teaching in Elluminate and language-teaching approaches per se.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ability to transfer ideas from observations to own teaching.</li> <li>• Related to technical issues and use of tools; consideration of style of session—interaction versus presentation.</li> </ul>
To discuss openly issues from the peer observation process in a confidential, supportive forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers welcome feedback and suggestions.</li> <li>• Teachers able to confront pre-conceived ideas about language-teaching “good practice.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teachers welcome feedback and suggestions.</li> <li>• Issue about impact of level of subject-knowledge on the depth of discussion related to the success of the session and the feedback that can be provided.</li> </ul>

to teachers who are already confident with teaching their subject in Elluminate but also used to experimenting with ideas.

### Conclusion

Our research has shown, then, that both cross-faculty and subject-specific peer observation have merit, offering congruent and divergent benefits. Participants who took part in both phases valued them equally. Peer observation is certainly a useful ongoing development tool, and participants expressed the wish that it become embedded practice: “Peer observation could be a standing arrangement, if there were an easy way of finding like-minded lecturers, not just as part of a project”; and, “I think the OU should explore how peer observation could become the norm.” Teachers could engage in different types of peer observation projects at different times, thus deriving the full range of benefits gradually over a period of time by being part of a dynamic community of practice. In our project, language teachers opted to participate in various phases, which, to an extent, allowed for such development. The choice some teachers made to participate twice in a languages-only model, others to do so in both formats, and others to participate only in one or the other

suggests that the teachers were selecting what they felt appropriate. The question for developers is what degree of choice to offer teachers, given that there may sometimes be a tension between what developers believe teachers need and what the teachers themselves may choose. An outcome of our project is that we will be able to present potential benefits from each approach to teachers, so that they can select the version which most appeals.

In a model where teachers are encouraged to participate annually in peer observation, one structure might be to alternate subject-specific with a cross-faculty phase. Returning to a subject-specific phase would enable teachers to explore with specialist colleagues a more expansive approach to their practice armory in online teaching, adding strategies gleaned from observing other subject areas. As practice evolves over time in each subject area, the alternating cross-faculty phase will highlight new possibilities.

Being able to offer choice will depend on the nature of the institution and managerial expectations of peer observation. We are fortunate in working in an environment with a large teaching staff in each subject area, so it would be possible to offer two options simultaneously if desired or to alternate annually. An alternative to treating the phases separately, however,

might be to allow more time for completion of the observations, allowing participants the opportunity to observe five sessions, three from within their own subject area and two from elsewhere.

It is worth reiterating that our project ran alongside staff development opportunities on teaching in Elluminate for our languages teachers, which included sessions led by peer experts on technological and pedagogical issues. Also, participants continued to explore individual development needs with developers. An institution might choose to interweave such work with peer observation so teachers can try out ideas presented in staff development sessions or in their individual development program. It is, therefore, for the institution to decide whether and how to integrate other staff development needs into a peer observation project.

We have now rolled out our peer observation model to all languages teachers across our institution, UK-wide. This will enable us to establish whether the findings from these two phases are substantiated. We have also introduced a new trial strand where student feedback on the lesson is to be integrated into the observation loop. Future developments are likely to involve exploration of other online tools, such as forums, enabling teachers to experiment with ideas gained from staff development sessions. It is worth noting that our research into cross-faculty versus single-subject peer observation has explored this issue in relation to two faculties—Languages, and Math, Computing, and Technology. Other researchers might be interested in exploring the extent to which our findings can be generalized with regard to a different subject mix.

Our caveat to those contemplating such a program would be that peer observation cannot be a panacea for all developmental grumbles. It will only work as part of a fully-integrated, organic, dynamic, developmental structure which is fully accepted by all stakeholders.

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- MARGARET NICOLSON is Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor in Languages for the Open University in Scotland and writes extensively on language teaching. She is editor of the books *Language Teaching in Blended Contexts* and *Gaelic Medium Education* and is a fellow of the Higher Education Academy.
- FELICITY HARPER is Senior Lecturer and Staff Tutor in Languages for the Open University in the South West of England. She is a contributor to the books *Language Teaching in Blended Contexts* and *Success with Languages*.