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Seeing is Believing: The Benefits of Peer Observation

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Abstract
Peer observation of teaching is seen as a supportive and developmental process for improving the quality of teaching in universities. Evidence is emerging that the process of observing is just as if not more valuable than being observed and given feedback. In this study lecturers completing a Foundations program in university learning and teaching were interviewed about their experience of participating in a reciprocal peer observation exercise. The benefits for observers include learning about a new strategy and enhancing their confidence to try this strategy in their own teaching. Receiving feedback was also perceived to be useful but not more beneficial than watching a peer teach. We discuss implications of our results for units and institutions planning to implement peer observation as part of a strategic approach to improve the quality of learning and teaching.

Keywords
Peer observation, social cognitive theory, teaching, academic development

Introduction

Watching another academic colleague teach is rarely the way we choose to learn about teaching. Yet, as one lecturer said, “After doing it [i.e., observing a peer] the first time, I thought ‘Wow’ … so much learning nowadays is like just from a textbook or from journal articles and stuff like that, you never see these things in practice”.

Peer observation is the process of colleagues observing others in their teaching, with the overall aim of improving teaching practice. Many universities have incorporated peer observation (also called *peer review*) as part of a strategic approach to enhance the quality of their teaching and learning (Bennett & Barp 2008; Byrne, Brown & Challen 2010). Often peer observation is included as part of an introductory or "foundation" program in university teaching and learning targeting new staff, or as an element in an accredited postgraduate program in higher education. Some universities also have well-established, institution-wide peer observation or review programs; for example, in Australia the University of Wollongong has a program in which a staff member can invite a senior colleague accredited as an observer to observe their teaching and write a review for use by the staff member in their probation/promotion application (Peer Review 2010).

When the main focus of peer observation is on helping colleagues develop their teaching, the process is often conducted as a reciprocal exercise, with staff observing each other, sharing their insights and providing mutual support (Bell 2005). The information generated in these "peer-observation partnerships" (Bell 2005) usually remains confidential and in the control of the observed staff member; for McMahon, Barrett and O’Neill (2007), this is the key defining feature of peer observation.

The traditional view of the process also includes an assumption that colleagues can learn effectively from each other’s explicit, constructive feedback about observed teaching. However, evidence is increasingly emerging that learning from watching a colleague teach can be just as beneficial as, if not more than, receiving feedback, even when that feedback is well constructed.

In this article we build on previous studies of peer observation (Donnelly 2007; Harris, Farrell, Bell, Devlin & James, 2008) and apply Bandura’s (1977, 1997) social cognitive theory, including the concept of observational learning, to frame and interpret the results of our own and others’ inquiry into the benefits of peer observation. We report evidence from a study of lecturers involved in peer observation as part of a formal teacher-development program that observing a colleague teach can both show the observing teachers how new strategies work and enhance their confidence to apply them in their own teaching. Observing a colleague teach can also affirm successful aspects of the observer’s approach. Conversely, being observed has been shown to lead to transient feelings of vulnerability for some staff, although feedback given by the observer has generally been found to be useful. We discuss the implications of our approach for institutions and/or organisational units who are considering incorporating peer observation as part of a strategic approach to enhancing teaching and learning.

Background

There is good evidence of the value of learning from observing a peer. Bell (2001, 37), in reporting on the evaluation of a peer observation component of a foundations program on university teaching and learning, first noted that observers or "reviewers" gained significantly “from the opportunity to observe a colleague teaching”. More recently, Bell and Mladenovic

(2008) found that peer observation in a university tutor development program was perceived as valuable, and that the majority of participants intended to change their teaching as a result of the process, and report that "most of the positive responses [about peer observation] were about the benefits of observing another tutor", while "only two [from 32] tutors mentioned the feedback given by their colleague as being valuable" (p743).

Donnelly (2007) explored staff perceptions of a reciprocal peer observation "scheme", part of a postgraduate certificate program in teaching and learning in higher education. Participants valued the scheme and thought that they learned both through receiving helpful feedback and by watching the teaching of others. Donnelly (pp125, 120) cites Bandura's later work on self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura 1997) as one of several theories that "underpin" the scheme, and interprets the perceptions of some participants as evidence that they were "developing [a] sense of confidence in their teaching approach", and thus their "self efficacy [for teaching] was enhanced".

The basic postulate of Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory is that people are the agents of change in both themselves and their environment through their interaction with that environment. In the later refinement of his theory (1997), the primary influence on personal agency is a person's *self-belief* or belief in their *efficacy*: their ability to exercise control and achieve the goals that they have set themselves. Self-efficacy is a person's belief in their capability to complete a task in a particular area (Bandura 1997). It influences goal-setting, motivation and the effort a person expends on a task, even in the face of difficulties or obstacles (Bandura 1989). The main way that people strengthen their self-efficacy in an area is through mastery experiences or repeated successful performances (termed *enactive mastery*) (Bandura 1989).

Another, although less beneficial, way that people strengthen their self-efficacy is through vicarious experience when they observe someone else engaged in successful performance (called observational learning or *modeling*). In research on children's learning, modeling is more effective for observers when the model being observed is similar to themselves (e.g., in age, gender, background and/or interests) (Horner, Bhattacharyya & O'Connor 2008; Schunk & Zimmerman 2007). As Schunk and Zimmerman argue,

> *"observing similar others succeed at a task, such as reading aloud in front of the class, may raise observers' self-efficacy. Children are apt to believe that if the peers can succeed, they can as well.... Conversely, observing similar peers have difficulty on a task may lead observers to believe that they also may have trouble, which can lower their self-efficacy" (p 10).*

For modeling to be effective, the model needs to be successful in the task.

Being verbally persuaded that they can master something also strengthens a person's self-efficacy, although this is less effective than modeling; and finally, people can also enhance their self-efficacy from positively interpreting their state of arousal in challenging situations. Conversely, self-efficacy can be weakened by failure, damaging feedback, and/or anxiety and feelings of vulnerability.

As Donnelly (2007) has suggested, if we apply Bandura's theory to teaching in higher education, university teachers' self-efficacy to teach well should be enhanced not only through mastery experience, but also through vicarious experience or modeling – that is, watching a colleague teach successfully – and through receiving persuasive feedback on their ability to teach well.

Context

This study was conducted at a large, comprehensive, multi-campus Australian university. The staff involved had graduated from a compulsory introductory program for new full-time academics called the Foundations of University Learning and Teaching program. It is divided into three modules that run over two semesters, and must be completed within 18 months of joining the University. In module one, during the first semester, staff are introduced to key concepts including student-focussed teaching, constructive alignment and reflective practice; in module two, they participate in peer-observation "cycles". In module three, during the second semester, staff conduct a negotiated scholarly project on university teaching and learning.

The peer-observation cycles involve staff in at least one experience of reciprocal peer observation, in which they choose a colleague to observe them in their teaching and provide them with feedback, and whom they in turn observe (but to whom they do not necessarily provide feedback). Colleagues are provided with optional examples of observation forms to use in writing their feedback during the observation, and after the observation meet to discuss their feedback. As part of the Foundations course requirements, the staff member submits a final report (which is assessed as either satisfactory or not yet satisfactory) in which they critically reflect on their experiences during module two. To the extent that colleagues are supported in the process with advice from academic developers, this is a "guided" model of peer-observation partnership (Bell 2005).

Method

Staff who had graduated from the inaugural Foundations program in 2008 were invited to participate in a semi-structured individual interview that focussed on their understanding of the usefulness of the peer-observation process for their teaching, and in what ways (if any) they had applied their experience. Of 12 graduates, nine (six females and three males), or 75%, volunteered to be interviewed. Interviews were held in the staff member's office and lasted approximately 30 minutes; they were digitally recorded and the recordings transcribed. Staff were at the level of either Associate Lecturer or Lecturer, and their discipline backgrounds included biomedical and health sciences; communication arts; engineering; marketing; law; and nursing and midwifery.

Ethical considerations included ensuring that interviewees were not asked to reveal the identity of observed colleagues during the interview.

Interview transcripts were analysed using content analysis, which involves "a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings" (Berg, 2007, pp303-304). Once themes began to emerge, they were compared iteratively – during an initial phase in 2009 and in a second phase in 2010 for consistency – with original transcripts. Themes were confirmed and discrepancies debated by the researchers to find common ground.

Results

Four main themes emerged in the interview data: (1) learning how to use new teaching strategies by watching; (2) affirmation of current teaching practice by watching; (3) seeing things as too difficult to do; and (4) learning from feedback given by the observer.

Learning how to use new teaching strategies by watching

Almost all staff (eight out of nine) thought that engaging in peer observation was beneficial for their teaching because they learned about new teaching strategies by watching their colleague use them successfully. The way observers perceived or judged whether a strategy was successful was by watching the interaction between their colleague and their students, and in particular students' reactions; for example, "you can just see that [the students] are focused on the teacher and … they are in the moment. They are not off thinking about something else" (Interview 5).

Through observers' vicarious experience or modeling, their *self-efficacy*, or belief in their ability to use a new strategy, was enhanced; this in turn motivated them to try the strategy. As one observer stated, "it gave me a particular impetus to try it, having seen it working" (Interview 3); another thought that "it also gives you good ideas … you start thinking 'I could do this'" (Interview 2), and so "maybe unconsciously you do try and copy the other person" (Interview 2). Some staff had previously thought about an observed strategy, in particular as part of their learning experience in the first module of the Foundations program, but had never tried it: "You can give me all the theory that it works, but until I actually saw it … in action I didn't believe it was a good thing" (Interview 5). Other staff had never contemplated such a strategy as the one that they observed: "it just never occurred to me" (Interview 6).

One observer watched a colleague give a lecture and move around the room during the lecture to ask individual students questions that were both generic (e.g., "What do you think about that?") and specific (e.g., "What does [the company that the student works for] do in this area?"). As the observer commented:

> *"That engaged students quite well and I thought that seemed to work as a tactic … [students] didn't mind if they were asked specifically and you know, [the lecturer] may well have chosen [their] targets carefully, [they] probably did but it seemed to work quite well, students spoke up and were involved, and [the lecturer] could get people all over the room, too."* (Interview 3)

The observer then tried this tactic in their own teaching context:

> *"It's not as possible for me to walk around the room but it is possible for me to speak to people, and I have walked out from behind the lectern a lot more and I try to actually talk to people; and again, when I know their names ask them by name what they think about a particular issue, and that seems to make things a bit more lively."* (Interview 3)

Another observer watched a colleague explain at the beginning of a lecture how a particular area of law could be applied to a real-life, everyday example. They then decided to try the technique themselves:

> *"I like[d] the way [name] started [their] class by trying to link something that might have nothing to do with the legal subject, and showing the student[s] that even though this has nothing to do in appearance with the legal subject, but you can actually learn from it and you can apply it in a legal context. And I found that later on I started doing that [i.e., using examples] in my classes and the students reacted positively towards that … they were like, 'Yeah, that makes sense now'. While before I used to talk about it for a whole hour and they wouldn't get the point. And while here it's now half an hour and they would understand it."* (Interview 4)

Another observer watched a colleague facilitate a large tutorial class by first asking student collaborative groups to report to the class on their project progress, and then inviting other groups to provide constructive suggestions and ask questions:

> *"So there was fantastic interaction in this tutorial. And I could see that the good students were really getting a lot out of it, and the slack students were almost wishing that they had done something because of, you know, the questioning …. I was sitting at a desk to the side and just watching the students' reactions and watching where she was standing and yeah, it was really interesting …. I was just really impressed, it flowed really well …. So that is something I have actually done, incorporated into my lessons where they are all doing group [projects] as well. So I try and get them to ask each other. I get the ball rolling and say you know, 'Where are you up to?' …. I try and get the other groups to think about things that this group … could be doing …. Before, I had just said, 'Okay, sit in your groups' and I [went] to each one."* (Interview 5)

One observer did not value observing their colleague for a range of reasons that included the class consisting mainly of student presentations with little intervention by the teacher, and a much smaller class size and students at higher year level than the observer was used to.

Affirmation of current teaching practice by watching

Some staff thought that engaging in peer observation was also beneficial because their colleague did things that they already did, which affirmed their self-efficacy to teach in these ways. As one observer commented: "[I] could see the class listening intently when she would give personal examples, and I have always tried to do that anyway, but I thought, yeah, that works too … just confirming, yeah, I am doing the right thing" (Int 5).

Another observer also mentioned an established strategy of providing personal examples: "I'd already – always used … small examples of what I knew from a clinical setting or my experiences, but never used it to the same extent. But yeah, now I do, I use it more and more" (Int 8).

Seeing things as too difficult to do

Some staff also observed things that they *would not do* or thought they *could not do*, in particular because they did not think it was practicable (e.g., because of class size) or they did not have that level of capability.

As one observer said of their colleague, "[they] are a born actor, you know …. I wish I could try this but I thought [their] idea of using a puppet was really innovative and good. But I know … I'm not really up to [it] or again not as confident" (Interview 2). This person did, however, observe another strategy (engaging students in a role play using a real-life example) that they thought was more "manageable" and "something I could also organise on my own without being a natural sort of actor" (Interview 2).

Another observer commented that their colleague's teaching style "was ... like a lot of energy, maybe that's not my personality you know ... that style of teaching ... it's almost like a motivational talk, like you can feel that energy in the room... I think I can be enthusiastic but I don't think I could match that" (Interview 9).

Finally, another lecturer who typically taught large classes commented after observing a senior colleague interact with students in a small-class lecture setting, "I can't teach like that [in a large lecture] … I really wish I could but I can't" (Interview 6), however they did observe another

strategy (using the internet during the lecture) that they subsequently tried themselves with success: "And since then … I've also … used the internet for other things as well [e.g., a video]… because I just never thought of it, you know, having access to it there" (Interview 6).

Learning from feedback

Some staff learned about new strategies for teaching through the feedback they received from their observer. As one person commented, they "took on board" (Interview 6) suggestions they were given about improving their PowerPoint slides and the way they moved around the room and made eye contact with the class. Another person commented that the feedback they received was useful because it was affirming – "you know you're doing this very well" – and gave them "something extra … one thing that was highlighted was to maybe actually make sure that the students have a little bit more time to ask questions and not cover the content too quickly" (Interview 9). A third person commented that some of the suggestions that they received from their observer were exactly what they had observed their colleague doing, which "helped consolidate it a bit more as well" (Interview 8).

Some staff felt relaxed about being observed and receiving feedback, mainly because they had an established a rapport with their observer (e.g., a mentor), while others were initially apprehensive about being observed and felt a "little self-conscious" or nervous at the start, as one person said, because "you are being judged in a way" (Interview 5); however, their nervousness soon dissipated during the observation.

Discussion

This study explored academic teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of peer observation for improving their teaching practice, within the context of their participation in a formal foundations program. Our results suggest that staff value watching colleagues teach, because, as predicted by Bandura's (1977, 1997) theoretical framework, the experience of observation strengthens their self-efficacy to apply new strategies to their own teaching. Staff also feel reassured or affirmed in their current level of self-efficacy. Overall, most staff thought that observing a colleague and receiving feedback were equally beneficial for improving their teaching. Some staff thought observing was more useful and/or more enjoyable or inspiring; however none said that *being observed* and receiving feedback was more useful and/or more enjoyable.

In being observed, some staff felt like they were being judged, while in observing, staff experienced greater agency and could judge for themselves whether what their colleague was doing was useful or not, in terms of both their own and the students' reactions. As one person commented, "[Name] was very good at drawing people into the discussion …. I found it useful, yeah. And that's literally by watching, observing someone else and saying, 'Oh, okay, that works'" (Interview 1).

Research with younger learners indicates that modeling is more effective when the model is perceived to be similar (e.g., has similar interests) and competent (or successful), and to have higher status (Horner, Bhattacharyya & O'Connor 2008). Our results indicate that university teachers value models who have similar students and class sizes and a similar interest in teaching well, and are perceived as experienced or successful: "it is good to learn from someone who has experience and is doing it well" (Interview 5); and, as another person commented, "it's not enough that you have a good relationship with them" (Interview 7). However some observers saw things that, although inspiring, they believed they could not implement because it was not in their

"character" or "personality"; for the staff in this study who mentioned it, the influence of one's personality was accepted; e.g., "it's really a reflection of who you are, and it translates [into your teaching]" (Interview 4).

Support for our interpretation of our results using the concepts of self-efficacy and modeling from Bandura's social cognitive theory also comes from recent case studies of peer-observation programs in Australian higher-education institutions (Harris et al. 2008). As one observer (case study 2, 90) commented, "the potential for the reviewer [i.e., observer] to gain much from the process should not be underestimated". As in our study, staff involved as observers in the case studies in Harris et al. (case study 1, 83) also mentioned feeling reassured, maintaining their self-efficacy to teach well through the process of modeling: "It was beneficial to watch other teachers and see the different methods of teaching, which provided me with new ideas for my own classes, as well as giving me positive reinforcement about my own methods".

The limitations of this small-scale study are that the staff involved were all in the relatively early stages of their teaching careers, and it is not clear whether similar results would be obtained with staff in more senior positions and/or more experienced in teaching. Our results were also obtained in the context of a mandatory program that encouraged staff to generate goals for improving their teaching through peer observation that they otherwise might not have developed. As one person commented, "I think Foundations actually made me think more about what was happening, rather than just going out and doing it or, you know, just looking and going 'Oh yeah'" (Interview 8).

Bandura's theoretical framework also suggests that when a person is verbally persuaded that they can master something, their self-efficacy is strengthened. Overall there was limited evidence in the interviews of observers providing *persuasive* feedback that their colleague was already teaching well in some way and/or that they had the capability to teach better. Most of the feedback appeared to involve suggestions or advice, which probably reflected the emphasis in observation forms and advice provided by coordinators of the Foundations program.

Further research is needed to investigate the effects of teachers combining their experience of observational learning or modeling with systematic critical reflection on that experience, and perhaps comparing their involvement in an informal process versus a formal program that involves engagement with core concepts about good teaching. Further research is also needed to investigate potential changes in teachers' levels of self-efficacy for different teaching strategies following their involvement in modeling and/or receiving persuasive feedback. In the only quantitative study of university teachers' self-efficacy to date, Dunkin and Precians (1993) found that award-winning teachers had higher self-efficacy than less experienced teachers.

Conclusion

In the traditional view of peer observation, emphasis is on a peer (the observer or reviewer) identifying or *detecting* an area for improvement in a colleague's practice and telling them about something new that they might try. McMahon, Barrett and O'Neill (2007, p505) even go so far as to say that in peer observation, staff "subject [their teaching] to *scrutiny* by peers, and use the professional dialogue and shared reflection that follows to improve professional practice" (our emphasis). The risk in this process is that teachers may lack sufficient motivation and/or practical knowledge to implement verbal recommendations. At worst, their self-efficacy for teaching may be weakened by poorly framed feedback.

In our view of peer observation, the emphasis as predicted by social cognitive theory is on the observer selecting a practice performed by a colleague that they could try, through vicariously experiencing the success of that practice (particularly by seeing the reactions of students). As Schunk and Zimmerman (2007, p11) also argue, "observing competent models perform actions that result in success conveys information to observers about the sequence of actions to use to be successful". The observer learns about how to perform the practice by *seeing it*, rather than being told about it, and comes to believe (strengthening their self-efficacy) that they can also teach in this way, and so is motivated to attempt the practice.

The implications for institutions and/or organisational units that are considering incorporating peer observation as part of a strategic approach to enhance teaching and learning is that there should be greater emphasis on organising an open process of peer modeling, rather than peer observation for confidential detection of areas for improvement. Modeling should involve the observation of staff who are successful in some area of teaching, such as lecturing, tutorial facilitation or e-teaching, and/or who are holders of teaching awards, or have been identified through student feedback or reputation within their organisational unit or institution as excellent teachers. We suggest that reciprocal observation (of the observer by the successful peer) is not necessary, or even desirable, particularly in cases where there is a low level of rapport between staff (and so a potential for the one observed to feel unnecessarily nervous or vulnerable).

A focus on peer modeling already occurs in at least one Australian university as part of a mandatory professional program (Harris et al. 2008, 93-94): "the scheme emphasise[s] that the program [is] about learning through observation, rather than concentrating on the direct feedback received by the reviewee …. Each academic visits the teaching and learning environment of the other for an hour, not for critique, but to see what can be learned from watching another. The third hour is spent doing a debriefing activity, where participants share what they have learned from the peer observation experience".

Combining modeling and teachers' critical reflection on their experience with subsequent enactive mastery of new strategies may result in the greatest improvement in their practice. In other words, watching someone teach well inspires us to try the strategy, and when we too are successful, our belief in the usefulness of what we saw and what we are capable of is enhanced.

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