

Peer Observation

Peer observation can be a very important and useful part of the data gathering process within an action research cycle. Trying to evaluate your own teaching practice is useful, but can be difficult whilst you are in the process of teaching the class. Getting feedback from your students is also very useful, but your students aren't trained as teachers and their feedback can be very difficult to interpret. Peer observation offers you the opportunity to get objective feedback from a trained professional who will be able to focus only on what's happening within your lesson.

What is peer observation?

Peer observation is the act of observing or being observed by a fellow teacher. This is usually an 'informal' process, which is at the request of one or both of the teachers involved, usually with the aim of teacher development or learning. The results of this process usually remain between the pair or group of teachers involved.

Peer observation can be contrast with the more 'formal' observation process that usually takes place within most schools and institutions. More formal teacher observations are usually carried out by more senior members of staff and can be part of a teacher development or training program, but are more often part of a quality control process. In short, making sure the teacher is able to teach to a certain standard.

Why do peer observation?

The main reason for doing peer observation is teacher learning and development. Remaining objective about your teaching and continuing to develop it can be very demanding and many teachers reach a point where they feel that they need help. Having the advantage of another set of eyes and the objective opinions of another teacher in your classroom can be very informative and can help you to see things that you are overlooking, during the demanding process of working through your lessons.

The benefits of peer observation are not only for the teacher being observed. There are many benefits for the observing teacher. The chance to see inside another teacher's classroom see how differently they do things and reflect on the differences with your own teaching practice can be very beneficial.

When to do it?

Peer observation can happen for a number of reasons. It could be that your school has a policy or program of peer observation and this is something that you 'have to do' at various times during your year.

New teachers coming into a school are often assigned a 'mentor' to help them adjust to the new context and part of this could involve peer observation.

You could decide that you want to observe / be observed by a peer because you want to develop and improve your teaching.

You could ask a peer to come into your class when you are trying something new to help you evaluate the new approach.

You could ask to observe another respected teacher because you are interested in finding out more about the way that teacher works or because you have heard about some kind of new method or approach they have been using.

Whichever of the above it is you should always remember that when you enter the classroom of another teacher you are entering into a very private space that they share with their students. This is a privilege that you should be very sure to respect.

How to do it?

To make peer observation most effective the teachers involved should be sure to discuss and agree upon what they hope to achieve from the process. Just 'dropping in' on each other's class and watching, isn't likely to be very informative.

If you are being observed try to decide what precisely you want your peer to watch for. This could be anything from your classroom management style and the clarity of your instructions to how effectively you are interacting with a particular student or the effectiveness of a particular method.

Give the person who is observing you some form of lesson plan, so that they know what you are doing and why you are doing it. Often this act of writing out your lesson plan and thinking through, expressing and sharing your rationale with another teacher can be as informative as the observation itself.

When the observation takes place, make sure that the students know why the person is there in your classroom and tell them that the person is there at your request to help you, not to check up on them. Students can often feel very intimidated by a 'stranger' in their classroom.

Ask the person observing you to make notes. They don't necessarily have to share these with you, but it's not a good idea to rely on their memory. You might find that it's helpful for you to give them specific areas to make notes about, for example you could ask them to write down all your instructions, or to time the amount of time you spend talking and the amount of time your students spend talking.

After you have been observed quickly make a few notes yourself about how you felt the lesson went and any points that you would like to ask your observer about.

Arrange a time to meet and talk to your peer after the lesson. Be sure that you make sufficient time for this and that neither of you will be under pressure to rush off to do something else. It's often best to leave the post lesson discussion until the next day as your impressions immediately after the lesson when your adrenaline is still pumping are often different from those after a good night's sleep.

If you are observing a class be sure that you know why you are there and what you or the peer that you are observing wants to get from the process.

Be sure to make notes a follow the lesson plan.

Remember that you can often learn as much and possibly more about the lesson from watching the students, their reactions and what they are doing and saying than you can from watching the teacher.

Never interfere with the class, talk to the teacher or the students unless the teacher who is leading the class asks you to.

You should also be very careful about any facial expressions, sounds or bodily gestures you make during the lesson. Many teachers find being observed very stressful and they could be extremely sensitive to your body language. What to you could be a brief glance at your watch to see what the time is, could easily be interpreted by the teacher as an indication of boredom or some form of criticism of their lesson.

When you have finished observing always thank both the teacher and the class.

Who should do it?

The choice for who observes the class is best left up to the teacher of the class. They should choose someone who they respect and feel will have something constructive and helpful to say about their teaching, but above all it should be someone they trust and feel comfortable with. If the observer intimidates or makes the teacher feel nervous, it is unlikely that the process will be beneficial.

Giving feedback to peers

Giving feedback to your peers or to any teacher you have watched needs to be handled very carefully.

The teacher being observed can be very sensitive and defensive about their class, especially if they feel it didn't go as planned so any criticisms or suggestions for improvement must be delivered in a very constructive way.

It's not constructive to dwell on what went wrong, but better to focus on what was good about the lesson, the teacher's positive strengths and what and how the lesson could be better next time.

Observing-peers can often be too keen to help, by making lots of suggestions and this can be interpreted by the teacher as criticism. It is much better for the observer to act as a listener during the feedback and allow the teacher to make the suggestions and lead the discussion.

As an observer don't assume that you understood every element of the class and the teacher and learner behaviour. If you felt something went wrong or you saw something that you feel critical about, then ask questions of the teacher and try to understand their rationale. In this way you might help them to realise for themselves what the problem is, or you may discover that you misunderstood the situation.

The observer must remember that what they are seeing in a lesson is only a small part of what is a series of lessons. To truly understand a lesson and the teacher learner relationship of that class you need to know what has come before the class and what will come after it.

As an observer be sure not to 'judge' the teacher you are watching. Good teachers sometimes have bad lessons, especially if they are nervous and not used to being watched or if they are trying something new. The observer should always be aware that they are there to evaluate the method, approach or help with a specific problem, not to judge and evaluate the teacher.

What happens within the classroom and feedback session should remain confidential. An observer should never talk about what they saw or what happened within the class without

the teachers' permission. Having this guarantee of confidentiality will make teachers more willing to be involved in peer observation and to take risks and experiment within the classes when they are being observed. If teachers feel that their mistakes will be made public and become the gossip of the staffroom, they are much less likely to want to be involved.

Conclusions

Setting up a program of peer observation is risky, especially if the teaching institution rather than the teachers themselves initiate this. A bad peer observation program, in which teachers become overly critical, competitive and defensive, can have a very negative and demotivating effect on the atmosphere of the staffroom and the teaching environment in general. If it is done well, however, a good regular program of peer observation can have a very positive effect on the teaching environment, the staffroom atmosphere and really help teachers to improve and develop. It can help to build an environment of openness, experimentation, materials sharing and mutual support that the teachers and students can benefit from enormously.