Models of Observation of Teaching

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Introduction

Yiend et al. (2014), drawing on the scholarship note that 'observation, when implemented in practice, rarely follows a tight prescriptive single model. Rather, institutions and departments tend to use existing frameworks as a starting point from which to develop programmes suitable to their own and their staff's needs' (2014, p. 479). Johnston et al. (2022) concur. Their examination of the research into peer review of teaching in Australian higher education notes that there is no 'one-size-fits-all' programme. They note the need for adaptation according to context, culture and community in order for the process to be a success; 'Outcomes are dependent on context specific models sensitively led according to participant needs' (2022, p. 400).

What model?

Much of the literature refers to Gosling's original three models of peer observation of teaching (2002) which he subsequently developed (2014): evaluation model- where the observation is carried out by a senior colleague for the purpose of appraisal or quality assurance; developmental model – where the observation is carried out by a T&L expert or an expert teacher with a view to demonstrating competence or enhancing practice; peer review model, subsequently called collaborative peer supported review (P-SR) model – where the observation is carried out by a peer with the purposes of '[improving] teaching through dialogue; self and mutual reflection; [stimulating] improvement' (2014). Gosling argues for the effectiveness of the third of these and outlines its key features, where it:

- promotes reciprocal learning
- recognises professional autonomy of all parties
- is based on dialogue, or more simply conversation
- is non-judgemental
- focuses on changing or developing professional practice
- incorporates enquiry or investigation. (Gosling, 2014)

The Peer Supported Review model moves beyond standard peer review to open 'a wider space for learning which can include those aspects of teaching and learning not accessible to observation, but which through conversation can be discussed, investigated and critiqued' (Gosling, 2014).

Peer observation of teaching, or peer review of teaching, is one of the most common approaches under the broad heading of observation of teaching. O'Leary and Cui note that 'peer-based models of observation have been used as a form of collaborative professional development by academic staff to stimulate reflection and provide a catalyst for thinking about and discussing teaching' (2023, pp. 90-91). Peer observation, complete with variations, is commonly described in the literature, however, the scholarship also considers other forms of observation which share qualities with standard peer observation of teaching and have some distinctive features or differences (mentioned in Table 1).

Approach	Brief description
Peer Observation/Review of Teaching	A peer observes a colleague teaching; often reciprocal; may involve review; generally involves dialogue at pre and post stages; typically uses standard approaches (e.g. ground rules, templates); variations exist re the configuration of the observers and observees (several descriptions in the literature).
Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)	Peer observation of teaching but with student collaboration and participation in the process as observers (O'Leary and Cui, 2020).
Teaching and Learning Circles	Circles of three or four colleagues who observe each other's teaching, with or without review as agreed. Dialogue and reflection important (Rogers et al., 2019; Grooters, 2008).
Just watching | Just teaching	Peers just watch a colleague teaching; no review is involved (Thomson, Bell and Hendry, 2015).
Video-reflection	Colleague is videoed teaching for own review or for sharing (McCoy and Lynam, 2020; Tripp and Rich, 2012).
Unseen observation	Colleague plans their teaching, discusses with a peer (called 'collaborator'), teaches class, gathers student feedback, reflects, engages in professional dialogue with collaborator, writes feed forward action points (O'Leary, 2022).

Table 1. Models of observation of teaching (OoT).

Each of the models is described briefly below.

Peer observation of teaching

Peer observation of teaching is where one colleague agrees to observe another colleague while they are teaching; depending on the interpretation of 'peer observation of teaching' this may involve a review element where the observer provides feedback to the observee. Generally, this involves pre and post stages, as described by O'Leary and Savage's Cycle of Peer Observation – CoPO (see figure 1 taken from O'Leary and Savage, 2020) and there can be a standard approach to how the observation is carried out including agreed ground rules and templates, which help to explain the process and to clarify expectations for the colleagues involved. This approach is often reciprocal where the observer and observee swap roles.
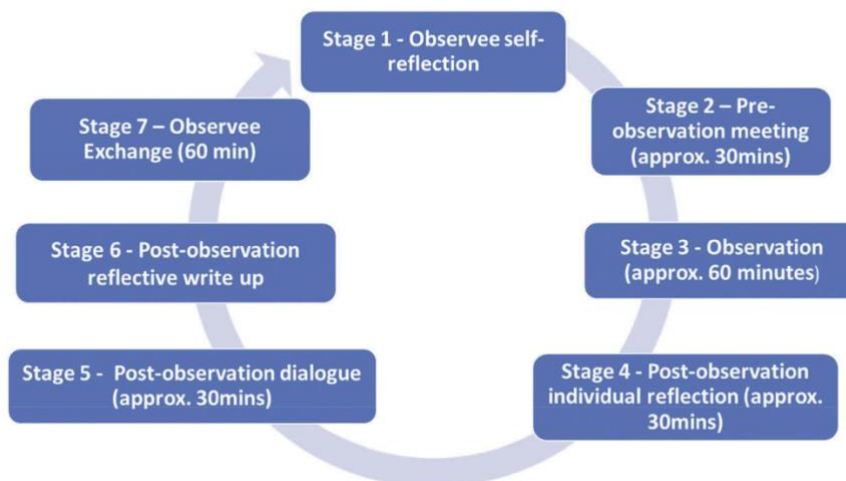
Figure 1: Cycle of Peer Observation (CoPO) (O'Leary and Savage, 2020, p. 149)

Variations exist within this peer observation model which can result in the following configurations, amongst others, of observation of teaching between colleagues

- from the same discipline, in the same institution
- from different disciplines, within the same institution
- from the same discipline, but from different institutions
- from different disciplines, and from different institutions
- at a similar career stage and with comparable level of teaching experience
- at different career stages and with different levels of teaching experience.

Observation of teaching might also be carried out by colleagues from teaching and learning centres or who work in academic practice or educational development.

The different configurations have pros and cons. These are noted in the literature, captured in our research with Maynooth University staff for this project and expressed as practice wisdom by colleagues who have experienced the various approaches. Many of these are presented in Table 2. As can be seen, in some cases what is considered an advantage, can also be perceived as a disadvantage.

Observer → Approach ↓	Same discipline, same institution	Different discipline, same institution	Same discipline, different institutions	Different disciplines, different institutions
Advantages (observers, observees, both)				
Understanding of the content and discipline-specific approaches	✓		✓	
Understanding of the institutional context and associated parameters	✓	✓		
Exposure to other approaches to teaching which may be applicable to own teaching	✓	✓	✓	✓
Potential to contribute to learning more broadly within the discipline/department	✓	✓	✓	✓

Potential to identify synergies across department in terms of teaching or research	✓			
Building of university T&L community	✓	✓		
More objective or neutral feedback		✓	✓	✓
Possibility to extend professional network		✓	✓	✓
Opportunity to explore similar challenges and possible solutions	✓	✓	✓	✓
Free from internal/institutional issues			✓	✓
Opportunity to reflect on cultural and institutional values	✓	✓	✓	✓
Lack of distraction by the content, thus greater focus on the teaching		✓		✓
Disadvantages (observers, observees, both)				
Over concentration on the content and less focus on the teaching	✓		✓	
Vulnerability in terms of nearness of the collegial relationship	✓	✓	✓	
Lack of knowledge or understanding of a discipline's signature pedagogies		✓		✓
Lack of understanding of institutional context and associated parameters			✓	✓
Logistics of organising in-person observation			✓	✓
Potential conflict re providing unbiased review	✓			
Concerns around quality assurance or giving colleagues 'glowing' reports	✓		✓	

Table 2. Advantages and disadvantages of different configurations in Observation of Teaching

Peer Observation and Review of Teaching (PORT)

Hendry et al. (2021) describe an approach to peer review and peer observation of teaching where they make a distinction between each of these processes, identifying the former as a process designed to 'provide support for university teachers to enhance their teaching practice', and the latter as 'a process in which an observer watches a colleague in their practice with the main aim of learning about teaching strategies through that observational experience' (p. 54). As noted previously, across the literature the lines between peer review and peer observation do not appear to be as clearly drawn as this; Johnston et al. (2022) in their systematic review note that 'a range of terms is used to describe PRT [Peer Review of Teaching]' and that 'the term itself is contested' (pp. 391-392). The PORT process (see figure 2) involves a goal-setting workshop of all participants, two peer reviewer observations each followed by a meeting, and a colloquium 'held at the end of the year, designed for participants to reflect on their experiences throughout the program' (p. 57). Participants also observe two sessions.
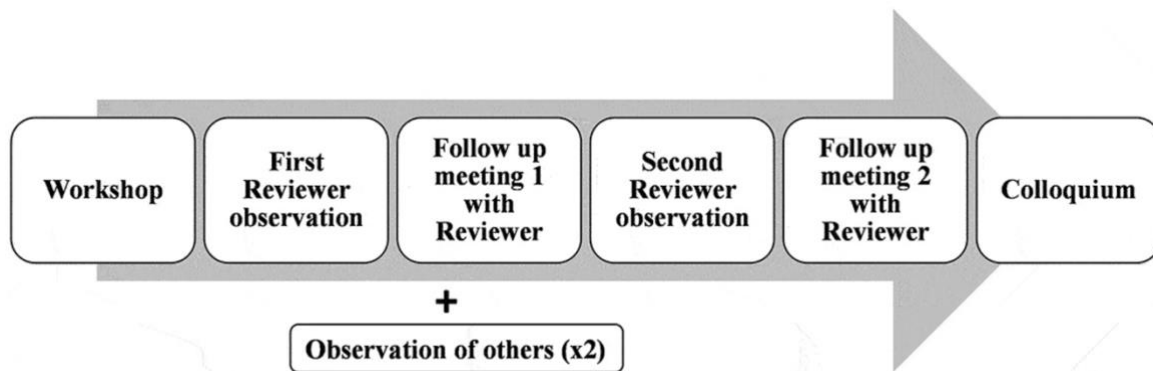
Figure 2: Peer Observation and Review of Teaching (PORT) (Hendry et al., 2020, p. 56)

Diffracting Peer Observation

In addition to variety in terms of who is involved in the observation of teaching, within or beyond the discipline and/or institution and the T&L setting in which it happens, there is scope within the processes to adapt in order to achieve other desired outcomes. One example of this is explained by Warren in what she terms as 'diffracting peer observation'. Warren notes that with this approach one is looking at 'the impact of an event and the patterns of difference that emerge' (2022, p. 292). The process does not involve evaluating and critiquing, so much as articulating 'patterns of difference' and asking 'why' and 'what if' about those. As the title of her paper suggests, it is about 'talking about differences, not looking for perfection'.

Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO)

Cycle of Collaborative Observation is similar to Cycle of Peer Observation but with space for students to participate in the process (see figure 3). O'Leary and Cui note that in CoCO 'students and staff all take an active role in critically reflecting on their practices, viewing the shared classroom experience from their perspectives and exchanging their observations and reflections with each other' (2023, p. 162).
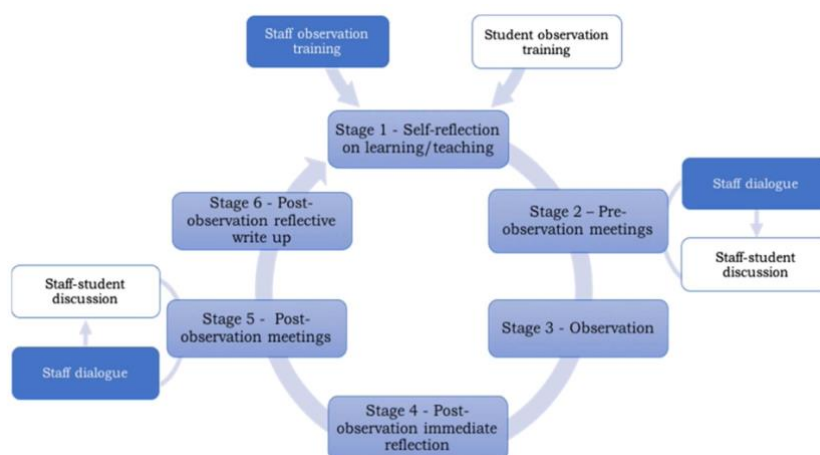

Figure 3: Cycle of Collaborative Observation (CoCO) (O'Leary and Cui, 2020, p. 150)

Teaching and Learning Circles

Rogers et al. (2019) describe teaching and learning circles, inspired by Teaching Squares (Grooters, 2008) 'as a hybrid of peer observation of teaching and collaborative peer review of teaching; with a strong emphasis on sociable, dialogical interactions amongst Teaching and Learning Circle members' (2019, p. 5). The circles are generally made up of three or four colleagues, either assigned to a group or self-selecting. Participation in a circle is voluntary. For Rogers et al., the circles were designed for observation of teaching, without any review process, however, participants opted to include peer review of their practice. The process involved pre and post observation meetings, and all members observed each other teaching. Practice is enhanced through collegial conversations about teaching, observations of teaching and self-reflection, and non-evaluative feedback on teaching (pp. 9-14). Grooters explains what non-evaluative means in their Teaching Squares process:

> Teaching Squares are meant to spur personal self-reflection rather than peer evaluation. Participants focus their conversations on what they've learned about their own teaching from the observation process and avoid direct commentary on their colleagues' performance. The goal is to encourage a respectful, safe, mutually-supportive experience for all involved. Participants are encouraged to approach the process in a spirit of appreciation – even celebration – of the work of their colleagues. (2008, p. 4)

Rogers et al. recommend that circles have autonomy, that leadership promote and support the programme, and that a co-ordinator '[oversees] the administrative tasks of forming Teaching and Learning Circles, and [provides] information and support to TLC members (or potential members)' (2019, pp. 3-4).

'Just watching' | 'Just teaching'

Thomson, Bell and Hendry (2015) in their work on peer observation of teaching discovered that 'just watching' was useful for observer's teaching development. Colleagues noted that they learned new strategies which they applied to their own teaching. Within 'just watching' Thomson, Bell and Hendry identified that observers can choose what they want to focus on which may help them to solve a T&L problem they are having. The process can challenge colleagues' own ideas about teaching and learning, and provide them with an opportunity to see how others teach content to students. Within 'just watching' there is no requirement to review the colleague's teaching.

Research with Maynooth University staff suggested a similar approach where it was questioned whether observation has to be a 'two-way thing'. In this case, as the respondent elaborated: 'the person being observed can opt in or out of receiving constructive criticism … What appeals to me is that colleagues would offer space for observation in their sessions [if] they are doing something worth seeing. I don't know if there is a need for the observers to provide feedback if it is not sought.'

Video-reflection

Video reflection involves a colleague being videoed teaching a class. While some colleagues might be anxious about being recorded, this process has several practical advantages: colleagues can gain a different (student) perspective on the classroom experience (Wass and Rogers, 2021); colleagues can use the video for their own observation of their teaching supported with relevant tools such as review templates; colleagues can revisit the recording to check aspects of their teaching; videos can be shared with others for feedback, including the sharing of individual aspects of teaching for tailored and specific review; feedback can be requested asynchronously and by colleagues in other institutions/countries without in-person challenges around logistics. Disadvantages are the technical set-up and having the required technology and know-how, securing, where required ethical permission from students to be recorded, and addressing GDPR requirements regarding the use, storage and access to recordings (see McCoy and Lynam, 2020) unless the recording has been organised to not include students.

Tripp and Rich (2012) in their work in teacher education note that the literature suggests that the benefits of video 'typically fall under two general categories: improved ability to evaluate teaching and changes made to teaching' (p. 729). Regarding the latter, they note that 'video encouraged change because it helped [their research participants to]: (a) focus on key aspects of their teaching, (b) gain a new perspective, (c) trust the feedback that they received, (d) feel accountable to change their practice, (e) remember to implement changes, and (f) see their progress' (p. 737).

Unseen observation

Unseen observation is described in O'Leary and Cui (2023) as 'a model of observation that relies on the teacher engaging in a process of self-observation and self-analysis, as well as collaborative reflection and dialogue with their 'collaborator', before and after the taught lesson' (p. 201). The model is outlined in figure 4.
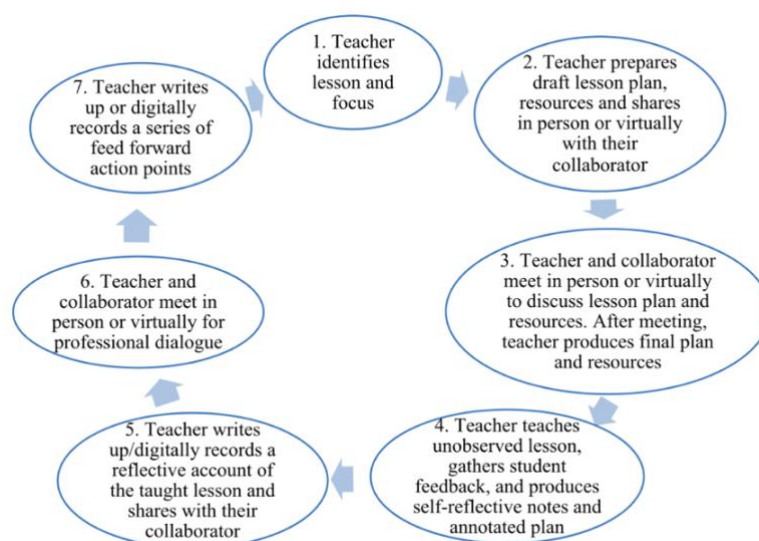

Figure 4. Unseen observation cycle (O'Leary, 2022, p. 5)

As the stages suggest, the teacher identifies an area of their teaching that they want to explore, they plan, share and discuss their planning with a collaborator, teach and seek student feedback, reflect, engage in professional dialogue and feed forward. The model does not, therefore, involve any outsider observation as such, and the colleague working with the teacher is not described as an observer, or a reviewer, but rather a collaborator. This approach gives the teacher agency, promotes professional dialogue and reflection, incorporates the students' voice, and prompts planning for future practice. It contrasts with performance management and accountability driven approaches and amplifies professional learning and community.

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