

# Lesson observation: beyond performance management

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The title of this discussion, '*Lesson Observation: top-down or democratic control?*', is interesting because it presents lesson observation as a binary, and I think that's part of the ongoing issue that we have with observation. When we think about the traditional focus of observation, not just in further education but across the English education system, it's been as a tool of assessment largely for performance management purposes. That's still its dominant use today. Over the last few decades, the balance has been on the '*sorting*' use of lesson observation rather than the '*supporting*' use of observation as a tool for understanding teaching and learning. Of course, the over-reliance on observation as a tool of performance management has many counter-productive consequences; it leads to very high stakes outcomes, and has blinkered how both organisations and individuals think about observation, compromising its potential as a productive tool for furthering our understanding of teaching and learning, and stopping us from making best use of observation to support practitioners' learning and development. This then raises the question of how we move beyond these performance models of observation. The starting point is very much about breaking the link between observation and assessment.

What I'd like to think about are the key principles for making best use of observation to improve teaching and learning. How can we remove those blinkers that have in some ways contaminated how people conceptualise and engage with observation as a mechanism? What do we need to do differently? I'd suggest there are five key principles:

1. Using lesson observation as a tool of educational enquiry so that we're applying observation as a method for studying and exploring the messy world of teaching and learning - the relationship between the two, the ways in which teachers' thinking is influenced,

and how teachers' thinking manifests itself in their practice and decision-making and so on.

2. Even before we start to contemplate the application of observation, we need to reconceptualise observation as a tool for supporting professional development rather than categorising or sorting teachers through some spurious grading system, or as a mechanism for assessing their overall competence.

3. Observation needs to be understood as a means and not an end in itself. What I mean by this is that one of the consequences of relying on observation as a tool for assessing teacher performance is that the event of an observation has become an end in itself, where absolutist yet reductionist judgements are made about the overall professional competence of practitioners. It is important to acknowledge that the potential value that observation brings to developing our understanding of teaching and learning is its use as a catalyst for collaborative and collegial discussion and reflection.

4. Connected to that is thinking about the method of observation as a process not a product, which, sadly, it has become in many educational contexts. Assessment-based models of observation inevitably end up focusing on the product or outcome rather than the process. And it is focusing on and understanding the latter where the real advances in knowledge and practice are to be made.

5. In order to make this shift in the way in which institutions and individuals conceptualise and engage with observation requires an investment in preparation and training for all staff involved. This typically needs to involve a process of '*unlearning*' about observation as a method of teacher assessment, and a '*reboot*' in

developing staff awareness of its application as a tool of classroom inquiry.

So, what are the implications for those coordinating institutional approaches to observation? Again, there are five:

1. The first thing it requires is a shift in ethos away from traditional notions of observation as an instrument of hierarchical evaluation to a more collaborative ethos in which observation is conceptualised as a more collegial instrument of enquiry.
2. Widening the scope of focus beyond individual sessions or lessons. As a result of that narrow focus, observation in some ways has become pathologised - the idea of focusing in on one very narrow snippet of somebody's practice, which is a very unrealistic and unhelpful way of using observation. We need to adopt a more holistic approach.
3. But if we're going to make the transition away from the hierarchical, performance-management, accountability-driven approach to observation, it also requires the development of a safe and trusting space within which teachers can operate and collaborate, without fear of reprisal or any punitive consequences.
4. This requires investment in developing reflection and coaching skills. These are not innate skills but skills that need to be consciously practised and developed over a period of time.
5. This again requires a shift in thinking about observation as it has been for so long - putting aside observation as an individual pursuit and realising that it has potential for developing a community-based approach to the way in which we understand the relationships between teaching and learning and the roles and responsibilities of teachers and students within that complex relationship.

One of the key questions we need to ask is: how do we convince others to move away from performance-management models? Performance-management models don't exist in a vacuum. They are part of a system where, over the last few decades, notions of accountability and quality assurance have become contaminated by very narrow mindsets which have become normalised. It's interesting to point out that some people infer a conscious quality about managers wanting to use observation as a

controlling tool. Whilst I recognise that in some instances, I think people are overegging the argument. What I mean by that is that it's more a reflection of the normalisation which results from a lack of understanding and a lack of imagination as to how to use observation as a mechanism. I've seen it in higher education contexts, where recent developments in the field are presented to management who are completely non-plussed by them. But why would they react any other way? They're not involved in the field, they don't know the latest developments, they don't read the research, and so they end up slipping back into an outdated but trusted normalised model that we can trace back to the 1990s and which still exists in so many FE institutions today.

But there are lots of examples of very innovative, forward-thinking approaches. For example, Guernsey College have rolled out a model which they refer to as the '*One Thing*', which is based on some of the principles of work we've been doing over the last decade, and which puts teachers at the heart of the decision-making. Teachers drive the agenda because they are the best ones to know what their priorities are in their own fields. But also look at Dudley College, which has a fantastic model called '*Teaching Triangles*', an enquiry-based model that involves looking collegially at areas of practice within particular departments and subject areas. The way they use observation is simply as a lens for exploring practice within those subject areas. There is no link to judgement whatsoever, and there's a very clear case-study presented of the '*Teaching Triangles*' model which we were very lucky to capture in a piece of research that I did with colleagues a couple of years ago and that was funded by FETL.

There are lots of examples that show that you don't need to continue with these stale, outdated, assessment-based models that continue to rear their ugly head in many institutions. If people are interested in reading more, these two books are a good place to start, as they're packed with lots of illustrative examples:

O'Leary, M. (2020) *Classroom Observation: a Guide to the Effective Observation of Teaching and Learning* - Second Edition. London: Routledge

O'Leary, M. (ed.) (2016) *Reclaiming Lesson Observation: Supporting Excellence in Teacher Learning*. London: Routledge.