

Sharing practice ‘outside the family’: Reflections on cross-institutional peer observation for online tutors

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While increasingly widespread, **teaching online** can be a solo endeavour. In this paper we consider how peer exchange between **online** tutors from different institutions may offer a solution to professional isolation. We report on a cross-institutional peer observation and mentoring programme between the Universities of York (UK) and Waikato (New Zealand), designed to support tutors’ personal development through online peer exchange. Our findings reveal that tutors’ use of synchronous conferencing tools was influential in shaping the relationship between participants on the programme. Exposure to diversity served to challenge institutional pedagogical norms. We review the engagement strategies and emergent learning outcomes for participants, and discuss the necessary conditions of openness and commitment for effective peer exchange between **online** tutors from different cultural and institutional contexts.

Keywords: peer observation; online tutoring; peer mentoring

Introduction

In recent years **there has been** a steady growth in online learning courses worldwide (**Allen & Seaman, 2015**), with digital learning methods now accounting for the most common way in which **university instructors** and students interact across distance learning programmes. In addition to bridging distance for geographically dispersed students, online course offerings also complement campus-based classes and provide flexible study opportunities for students who are juggling employment, family and sporting pursuits. An online environment presents **instructors** with fresh opportunities to engage with learners through interactive media, but at the same time challenges **staff** to keep pace with technological change and adopt pedagogies that are matched **carefully** to student needs (Baxter, 2012; McWilliam, 2005). This requires regular critical reflection on teaching methods and tools and their alignment in support of student learning. As Brookfield (1995) explains,

“Critically reflective teaching happens when we identify and scrutinize the assumptions that undergird how we work. The most effective way to become aware of these assumptions is to view our practice from different perspectives.” (pp. 12-13).

Brookfield (1995) goes on to discern four lenses through which to examine teaching practice – through autobiographical introspection, student perspectives, theoretical frameworks, and through the lens provided by our colleagues’ perceptions and experiences. Thus, “we can ask colleagues to be mirrors, mentors, or critical friends with whom we engage in critical conversations about our practice” (Brookfield, 1995, p.13).

Traditional views of mentoring often juxtapose an experienced mentor with a novice protégé, while recent proposals suggest self-mentoring as a means of avoiding the challenges of pairing (Carr, Pastor & Levesque, 2015). We view peer observation as an approach more closely associated with collegial mentoring, offering an opportunity for tutors to reflect and develop through critical dialogue and the sharing of perspectives with fellow professionals. The intent is that professional discussion and appreciative inquiry take priority over discourses of competency standards or performative demands. Rather than working from a negative stance or deficit perspective, where development is targeted to mend practice, the peer observation approach aims to build upon strengths by valuing pedagogy intertwined with professional identity, agency and judgement (Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2014; White, 2010).

We have observed within the UK higher education sector in particular, a growing attention to the application of peer observation techniques to staff development for online tutors through initiatives such as the Open University’s programme of peer-

observed synchronous tutorials (Jones & Gallen, 2015; Nicolson & Harper, 2014), University College London's 'Peer-to-peer Reflection on Pedagogical Practice' (Swinglehurst, Russell & Greenhalgh, 2008) and cross-institutional programmes such as the COOLAID programme between the Universities of Hull and Staffordshire (Bennett, Lee, Lynch & Howard, 2010). The University of York's peer observation programme has been influenced by these initiatives, whilst also drawing on peer review (Gosling, 2002) and peer mentoring techniques (Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2014), with links to learning conversations, goal setting and positive change (Walker, 2015).

Peer mentoring is predicted to become more prevalent as a form of professional learning with benefits arising from mutuality, reciprocity or co-mentoring (Garvey et al, 2014). Using digital media for mentoring conversations has become increasingly popular, with virtual mentoring (also known as e-mentoring) proving accessible and enabling more time for reflection and learning (Garvey et al, 2014; Law, Ireland & Hussain, 2007).

Informed by these examples and our respective institutional experiences, a joint peer observation programme was launched in 2015 between the Universities of York (UK) and Waikato (NZ). This innovative collaboration marks a departure from previous programmes, bringing together 'online tutors' (i.e. staff with an online teaching role) from different teaching and cultural contexts to share practice online. We report on participants' experiences, engagement strategies, and the learning outcomes arising from the programme, with a view to informing future cross-institutional peer mentoring initiatives.

Rationale for the York – Waikato programme

The University of York in the United Kingdom currently offers 26 accredited postgraduate distance learning programmes, as fully online courses. As part of the University's peer support for teaching scheme, a York peer observation programme was trialled between 2011-14, bringing together participants with contrasting **online** tutoring approaches and disciplinary backgrounds. **This 'opt-in'** programme offered opportunities **to share** strategies **on** discussion management and activity design, as well as to **investigate** the use of **different** technologies **within online courses**.

In a bid to extend this initiative with fresh perspectives and expertise, York participants were joined in 2015 by online lecturers from the University of Waikato in New Zealand, as an international partner. Waikato offers online classes and programmes at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and the Faculty of Education was an early adopter of online teaching, establishing an online initial teacher education degree course in 1997.

Participants from Waikato's Faculty of Education joined a diverse range of tutors from York programmes ranging from Applied Human Rights to Health Economics on the combined programme.

The design of the programme remained true to the values of previous York peer observation programmes (Walker, 2015), offering a development opportunity for individuals focusing on the 'mutual exchange of practice' (McMahon, Barrett & O'Neill, 2007) with constructive dialogue, driven by participants' own objectives for the exercise.

Implementation of the programme

The online programme was jointly managed by York and Waikato coordinators (the authors of this paper) and launched in March 2015. Ten tutors and programme managers from the University of York **volunteered to join the programme**, collaborating with seven colleagues from the University of Waikato. Half of the York cohort had participated **in** at least one of the three previous peer observation programmes, with five tutors joining for the first time. One Waikato **lecturer** had participated **in** the 2014 York programme, with the others coming fresh to this cross-institutional arrangement.

Nine pairings were matched by the coordinators, with one Waikato participant engaging in two observation arrangements with different partners from the University of York. One York tutor requested to be paired with a fellow York participant, as he was new to online tutoring and wished to learn about the institutional way of doing things before branching out. The other eight pairings were matched as closely as possible by experience and discipline between York and Waikato participants, although this proved challenging given the diverse range of courses represented on the programme.

Drawing on lessons learned from previous peer observation programmes at York (Walker, 2015), participants were provided with guidance on how to conduct the observation with their partner, based on a four-step engagement model, addressing how to prepare for the observation and exchange feedback. Indicative timelines were given for each step of the process, with 2-3 weeks suggested for preparation for the observation, allowing time for partners to get to know each other and agree on objectives and roles for the observation. A month was suggested for partners to review a 'live' or archived module site, with 2-3 weeks recommended as the period within which

to exchange feedback immediately after the observation activity had been completed.

Participants were also given suggestions on observation themes to consider when defining their own development objectives, but were free to choose their own focus. The only requirements were to complete and return to the programme coordinators a *pro forma* confirming their objectives for the observation after this had been agreed with their partner, and to notify the programme coordinators at the end of the process and engage in a reflective discussion of their experience. The reflective conversation marked the fourth and final step in the engagement model and also addressed the 'change agenda' that individuals would be pursuing, drawing on the learning outcomes that they had personally identified from the observation process which they could apply to their tutoring practice.

Evaluation methods

The extension of the York programme to Waikato participants offered new opportunities for peer exchange on a number of levels, addressing organisational and cultural differences in approaches to online pedagogy. It also presented a number of challenges - not least in terms of the logistics of bringing individuals together who are situated in different time zones working to different institutional calendars.

Our research investigated participants' perceptions of their experiences, with the aim of learning about the conditions influencing the effective exchange of practice between tutors from different institutions. **Ethical approval for the study was received from both institutions, with all participants also consenting to engage in an evaluation activity at the end of the programme. Once a pairing had completed the exchange of feedback rounding off the observation process, individuals were invited to engage in a semi-**

structured 'one-to-one' interview with the coordinator from their institution, using a shared framework of questions. The 17 interviews were intentionally organised with individuals rather than with pairings to encourage critical reflection on the observation experience, and were designed to elicit feedback on how participants viewed the matching process, negotiated with their partner and managed the mentoring processes. Participants were also invited to reflect on personal-professional learning.

Transcripts of the interviews were shared with participants for validation purposes. The reflections of participants on the learning outcomes were subsequently cross-referenced with the espoused objectives for each observation as documented in the *pro forma*, to review the evolution of the learning exchange for each pair. Interview transcripts for the whole cohort were combined and a qualitative content analysis performed of the recorded comments as part of an inductive evaluation approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coding categories were derived from the themes emerging from responses to the research question-set and were verified independently.

Findings

All nine pairings successfully completed observations and feedback exchanges and reflected on their experiences through the evaluation interviews. For the purposes of the cross-institutional research investigation, we report on the experiences of the eight York-Waikato pairings in the discussion below.

Drivers for participation

Participants cited familiar reasons for participating on the programme, such as the opportunity to reflect on their tutoring practice and to learn by watching other

colleagues' practice – benefits which are commonly associated with peer observation (Thomson, Bell & Hendry, 2015). The cross-institutional dimension was particularly attractive in promising an experience free from internal issues. In this sense it represented a genuine staff development opportunity geared towards participants' own focus:

“It was an opportunity to have a rethink about things and work with someone I had never worked with before, so there was no institutional agenda at work here, it was about growing ourselves.” (Participant 5, Waikato)

Working with an external colleague promised broader and more diverse perspectives, with partners reflecting from different institutional contexts. This was seen as both daunting and exciting. “Going outside the family” as one York tutor described it, could be both exposing in terms of the criticisms **of established practice** and enlightening in addressing blind spots which might otherwise go unchallenged. Most were curious about developments in online learning in different contexts:

“There was extra interest this time – getting experience of the external culture of an institution – that was motivating. It is important to keep abreast of developments in distance learning in other institutions, to see whether the way they do things could benefit our own students.” (Participant 7, York)

Waikato participants mentioned that the opportunity to work with colleagues from York served to complement the existing access to viewpoints from local colleagues. Access to both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ perspectives was deemed to be important, alongside the formation of both strong and weak ties. **Weak ties with acquaintances can be useful for task-focused input** and for the sharing of fresh ideas gleaned from wider networks (Haythornthwaite, 2000). Ties are strengthened when there is a greater frequency of

interaction and closer relationships (Easley & Kleinberg, 2010). Overall, combinations of weak and strong ties are reported to provide affective and cognitive support (Ben-Peretz & Kupferberg, 2007) and we posit that they may offer valuable support to professional development for online tutors.

Reflections on matching

The matching requirements communicated by participants to the programme coordinators touched on preferences relating to the institution and role and experience of the partner they wished to be matched with, but extended also to requests for disciplinary matches and expertise in a particular area; e.g. teaching experience with research methods and expertise on innovative ways of supporting learning in Moodle. Individual preferences over institutional matches and roles (tutor / programme manager) were met by the coordinators, but disciplinary matchings proved harder to satisfy due to the mix of participants. This led to some initial surprises when participants were notified of their partners, but provided an opportunity to explore:

“We were two totally different people from two totally different worlds. We were as mismatched as you can get but that worked well for us. Because each knew nothing about what the other was teaching so we had fewer assumptions about how things should be done, and we got a fresh look at how things could be done differently outside of our usual sphere.” (Participant 7, Waikato)

Whilst few tutors favoured a cross-disciplinary exchange at the outset of the process, the matching experience helped them to see the possibilities and value of working across disciplines.

Participants identified a trade-off between subject knowledge and online experience in the matching process – with the latter more highly valued.

“By having someone who is very experienced online, you would probably gain a lot more online experience that is useful.” (Participant 6, Waikato)

Working arrangements and emergent models

Participants were guided to set objectives and manage the observation and feedback processes, but were free to determine how and when to complete their observations and exchange of feedback. The observations were conducted with participants working across time zones, using a combination of email and synchronous communication tools such as appear.in and Skype to support their exchange.

Three engagement models emerged across the different pairings, ranging from an instrumental **relationship** to collaborative models focusing on shared or evolving objectives, as illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Engagement models for York – Waikato exchange

The key distinction between the engagement models was in the way participants approached their first synchronous conversation, either as a ‘get to know you’ to build rapport, or as a procedural dialogue to confirm arrangements for how the observation would run. Another key difference related to how objectives for the observation were determined, either independently or through discussion of shared interests. Thus, while some participants embarked upon the peer observation with clear goals in mind, others entered the partnership with an open-ended intent to learn and goals emerged through discussion with the partner. Where the exchanges were characterised by negotiation and co-construction of learning outcomes (Vygotsky, 1978), goals were effectively talked into being and the relationship was pivotal to the ‘change agenda’. According to some

commentators, this distinction between task-focused exchange and relational orientation is the essence of the coaching and mentoring continuum. That is, coaching is focused on concrete issues as a task orientation whilst mentoring is developmental, longer term and relationship-oriented (Alkins & Lawrence, 2012).

The frequency of synchronous meetings was also important: one pairing conducted three online meetings to build rapport, negotiate a framework and establish guidelines for the peer observation and then discuss feedback. For another pairing the relationship *was* the focus of the exchange and multiple meetings were used to address issues in their day-to-day practice. Multiple meetings influenced the longevity of the mentoring partnership, and the evolutionary exchange took place over a longer timeframe. There are implications here for the maintenance of social support and stronger ties between participants (Haythornthwaite, 2000).

Learning outcomes

By cross-referencing *pro forma* objectives with reported outcomes we were able to track the development of each critical exchange. Declared objectives from the *pro forma* returns reflected a number of common themes such as approaches to discussion management and student engagement.

Task-focused participants adhered to the questions that their partner had identified in their observation contract when observing and returning feedback. Observees reported receiving valuable insights for consideration in their own practice, such as tips on how to build interaction into recorded lectures through links to case studies, assignments and discussion activities.

In other cases the benefits of the exchange were experienced more by the observer when reviewing a partner's work, an effect reported in previous studies of peer observation (Jones & Gallen, 2015; Walker, 2015). This was particularly likely where a partner had adopted an innovative approach, such as the integration of social media tools to support learner engagement.

Rapport-based pairings demonstrated greater freedom to go beyond the stated objectives to explore diverse areas of tutoring practice through a more open-ended review. Going beyond the remit raised divergent questions. For example, when one partner had expertise in interface design this developed into an area for incidental focus and development. A 'misreading' of the course site by an observer in another pairing was transformed into a learning opportunity, leading to discussion on how to communicate to 'outsiders' who are unfamiliar with an established course structure and teaching methods.

"I appreciated this learning even if it highlighted an area beyond the initial observation like effective communication. I learnt a lot about not assuming and more on the communication of a teaching space to an outsider." (Participant 2, Waikato)

The frequency of conversations in rapport-based pairings enabled participants to circle back and develop themes of interest, leading to more detailed questioning and challenge on personal tutoring styles and institutional tutoring norms. Themes ranged from the relative autonomy of tutors to manage assessment to the merits of actively managing student learning online – with York tutors favouring a more 'hands on' approach which appeared at odds with the academic freedom and self-directed learning championed at Waikato. Discussion also touched on the formality and tone of the tutor's voice, with

differences perceived between York and Waikato partners in communication style, provoking a deeper personal analysis of tutor identity and authenticity when engaging with students:

“.... she recognised how the language I used and the way I talked was much more informal than she was used to. I don’t know if that is NZ or a personality thing. ... The different experiences and perspectives of interactions were valuable for thinking about my teaching.” (Participant 3, Waikato)

It is conceivable that the perceived informality of New Zealand participants’ interactions with students is an example of cross-cultural difference and that this is an illustration of how exposure to diversity can prompt reflection. It is noteworthy that this observation was made by three of the participants who were familiar with both the UK and NZ tertiary contexts. Nevertheless, beyond raising the possibility of cultural and contextual diversity, we do not seek to generalise about systemic or cultural traits, but rather to emphasise that understanding difference can help us to see our own ways of working more clearly, and to recognise new possibilities.

Discussion

Whilst acknowledging the limitations of this small-scale study, we contend that the research is insightful in highlighting the potential benefits of cross-institutional peer exchange for online tutors. The cross-institutional dimension was a compelling reason for established tutors and programme managers to join the programme, promising a purer personal-professional development process, free from internal agendas and bias in the observation and feedback exchanges. It offered a window into a different institution’s tutoring practices, with the opportunity to observe different teaching and

technologies in use. Evidence from this preliminary study also suggests that cross-institutional exchange can encourage participants to reflect more deeply on the cultural and institutional values influencing their tutoring practice, transcending the established operational themes of discussion management, activity design and technology usage which are typically addressed in institutional programmes.

Importantly, we infer from the interview findings a number of necessary conditions for effective peer exchange to take place online between tutors working from different cultural and institutional contexts, focusing on openness and commitment to peer exchange. Firstly, our findings suggest that the need for participant control over the matching process may well be overstated (Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2013), and indeed that matching outcomes should not be viewed as decisive in determining which tutors will work effectively together. As one Waikato tutor observed:

“The matching doesn’t matter. I figured that if someone else wanted this kind of thing then it was going to be a worthwhile partnership anyway.” (Participant 5, Waikato)

It follows that openness to feedback and the possibilities for change can be more influential in the development of an effective peer exchange. Where participants join the programme voluntarily, driven by a curiosity and desire for peer input into pedagogy, the foundation is laid for growth and productive exchange. This mindset, best characterised as productive (Argyris, 2004) or as a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) would seem to be as important as the initial matching, if not more so. This open orientation to professional and personal growth was evident in participants’ reflections on their intentions and goals, where they frequently spoke of hoping to discover new ideas and “something different”.

In addition to curiosity about learning from difference, commitment and investment of time in the process are also relevant factors, holding the key to productive cross-institutional relationships. Commitment is particularly relevant for international mentoring that requires participants to negotiate time zones and institutional calendars for the scheduling of observations. Cultural and institutional differences are such that more time may be needed to build an effective rapport and set the tone for the relationship and how it will evolve. This requires tutors to commit to establishing common ground at the outset of the process (Garvey, Stokes & Megginson, 2014; Gosling, 2002; Shortland, 2010). Adequate preparation in mastering the “telescopic” (big picture) and “microscopic” (operational) perspectives of an observed course, as one participant described them, are also needed. Effective dialogue needs to be underpinned by a sound understanding of the wider context (e.g. institutional context and programme culture), as well as the background to the course which is being observed – in order for feedback to be framed **appropriately** to the observee; this requires adequate preparation and communication **to be established from the outset of the peer exchange process**.

For participants who mastered this level of detail through an initial series of synchronous discussions, there emerged a shared understanding from which to challenge and probe different institutional pedagogic norms, such as the merits of active involvement of students in assessment. This suggests that when assessing the value of peer exchange we should consider the richness of the discursive process that unfolds as much as the transferable feedback and insights that are generated from the process. Our findings highlight the scope for rapport-based pairings to use the discursive process effectively to challenge personal and institutional ‘blind spots’ and accepted norms in teaching and assessment practices. Rather than producing actionable insights for

immediate implementation, the discussions may also unlock new questions and in this way help to define a change agenda to share with a participant's wider programme team. We will seek to test these assumptions through further iterations of the York-Waikato programme as part of our ongoing research in this domain.

Future Directions

In order to build upon the first experiences of the cross-institutional peer observation programme for online tutors, there are now plans to expand the range of partners and disciplines, and to involve further institutions in the programme. It is hoped that 'snowball recruitment' will assist these intentions, as past participants act as ambassadors for the programme, encouraging colleagues to take part. In addition, we expect returning participants to maintain a core team of online tutors. One possibility would be to offer returning participants the opportunity to work with the same partner again, an option that could lead **potentially** to the continuation of evolutionary collaborations, or to the expansion of other models of engagement. For example, it is conceivable that pairs could work with pairs, to enable four participants to engage as a group. Various permutations are possible. To complement the expansion of the peer observation programme, we also propose generation of deeper case study data via focus groups with participants in each institution, in order to investigate and verify the tentative models of engagement and establish further guidelines for cross-institutional, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary peer mentoring.

Disclosure statement

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