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A MODEL FOR PEER OBSERVATIONS OF TEACHING PRACTICE AND
A PROPOSAL FOR IMPLEMENTATION AT OTAGO POLYTECHNIC

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The following sections are the work of the first author: After the first author's content has concluded, there follow two reflective accounts from the second and third authors who were the first author's mentors.

INTRODUCTION

Observations of teaching are an increasingly common method used by educational institutions either to evaluate teaching practices or to help develop teacher capabilities. Observations of teaching offer multiple benefits to both staff and institutions, especially concerning the enhancement of teaching quality, recognition and rewarding of good teaching, and the development of academic careers (Harris et al., 2008). For teaching staff, especially, the benefits of an observation programme include receiving feedback on their teaching, acknowledgment of their efforts and the discovery and adoption of best practice techniques from their colleagues. Peer observation programmes foster a collegial culture as colleagues engage in discussions and share insights around teaching practice, either within their own disciplines or across departments.

Although teaching observation programmes carry valuable benefits for teaching staff and their institutions, there are common challenges to their implementation and sustained usage from the very people they serve to benefit. Typical challenges include the heavy workload and limited time that teaching staff have for such development initiatives (Gosling & O'Connor, 2009), as well as a lack of trust that staff may have in the process, either due to a lack of confidence in having their work observed, fear of negative evaluation and unfamiliarity with such processes (Harris et al., 2008). The literature does offer solutions to these obstacles, such as a focus on development as opposed to evaluation, the maintenance of confidentiality, and the training of staff in providing constructive feedback (Gosling, 2002), as well as the need for voluntary engagement and a staged approach to implementation that begins with more willing staff members (Harris et al., 2008). However, staff reticence remains a concern (Edgington, 2014).

An earlier study (Staples, 2022), motivated by such challenges, was conducted to explore how peer observation of teaching (PoT) could be used at Otago Polytechnic (OP) to develop facilitation practice and encourage facilitators to share techniques with their colleagues. This study examined how PoT could be designed to give facilitators ownership of their own developmental process. The results showed the use of a parallel community of practice (CoP) to be the key ingredient to the successful uptake of a PoT programme. The key output of the study was the creation of a peer observation and CoP model that could be used across Otago Polytechnic. The proposed model was underpinned by scholarship available at the time. The aim of this article is to consider if the proposed model for Otago Polytechnic is still supported by more recent research. The article will briefly explain the process, findings and proposed model and will then compare the proposed OP model to the work of two other recent research outputs. The article will conclude with recommended changes to the proposed model, based on the comparisons.

DEVELOPING THE PROPOSED PEER OBSERVATION MODEL

The original study used participant action research as the methodology (Staples, 2022). The intention was to help bring about cultural change within the organisation via the research project, through the researcher working alongside, and empowering, the participants to create a peer observation model that would benefit their own and their colleagues' classroom practice. The participants were assisted to take ownership of their own development and could thereafter (with support from the Learning and Teaching Development team) help drive the capability development of their peers outside of the research participant pool.

Seven facilitators at the Otago Polytechnic Auckland campus from two academic departments voluntarily took part in the study, which started at the end of 2020 and concluded in early 2021. The method used was the creation of a peer observation of teaching programme, *combined* with a CoP model. The participants received training in how to conduct observations and provide feedback. To help identify focus areas for their development of practice, each participant was observed initially by a Learning and Teaching Specialist, who also conducted final observations of the participants after the peer observations were completed. The participants themselves engaged in three rounds of peer observations over the period of an eight-week teaching block, with each observation round lasting two weeks. The first two rounds of peer observations occurred between members of the same department, while the third round was interdepartmental, so that participants could potentially be exposed to differences in teaching practice. After each round of peer observation, all participants came together as a community of practice (CoP) for a reflective session, facilitated by the researcher. These CoP sessions allowed for a sharing of experience and best practice, and were an opportunity for the researcher to receive feedback on the viability of the peer observation process being used.

The results indicated that the inclusion of a community of practice, facilitated by a champion, who would promote and facilitate the CoP sessions, was significant in motivating teachers to engage in teaching observations for the purpose of their own development and in sharing their practice with their colleagues. While the intention was to create a process that would encourage development of practice that was separate from managerial compliance initiatives, it became apparent that facilitators might want to use such a programme as part of their official performance review process.

Based on the study at the Auckland campus, the following model (Figure 1) was proposed for the use of a similar programme for Otago Polytechnic:

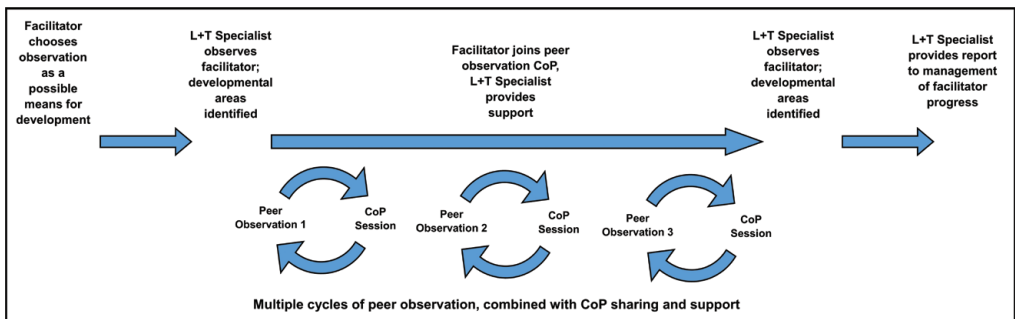


Figure 1. Proposed model of peer observation of teaching for Otago Polytechnic (Staples, 2022).

This model, if used at Otago Polytechnic, would make use of the Learning and Teaching (L+T) specialists assigned as academic capability (AcCap) partners to the various colleges to facilitate the programme within their college. The L+T specialist would champion the programme and facilitate the regular CoP sessions with the participants.

The model allows for two approaches to peer observation of teaching depending on the motivations of the participants, who would participate voluntarily. Some teaching staff may choose to engage in peer observation purely for their own development and to be exposed to ideas from their colleagues. Others may also choose to engage for development of practice, but with the added intention to have their progress linked to their official performance reviews and professional advancement. This latter group, having agreed with their formal leader to use the programme for their development, would initially be observed by their L+T specialist, after which they would agree to focus areas for their development. The teacher would then join their colleagues in a series of peer observations, acting as both reviewer and reviewee, and would join the regular CoP sessions to share their development with other teaching staff from their college. Once the facilitator felt that they were ready, the L+T specialist could observe them again to record any developments in their teaching practice. The initial and concluding observations, conducted by the L+T specialist would, by necessity, have an *agreed upon* evaluative aspect to them, whereas the observations by peers would be purely for development and collaboration. Those facilitators who chose not to use the programme as part of their professional reviews, would have the option to engage purely in the peer observations and the CoP sessions.

COMPARING THE PROPOSED MODEL WITH RECENT RESEARCH

This section compares the proposed model with two pieces of recent (post 2020) research. The first (Kocur, 2021) was selected as it compares the different types of observation programme that can be used, while the second research output (Mouraz et al., 2023) was selected due to its multidisciplinary nature, which was also a consideration of the research that led to the creation of the proposed OP model.

Kocur (2021), expanding on the work of Gosling (2002), identifies three different models of peer observation of teaching that are used in evaluation and development of teaching practice: evaluative, developmental and collaborative. Kocur highlights the positives and negatives of each model, while advocating for the use of the collaborative option. For Kocur, the strengths of the evaluative model, used by management to evaluate the quality of teaching and to mould compliance in practice, include “quality assurance, compliance and adherence to standards” (2021, p. 136). The weaknesses, however, include educators being resistant to a process that is seen as top-down and focused on standardisation. The development model, on the other hand, involves observations by educational developers or expert teachers to provide feedback on specific developmental needs, as determined by the expert and the teacher being observed. As the name suggests, the focus here is less on compliance and more on development of practice. Like the evaluative model, the developmental model brings both positives and negatives. The positives include observations that are less judgemental, as the feedback is only shared between the observed teacher and an expert reviewer, who provides a sense of credibility to the identified needs. This model can enhance teaching practice through encouraging critical self-reflection based on the received feedback. The negatives, states Kocur, include a lack of impact as the response to the feedback depends on the reviewee and there is no structured mechanism to ensure that feedback is actioned to produce improvements to teaching. In the collaborative model, teachers observe each other and improve their teaching practice through dialogue and mutual reflection (Gosling, 2002; Kocur, 2021). This model highlights equality between the peers involved in observations and should eliminate or greatly reduce potential judgements in favour of constructive feedback. While Kocur identifies some negatives to the model, by citing Georgiou, Sharma and Amanda (2018), such as “a lack of adoption given its strictly voluntary nature, varied interpretations of what quality teaching looks like, and potential fear of being critical of one’s colleagues” (p. 136), Kocur also highlights that this model has gained popularity due to its self-directed nature, ease of implementation and flexibility, as well as its providing developmental benefit.

The perceived benefit of the proposed Otago Polytechnic (OP) model (Staples, 2022) is that it is flexible enough to cater to different needs. The model encompasses aspects of all three models identified by Gosling (2002) and Kocur (2021), in that it allows for evaluation, development of practice, and collaboration between peers. In doing

so, the model would address, and possibly overcome, the limitations in each of the three observation methods described by Kocur (2021), while simultaneously producing the positives from each of the different models. Like the evaluative model, the proposed OP model would allow for an adherence to quality assurance and a set of standards from teaching staff. However, what would set this apart from other compliancy-based evaluative models is that the staff member would have the *choice* to agree to this. When meeting with their academic leader as part of their annual performance review, the staff member could choose to use the observation programme (as *one* option of performance measurement) to meet performance targets in teaching. These could be agreed upon with their formal leader and the AcCap partner, who would provide the initial and concluding observations and identify developmental focus areas with the staff member. Therefore, while still providing an evaluative process as part of development and professional advancement, the negative connotations of top-down compliance can be diminished. A greater sense of ownership and, therefore, motivation to engage in the process could result.

The proposed OP model, by using the AcCap partners, would align to the developmental model as described by Kocur (2021), which requires observations be completed by expert teachers or educational developers. This especially would be the case for those teaching staff who prefer to use the model as part of their formal development. The AcCap partners would also facilitate the CoP sessions, allowing for practice to be shared with a wider group of people. The potential problem with the development model, as identified by Kocur (2021), was a lack of impact as there is no mechanism to ensure actions are taken by the teacher to improve. The OP model would address this for those staff members who have made it part of their formal professional development. However, it would also work for those staff members who have instead opted for the developmental pathway. By engaging in *regular* cycles of observation, colleagues are constantly exposed to different teaching practices and can discuss their own practice with their observation peer, as well as in the wider CoP group. By having these regular observations and CoP sessions that are not judgmental but are rather about open discussion and idea-harvesting, the staff member would be provided with multiple reminders to action any feedback they have received or any reflection they have made on their own teaching.

Mouraz et al. (2023) introduce the use of a multidisciplinary peer observation programme that fosters teacher collaboration, innovation and reflection on practice. Their model ('the Mouraz model') begins with two sets of teachers from different disciplines coming together to form "quartets" (Mouraz et al., 2023, p. 49). The organisation of the quartets, including the observation objectives, is determined by the members themselves. In the quartets, each teacher is observed in one class by at least two observers – one from their own discipline and one from a different subject area. The observations include the typical and necessary pre- and post-observation sessions. Each observer completes an observation form with pre-determined focus areas and the post-observation phase consists of a joint reflection on the observations by all members of the quartet. At this session, members jointly share their perceptions about the observed classes and develop suggestions for improvement. The quartet engages in the process through three observation cycles. "This three-part observation-cycle approach," according to the authors, "allows the participants to ... implement the changes they wish to experiment with in their pedagogical practises in a more secure and supported way" (Mouraz et al., 2023, p. 50). Alongside the observation cycles, participants also take part in a training programme, which consists of three sessions that introduce the programme and guide the participants through it, discusses the perceptions and reflections of the teachers, and supports the teachers in the implementation of their improvement strategies. The final training session promotes the further, sustained use of a collaborative class observation process.

The key principles of the peer observation model used by Mouraz et al. are that it is voluntary, symmetrical (all participants are both observers and observed), it is multidisciplinary (allowing for varied perceptions), it has flexible observation foci that are determined by those being observed, and the feedback is confidential (between the observer and observee) allowing for trust to develop.

While there are some small differences between the observation programme used by Mouraz et al. and the proposed model of observation for OP, the similarities between the two programmes are noteworthy and show that the OP model does align with current efforts by others. The OP model, like the Mouraz model, is voluntary and symmetrical in nature. As described, participants will only take part in the process if they choose to do so, whether this is for evaluative or developmental purposes. Participants will also act as both observers and observees, and, like the Mouraz model, they will be able to conduct their observations with autonomy by selecting their own focus areas and sharing these with their peers. As for confidentiality, participants who engage in the programme purely for developmental purposes will control which feedback they choose to share with the wider participant group. For those who choose to engage in the programme as part of their official performance review process, the confidentiality is lessened as their academic leader will receive their observation reports from the AcCap partner.

We can also compare the implementation of the Otago Polytechnic model to the Mouraz model. The OP model does not *require* that participants come from different disciplines, whereas the Mouraz model identifies quartets of teachers from two different subject areas. While the earlier research conducted (Staples, 2022) did include the use of inter-departmental observations as part of the idea for an organisation-wide process, and found these to be valuable to the participants, it was ultimately decided that the complexities of teaching at Otago Polytechnic (such as workload and timetabling) would not be conducive to make this a mandatory part of the observation process. Rather, the recommendation was to keep the observations within the various schools – at least until participants felt comfortable to explore beyond their own colleges.

The Mouraz model also identifies the use of an observation form during the class observations, which is completed by the observer. The use of such forms is common in observation programmes and is recommended throughout the literature (Kocur, 2021; Harris et al., 2008; Hendry et al., 2021; Kumar et al., 2020), although this is not specifically stated in the OP model. Therefore, one consideration would be that observation forms be included as part of the OP programme and that these forms are developed with participants when they join the process.

It is also noted that the quartets in the Mouraz model engage in a group reflection after each round of observation, where they share ideas for improvement of practice. While these sessions are essentially small, and only occur a maximum of three times, their aim is remarkably similar to the CoP sessions that form part of the proposed OP model. The difference being that the OP model would not be limited to only three rounds of observation and the CoP session would include all members of the team, whereas the Mouraz model limits their sessions to the smaller quartet groupings. For Mouraz et al. (2023), the value of a peer model is that it places emphasis on collaboration to improve long-term mutual professional development and development through communities of practice (Byrne, Brown & Challen, 2010 as cited in Mouraz et al., 2023). The CoP sessions are critical to the proposed OP model. In the results from 2022, it was the CoP that created a sense of empowerment for teaching staff and a willingness to share their practice. In fact, Kocur's (2021) potential negatives of the collaborative model – lack of adoption, fear of critiquing a colleague, and varied understandings of what constitutes good teaching – were not witnessed during the research. This, this researcher believes, is due to the regular meetings of the participants in the CoP sessions, where they were free to discuss their experience without judgement. Contrary to Kocur's concerns, the more the participants engaged, the more eager they became to share practice and observe more peers. As Mouraz et al. (2023) state, in the context of their programme, "the creation of learning communities between participating teachers and the reflection about the implemented improvements and innovations are the main drivers of development" (p. 50).

Reflective practice is a key aspect of peer observation programmes and is driven by the feedback given by observers. As Mouraz et al. (2023) point out, basing feedback and subsequent reflection on the isolated perceptions of an observer is dangerous, as it could be interpreted as evaluative or threatening to the teacher being observed. The authors suggest mitigating the dangers by training participants in giving constructive

feedback, allowing them to choose partners based on existing relationships, using a pre-designed observation form and engaging in pre-observations to determine observation objectives. We can argue here that the use of a CoP, as intended in the proposed OP model, would also greatly help to lessen the dangers inherent in providing feedback. Through a *continuous* process of observation and engagement in structured communities of practice sessions, the observed teacher would not be receiving isolated feedback from one observation. Rather, the feedback would be more frequent, and the teacher would be able to hear from, and engage with, a wider range of voices to develop new strategies to implement.

An important aspect of the Mouraz model is the inclusion of teacher training that occurs parallel to the observations, where teachers are guided through the observation process, including how to conduct observations and provide constructive, non-judgemental feedback. This study (Staples, 2022) engaged participants in similar training processes. While it was always intended that participants would receive such training as part of a peer observation programme, it has now been realised that this should be made more explicit as a component of the OP model. It would be the role of a learning and teaching specialist to train participants at the start of the programme and to continue offering support and guidance as part of their role as CoP champion. Should the L+T specialist choose to remove themselves from the process, due to their own workload, they would be able to pass the role of champion to another member of the CoP.

CONCLUSIONS

The model for peer observations at OP appears to compare well with recent scholarship and addresses the concerns and ideas that are present in the literature. The model is flexible and can be adjusted to the needs of the participants, whether these are evaluative or developmental. The model also allows for collaboration and reflection through development, via the continuous use of a community of practice. However, more explicit emphasis needs to be placed on the use of observation forms that will capture actionable feedback for those observed. Likewise, the need for observer training as part of the observation programme needs to be explicitly indicated as part of the model going forward.

AUTHOR 2 CONTRIBUTION

Peer observations provide an important tool for improving teaching practice, and providing valuable constructive feedback and recognition. Utilising an observation form and championed by an experienced learning and teaching specialist to make observations, provides an evidence-based approach useful for performance reviews.

The importance of a voluntary approach and the use of a community of practice, facilitated by a L+T specialist, cannot be underestimated. This could remove the fear of a possible poor evaluation, lack of trust and concerns around confidentiality. The CoP provides an effective social constructivist tool for building trust and a sense of belonging, sharing of enterprise and enhancing the reflectivity that is a precursor to independent learning (Henry et al., 2020). The CoP also provides an inclusive, non-judgemental learning environment for sharing teaching practice, mutual professional teaching development and promoting a sense of empowerment (Staples, 2022).

The peer observation and community of practice model, developed by Staples (2022), incorporates an evaluative, developmental and collaborative approach suggested by Kocur (2021), with each educator being an observer and observed. To be effective, the model needs to be flexible enough to fit around time poor teacher needs, initially including intra-departmental observations while later expanding to inter-departmental observations. As Staples (2022) points out, the key to peer observation is reflective practice. Reflective practice is the ability to reflect on one's actions to engage in the process of continuous learning (Schön, 1987). Reflective practice critically examines one's experiences and actions to learn from them and create an action plan to improve future performance (Morton, 2022).

AUTHOR 3 CONTRIBUTION

The work produced by Staples (2022) provides correlation with work of other researchers including Kocur (2021) and Mouraz et al. (2023), and it provides a combination of methods that suit a community of practice (CoP) for a cadre of lecturers who are new to an academic profession or are used to a didactic teaching system where they take sole responsibility of individual learner courses.

With the advent of a learner-centred strategy becoming important as one of the education priorities of Te Pūkenga, a CoP structure for tertiary academic professionals will be able to offer good support to the collaboration processes needed for learner-centred and peer facilitation work. The advantages an established CoP continues to provide are shared space and time for more processes such as staircasing (Harrison & Mendoza, 2019), and research-based learning (Fung, 2017) that will foster a climate of collegiality. This enables the development of academic professionalism and peer research practice to grow and thrive. This can be underpinned by a developmental framework of practice of a kind illustrated by Harrison (2021), and work on professional development and self-assessment provided by Boud (2005).

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