The Observation Effect: Exploring Reliability and Sustainability in Teaching Performance Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

This research postulates the need for a reconsideration of the current implemented evaluation programme of teaching performance in the UK and theorises the devising of potential action to convey functional expansion to the specific educational praxis. The adopted ethnographic enquiry seeks to find the components of the platform observer-observee and endeavours to enter the world of the lecturer experience under observation to evaluate the modus operandi. Identifying the stressors and their corollary epitomise the core of the investigation. It is extraordinary for the practice intending to observe natural behaviour in the educational environment to be also responsible for classroom dynamics disruption. The validity of results seems compromised by the inherent group interference from the observer's presence and from the subjective psychological response of the observee under pressure. The analysis highlights the need to review the observation arrangements in place, contemplating devising a more comprehensive monitoring of teaching provision.

Keywords: Evaluation, Observation, Performance, Stress, Teaching, Validity.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The author's objective is the evaluation of the effectiveness and consequences of the current performance management system implementation for the monitoring of classroom teaching.

The current observation procedure, aimed at estimating the performance and efficiency of teaching delivery in the classroom, claims to be developmental and supports teaching staff. This research explores the possibility that such assertions are not translating into the expectations of the protocol itself and looks at finding more constructive ways of serving the same purpose. In fact, there is a suspicion of such a method being highly taxing while proving only modestly supportive. Teaching observations appear to create a stressful environment that is often not conducive to progress. There is insufficient evidence of the current scheme's efficacy in assessing the teaching delivery as productive and beneficial to academics. On the contrary, there is strong feedback that it is a cause of stress and offers negligible support towards professional advancement.

Ofsted (GOV.UK 2013, 2016) sets the pace for the lesson observation criteria. This permeates the climate in the application of performance evaluation with its subsequent concepts, interpretations, and derived policies designed by the various educational institutions. The debate on the reliability of observation arrangements is widely discussed in educational

establishments and develops at a variety of teaching delivery levels. However, the bulk of the existing investigation predominantly takes place and unfolds within the school sector.

While recognising the importance of the quality of teaching in education and the consequent need of checking performance, one vision allows that the application of the grading system can potentially impede dialogue between observer and observee (Marriott 2001). The monitoring of classroom operation and teaching competence through observation activity is also deemed to represent a controlling tool rather than a developmental and more constructive device (NUT 2007). Other stances rest on the premise that the focus of the scrutiny should reside and be essentially based on professional dialogue (ATL 2008). Inferences such as that "We often observe what we want to see" (Wragg 1999) power questions on reliability and criticise grading for being substantially vague, all while letting too much space for interpretation. Moreover, extrapolations denounce the danger of overlooking the observer subjectivity, hypothetically converting in bias and its accompanying implications (Wolf 1995).

An identical discussion extends to the Further Education sector, considering that a one-off observation provides only a snapshot into the realm of performance evaluation (Wragg et al. 1996). Even a series of observations can only supply a collection of snapshots (Campbell et al., 2004). Artificiality can likely result as a chief reaction to the observation exercise (Cockburn 2005), and similar reflections are present in other material connected to this area (O'Leary 2006, 2011, 2012, 2012, 2013). There exists an awareness that unannounced observations or the lighter versions, such as the so-called "walk-through" and some other times defined "learning walks," all act as a distortion agent actioned as a detaching factor from their original purpose of builders of dialogue and tool for reflective practice (Downey et al. 2004). Additional views sustain observations as merely representing a mean of quality assurance (Armitage at al. 2003; Hardman 2007). A section of the same argument reaches the Higher Education sector, where the use of a mainly peer-based observation model emerges as a more valuable mode, nevertheless, still not entirely free of some of the above issues (Peel 2005).

This paper aims not to argue with the current observation system per se but to analyse the psychological dynamics that define it. However, in the process of making this case, the possibility for some aspects of the conventions to be indirectly challenged is probable to surface. The focus of the reflection partly stems from an ongoing debate among teaching staff, Unions, and Colleges, and the deliberation manifests evident concerns on the efficacy of the existing assessment of performance.

A statement from UCU highlights that 'Internal college lesson observation policies and procedures continue to be the industrial issue that has been the subject of the most sector conference motions in recent years. This reflects the fact that lesson observation policies are still a hotly contested industrial issue in FE and adult education today. Furthermore, commenting on developments, the union recognises that 'There was a sharp rise in imposed punitive and draconian changes to lesson observation policies. These triggered the largest number of local disputes of any single issue in the FE and adult & continuing education (ACE) workplaces. Some colleges and providers are clinging to these punitive graded lesson observation models, and these pages contain bargaining advice for branches still fighting these outdated measures that are no longer fit for purpose' (UCU).

Some indications of changes taking place in lesson observations are suggested by the UCU led research manifested in the O'Leary Report (1913). Through a first-hand collection of databases, the latter, paired up with a literature review on the subject, systematically questions the widely implemented practice of graded lesson observation by indicating that such exercise does not contribute effectively to the quality of teaching and learning together with causing anxiety to teachers. The following is a summary of the key findings presented in the report:

> 89.7% agreed that unannounced observations would lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety amongst staff; 83.2% disagreed that unannounced observations were a welcome addition to the quality improvement process; 85.2% disagreed that graded observations were the most effective method of assessing staff competence and performance; 76.3% agreed that ungraded observations were more effective in assessing staff competence and performance; 74.8% disagreed that graded observations had helped them to improve as classroom practitioners; 67.4% agreed that graded lesson observations should no longer be used as a form of teacher assessment; 65.7% disagreed that graded observations were essential for improving the quality of teaching and learning; just 10.6% agreed that graded observations were the fairest way of assessing the competence and performance of staff (O'Leary 1913).

The ethnographic findings of this paper support the above conclusions but aim to expand on previously unconsidered or only superficially examined areas, such as the actual interloping of the observer's input on the observee operational capability.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

This paper provides a long-term multifactorial ethnographic investigation, relevant to social research, based on participation rather than just observation (Van Maanen 1996) and embracing the agency of all educational actors while to education research, it specifically delivers a

portrait of the observed teacher (Harris & Johnson 2000), bringing an insight into the underlying forces of the performance evaluation exert.

It imparts a substantive contribution to key bodies of knowledge by reporting on the current observation system and its bearing on the teaching staff. The effort is significant because it opens a window on issues of validity and dependability of the protocol, potentially challenging educational policy and practice surrounding the current teaching performance evaluation system. It ultimately represents thought-provoking research leading to unchartered territories through a proposal of an innovative approach, which concentrates on underpinning psychological drives and reactions unconsidered in previous academic output.

The necessity of such exploration simply emerges from the everyday experience of the author's immersion in education settings. Within this reality, the teaching observation exercise as part of the performance evaluation is persistent. A bulk of reflective practice naturally occurs from this aspect and the involvement in the educational establishment. No intention of investigating the observation system is whatsoever present at the inception of this enterprise. Instead, a strong spontaneous and unexpected drive emerges as an irrevocable need to understand the core dynamics of the observation experience, which often produce problematic outcomes. In fact, through a series of reflections on such context, the first elaborations start to take shape. In a sense, the work in the initial phase starts to write itself, generated by the impact of the scheme in discussion over the immediate teaching environment.

CHOICE AND MOTIVATION OF METHODS

Autoethnography is the immediate methodological force surfacing from the initially unplanned exploratory activity equally in a spontaneous custom. As a natural tool of self-reflection (Maréchal 2010), it also delivers a mixture of self-representation and cultural dimension (Ellis 2004), offering a tangible contribution to knowledge, value to the personal and experiential, all while providing the power of storytelling (Adams et al. 2015). It further facilitates a working relationship between the individual and a given organization (Parry & Boyle 2009). However, since the autoethnographic exercise is based around the self (Goldschmidt 1977), in order to minimise the mainly subjective focus, the author opts not to rely exclusively on it by choosing a methodological expansion to a wider ethnographic approach focused on extracting meaning in a naturally occurring backdrop (Brewer 2000). Participant observation (Spradley 1980) is employed, in the pure form of full participation at this stage, affording total immersion in the studied habitat. However, risks of overpowering subjectivity input are still present to some

degree. So, to further mitigate such issues, a sort of triangulation (Douglas 1976; Lincoln & Guba 1985) is introduced by shifting the focus on the experience of other teaching staff.

DETAILS OF METHODOLOGY

The study includes information from reflections of teaching staff linked to a variety of adult educational sites, mainly colleges of FE/HE in the North of England, and spans several years of fieldwork. In an analogous manner to other research by this same author, it bases its investigation on both a primary and a secondary type of enquiry and forms a series of considerations on different teaching and learning aspects. Specifically, the use of ethnographic research where data gathering is predominantly achieved through participant observation, informal conversations, online information, and teaching staff feedback is then supported by selected published literature within the disciplines of cognitive science and psychology. This material is presented and evaluated as potentially able to corroborate and explain the ethnographic findings. Reflections originating from a psychological perspective specifically refer to targeted expanses of cognitive research relevant to the studied realm. The fundamental reason for the ethnography choice is found in the usefulness established through the unique privileged in-depth opportunity of analysis offered by it (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994). The advantaged position of the researcher, being able to participate within the context, which is explored not as a foreign presence but in the capacity of a true agent able to be part of that same world view sought to be comprehended, is the strongest motive behind the utilised method of inquest. The opportunity for the researcher to be entirely immersed in the setting participating as a real member, rather than an extraneous entity, enables the quest attempt to collect data in the truest reliable manner and cancels or at least reduces to the minimum the chances of an observer intrusion effect or any other kinds of meddling to materialise. Elements of auto-ethnographic methodology as a lecturer additionally supply a driving contribution to the scrutiny.

SUMMARY OF KEY ETHNOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

Primary data is analysed through a thematic procedure and organised according to recurrent themes. For each identified category, examples of elucidations are synthesised and portrayed as representative of that space. Such collection offers feedback of teaching staff experiences and perceptions mainly showing the following complaints in several areas (Field notes, extracts 2009-2014):

Feelings of stress and anxiety:

> 'No matter how much I try to rationalise the all thing…that it is only an observation… that I know I will go through it fine… and after so many times I've been observed… it still gets me. And there I am, shaking with stomach cramps and panicking.'

> 'The two days following the email communicating I will be observed are always a nightmare. A continual time of worries. There is no life other than trying to put together that impossibly perfect lesson.'

Such feeling of apprehension can be compounded by the most aggressive version of unannounced observations/learning walks:

> 'Every day waking up and getting ready to go to work … I wonder if I will be observed. It is that uncomfortable feeling of not knowing if it is the day that it will happen. Thoughts running through my head. Have I prepared myself enough? Going through my head all the steps I will be taking, what I will be doing with the activities and resources. Walking into the classroom more fear, looking around for who could come and observe me. But nobody is there. Only a couple of minutes past the beginning of the class I manage to relax and be myself. Then I know I will manage to enjoy the session and do something good for my students.'

> 'I often think I could be walking into the class without that horrible feeling. For me it is fear. A constant deep feeling of fear that produces that inability of just relaxing, looking forward to the session and enjoying the sharing of experiences with the students. I always think that, without that anxiety always with me, teaching could be really a dream job.'

Dissatisfaction with the protocol perceived as not constructive, posing obstacles to the teaching practice, or offering negligible support from observation feedback:

> 'I don't think I have ever improved my teaching through observation feedback. It is true that after an observation, I reflect on my performance, but it is usually about what I did not manage to do in order to impress the observer. It is a distraction more than anything else. I definitely get more ideas and help by exchanging opinions and sharing good practice with a colleague.'

> 'The all exercise is supposed to be developmental. However, I have to totally disagree. The worries of the expected performance and the possible consequences if not successful do not allow this to take place. It is only my perception, of course, but talking to colleagues; there seem to be many very similar feelings around.'

> 'You are somehow forced to put aside the needs of the students and what is best for them, all to direct the energies of your performance in the way that meet the observer's expectations. Basically, it means neglecting your class in the name of a successful observation outcome.'

Feeling of powerlessness and not being in control of the situation:

> 'As a tutor, you do not feel trusted. There is not much trust in our professional judgment. It is difficult to sanction the grading system as an indicator of quality of teaching. I find it quite diminishing, and there is nothing we can do. Observations are designed to control us. We have to put up with it, and it is not easy. It is definitely testing.'

'Wouldn't it be great to be valued as professionals? To be believed in the decision making? Then the atmosphere would be enormously different… talents could be allowed to flourish with opportunities of sharing good practice and growing becoming a natural outcome.'

Conclusions not representative of real global professional competence and ability:

'I have been graded on the basis of a very small chunk of all my teaching time … that grade will stay there for a while without considering my performance day after day. Is that grade really describing my ability?'

'The small amount of observation time taken into calculation, allegedly showing measure and quality of teaching performance, realistically is insufficient. That brief observation of the class, even repeated a few times, cannot truly describe the overall professional capability of a member of staff. It is ineffectual at best, misleading in its core.'

Creation of artificial dynamics in the classroom where student behaviour changes (either toward a positive or negative direction):

'When the observer is in the classroom, students modify their behaviour. It is so evident. I find myself in front of a different group, with new reactions. It can be challenging to deal with the new situation. Some students at times and depending on different psychological profiles can feel intimidated by the presence of the observer. Some of them will stop talking and interacting. Some of them will feel deeply uncomfortable. And it does not matter how much you tell them that the visit is for the staff and not for them. They feel scrutinised, no matter what. In an extreme case, the student reacted by asking permission to leave the room.'

'The response of your students comes as a surprise, and you have to be ready to deal with it. When someone is observing you, it can be all too complicated. I find it very stressful. It can be non-inclusive for students too. The confident ones could engage in showing off while others who are shy would withdraw because of panic or fear of making mistakes or feeling exposed.'

Teacher behaviour disturbed/altered/modified by the presence of the observer:

'The whole classroom atmosphere is immediately transformed… it becomes impossible for me to relate to the students in the usual way. It is in the air ... it is unavoidable … it is no longer the ordinary natural session.'

'When the observer is in the classroom, I can feel my interaction with the group changing dramatically…My body language, movements, talk all appear to be transformed. It feels like a natural flow is suddenly and drastically interrupted. My confidence is affected, and I know my performance is no longer the usual one. It is only when the observer leaves the room that I am able to confidently relate to the students in a spontaneous way. And nothing else changes, really; just the observer is no longer there. Sadly, I do not feel I have managed to show my true ability.'

Different psychological responses according to different personality types. For many, it means not being able to perform as per normal and not being able to express true ability:

'I just can't do what I usually do, and in the same way, I normally do it when someone is sitting there taking notes about me. It is as simple as that. I can even hear the tone of my voice changing. My hands start shaking. I lose confidence. It is a disaster.'

'During observations, I struggle to find the right words to say, which is something not normally happening in other circumstances.'

Difficulties in cognitive processing such as with memory and planned steps recall:

'After being observed, I often realise to have forgotten some parts of activities I had planned. I can say it is a very rare occurrence under normal conditions. It seems to happen a lot more when I am observed.'

'Often, I forget what I had decided to introduce or talk about. I can no longer find my concentration. Indeed, the fact that I can't remember what to do makes the task ahead extremely daunting.'

Difficulties in focus and concentration:

'Words don't come easy when you are observed. Sometimes also, what you are going to say next becomes an enigma. You could choose better words. It is a massive undertaking when you are under pressure.'

'In the observer presence, the mere task of thinking becomes a challenge. The level of attention, usually present in class, is now much less automatic and unquestionably much harder to achieve.'

Occurrences of panic and confusion:

'I can usually feel my heart racing. My lesson plan suddenly does not make much sense. It is difficult to give instructions on the activity and the response from the group feedbacks I am not being successful. In my last observation, I lost focus.'

'In one of my late observations, I was really demoralised. I was distributing some handouts to the group, and I could hardly hold the papers. My hands were shaking badly.'

FINDINGS AND RELATED RELEVANT SUPPORTIVE LITERATURE

Data collection presented in the above section of this paper strongly exhibits evidence of stress being a persistent product and holding a consistent correlation with lesson observations with the rest of related professional appraiser practices. This is often accompanied by teaching staff complaints unfolding constant, debilitating repercussions for having to work in such a pressurised environment, often accompanied by perceived unrewarding conditions. Both primarily and ultimately, stress presents itself in the shape of an uncomfortable constant when considering work performance in relation to teaching observations. One of the major sources of stress teaching professionals suffers arises from feelings of difficulties of being and remaining in control of a given situation they are trying to manage. Sentiments of not being granted trust and value as professionals are also widespread perceptions among lecturers.

The detrimental effects of chronic stress on animal and human, physiology, and psychology, manifesting through the activation of the fight-or-flight response, are extensively documented (Cannon 1929). However, Sapolsky (1998) offers a new overview when describing how the mere ranking in a hierarchically organised group can be highly damaging to actors occupying subordinate positions. Such members of the group noticeably face a much harder time in coping with stress. Another study, this time focusing on humans rather than on baboons, reaches strikingly similar conclusions. In fact, the Whitehall Study, a series of longitudinal cohort analytical investigations considering the social determinants of health in British Civil Servants, finds a strong connection between employment grade level and general wellbeing, with individuals in the lowest grades resulting worse off than the ones in the higher grades (Marmot et al. 1991; Kunz-Ebrect et al. 2004; Kuper et al. 2003). It is noteworthy to highlight the fact that a change in management, adopting a more supportive approach that values the employee's work, would have the capacity to introduce an improvement in general health on individuals occupying the lower positions.

Collected ethnographic data also indicates a solid recurrence of instances in which teaching professionals struggle to operate at an acceptable cognitive level by experiencing issues with memory and focus, presenting themselves at the forefront of all difficulties.

In connection with the above, comprehensive research literature results tend to support these deep perceptions by bringing information that both acute and chronic stress could potentially cause cognitive impairment through an impact on cognitive function. In the specific, it would translate into dramatic effects on memory. The stressful state places the individual in a challenging environment to operate from. This creates a context in which individuals hold a vulnerable position and are susceptible to experiencing serious challenges in both encoding memory and retrieving information (de Quervain et al. 1998; Kuhlmann 2005; Park et al. 2001, 2008).

While both short term and long term memory could somehow be affected by stress (Baddeley et al. 2010), it is mainly working memory that appears to be most disturbed and, therefore, justly, the most researched of this cognitive area of study (O'Hare 1999). It makes it harder for a person to perform at the best when under unfavorable circumstances (Duncko et al., 2009; Lee 1999). The powerful effects of stress can be reflected on an array of memory functions as well as on broader cognitive aspects of the brain (Cavenagh et al., 2010). They

have the potential to influence mental processes such as attention, which specific mental process would need to work in association with memory (Derryberry et al. 1994).

Ethnographic feedback also shockingly reveals that all observation activity produces an obvious unnatural environment to move from professionally. Artificiality becomes a real companion of all the other activities involved. The moment the observer walks into a classroom, the forces at work in the milieu are dramatically altered. In a few words, the specific setting is no longer the same. It is drastically transformed for the better or, the worse, and most of the time, because of the pressure involved, it is the latter that manifests more predominantly. In the aftermath of such occurrences, the observers will no longer be in front of a natural venue to evaluate.

On the contrary, they will face an artificial scenario created based on their own incidence. The observer's presence alters the natural classroom environment, acting as an external variable and immediately transforming the student and tutor interaction into a highly synthetic exchange. The foreign presence disrupts classroom dynamics and compromises the validity of the observation exercise because of such observer role and effect. Individuals under observation tend to react in particular fashions and in direct response to the awareness of being scrutinised. In any likelihood, the class behaviour will adjust to an unnatural and simulated response.

A partial elucidation can be offered by the widely acknowledged manifestation of the phenomenon of psychological reactivity (Heppner 2008) represented by the Hawthorne effect (Landsberger 1958; Mayo 1949). This appears relevant even if shadowed by controversy on both validity and design of results (Parsons 1974), together with the added question mark on a far from rigorous employed methodology (Adair 1984). This area of research is inconclusive. However, if the possibility that some sort of reactivity taking place is considered, as ethnographic feedback strongly suggests, then the underlying postulate arising here would be the reaction of individuals exhibiting transformation of behaviour when under a process of observation (McCarney et al. 2007).

Another sort of reactive phenomenon could potentially develop. In this case, it could be the instructor causing interference in the classroom through some form or variation of a Rosenthal effect (Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968). Here, the teacher's expression of confidence, optimism, and higher expectations can positively influence students to increase their performance (Whiteley & Johnson 2012; Good & Brophy 1974; Bezuijen et al. 2009).

However, according to individual specific reaction, the tutor under stress could result in pessimism and, through a self-fulfilling prophecy, could spark an opposite outcome, where students negatively react and decrease their performance (Zinn 1994).

Furthermore, it seems pertinent to underline that there is a unique stress response. Individuals appear to respond to stress exposure in distinctive personal ways. Because of the same peculiar answer, some lecturers under observation might be advantaged performing as wished. In contrast, others could find themselves disadvantaged, unable to express and demonstrate their true potential fully. As a result, the observation exercise would fail to apply its inclusiveness. In this context, multiple publications propose concepts such as psychological hardiness, a specific cognitive style expressing resiliency to stress (Kobasa 1979, 1982; Kobasa et al. 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985). The suggestion is that such a personality trait potentially has the power to counteract the detrimental effects of stress (Westman 1990). Parallels of this manifestation can be found in psychological paradigms such as locus of control (Rotter 1966) and self-efficacy (Bandura 1997). However, the characteristics mentioned earlier do not seem to appear as universal constants, thus exposing a share of individuals to a likely disadvantaged position due to their subjective reaction.

Coping with stress mechanisms, through for instance chasing meaning, demonstrates to be more important than just avoiding stress. A possible answer lies in the facilitation of a design in an environment where social support can flourish, allowing to express compassion, with the construction of a more ideal ambience in which tutors can thrive and reinforce resilience to the adverse effects of stress. Research in health psychology widely shows that the availability of a positive surrounding and an optimistic outlook on handling difficulties hold potential to counteract stress through compassion and social help, possibly triggering a positive result contributing to building resilience (McGonigal 2015).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study concludes by acknowledging the need for a performance evaluation procedure in monitoring teaching provision and recognising the necessity for exploring complementary approaches to the current teaching observation applications. It strongly advises on the solid condition of not solely relying on the lesson observation as an instrument but taking into consideration a more holistic approach to form a more complete and reliable representative estimation exercise. Alternatives such as students results and feedback should also be contemplated.

Constant stress endured by the teacher due to perceptions of not being in control can be possibly reduced by eliminating perceived subservient practices such as unannounced and graded observations, with the substitution by the management of an orientation towards a Servant Leadership (Greenleaf 2002, 2003). For an observation to be effective and truthful to its aim, it is paramount to recreate the most spontaneous and least invasive environment for the teaching practitioner to operate from. This would, in turn, minimise classroom interaction interference to the maximum and create an environment that is less taxing on individuals with specific psychological responses to stressful situations.

All efforts should be directed towards creating a more natural background for the teaching observation to occur. It seems obvious from the above reflections that the surroundings need transforming into a more spontaneous locale for valid scrutiny to happen. Design and implementation of, for instance, sessions similar to masterclasses (Hough 2014) could possibly provide a partial answer, affording a stage where whoever observes does it as being part of the natural group instead of being present as an external variable. Such a context could offer an ideal platform for teaching staff to express their own ability freely. At the same time, the supervisors in need of observing performance would have a unique opportunity to measure such execution, in their participatory role, without admitting any reactivity to form, as much as any artificiality to develop. Creating and intensifying a supportive network around tutors would seem to be paramount. This could be accomplished by allowing more sharing of good practice through activities that permit it to be expressed. Any peer-based exercise at this juncture could prove valuable. A strong and valid answer could be provided, for example, by co-teaching implementations (Bacharach et al. 2004; Cook & Friend 1995; Washut Heck & Bacharach 2010).

The author advises and supports any further investigation of new models that contemplate other holistically based applications in assessing teacher competence.

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