THINKPIECE: OBSERVATIONS OF 'GOOD' TERTIARY TEACHING

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Formal, graded observations of classroom-based lessons are used in educational environments worldwide and can have very different objectives. There are many similarities between the tertiary educational cultures of New Zealand and the United Kingdom (UK), but in the case of lesson observations, there are some distinctions worthy of consideration. Generally, lesson observation policies seek to 'measure' the perceived quality of teaching and learning in order to improve learning outcomes. However, paradoxically, UK strategies may inadvertently limit the simultaneous beneficial opportunities of support and professional development. There are important lessons here for educationalists and policy-makers in New Zealand.

Lesson observations should be viewed within the global context of the New Right and neo-liberal politics of educational sectors (Benade, 2012). As a newcomer to the New Zealand educational environment, the accountability agenda appears less-well defined or developed. Yet as Halford (2013) and others highlight, there is evidence of increasing pressures from the global educational marketplace. These include debates about lesson observations because arguably, lesson observations are symbolic of the tensions between the needs of management to be seen as 'responsive' to economic and political pressures, versus the autonomous, creative and 'hidden' nature of teaching and learning.

Arguably, it is this pressure for more accountability and performativity that has driven the UK's widespread quantitative graded observation strategies because it is perceived this is what stakeholders and government inspectorates demand. This has contributed to an audit culture that from curriculum delivery to professional development has seen some institutions descend into a demoralising 'tick-box exercise' that is far removed from the complex realities of the classroom (O'Leary, 2013). Fortunately, however, in some UK university environments more supportive, formative peer-observation polices are in place.

On a micro level, observations can undoubtedly be positive experiences for teachers. Teacher-educators in particular may enjoy the opportunity to 'perform' their skills and/or engage in collaborative development that may, in turn, inform and enhance their student-teachers' pedagogy. However, some readers of this 'thinkpiece' may (understandably) associate lesson observations with uncomfortable memories of past in/competency judgements as beginning-teachers. That is because teaching is so personal; it involves our unique (dis)embodied 'performativity' (Butler, 1997) and 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983). During an observation this performativity is interpreted and judged by an 'other'. Teachers may therefore conceptualise an observation as 'inauthentic' teaching (Edgington, 2013).

Similarly, managers or peers, acting as observers, may *themselves* be aware of these embedded memories and therefore the potential symbolic power of their presence in the classroom. This is especially relevant when the outcome is explicitly articulated as an alpha/numerical grade to comply with external reporting requirements. Often an intrinsic part of observers' training involves consideration of the complexities in providing feedback—which should be a constructive contribution to individuals' reflections on the session. Nevertheless, no matter how sensitively handled, feedback can sometimes (perhaps justifiably) trigger defence mechanisms in (both) individuals which may inhibit an honest, professional dialogue about a pedagogical approach. Hence these policies may have a negative impact on perceptions of a teacher's professional identity (O'Leary, 2013).

Within the UK tertiary environment, lesson observation policies are well-established and the emphasis is firmly based on quality assurance policies and therefore inevitably often perceived as reductionist in approach. Alongside the abovementioned emotional aspects, reactions to these policies can be perceived as an unwelcome managerial intrusion into a professional space. Consequently, surveillance of this nature may have a negative impact on tertiary teachers' well-being, teaching practice and in turn, students' progress. This is because, crucially, research suggests that if

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professional dialogue is absent during an observation, the opportunity for learning for both parties can be lost, because learning and reflexivity is difficult in an atmosphere without mutual respect (e.g., Knowles, 1985).

Attention to the psychosocial perspective of observations could include the inherent difficulties in the subjective judgement of teaching practice. As O'Leary (2013) notes, "By attaching a grade to the subjective judgement of the observer, people are seduced into believing that such judgements have greater objectivity and authority than they can, in reality, claim to have (p. 22).

Arguably then, it is the intrinsic evaluative nature of observations that potentially leads to manifestations of emotions within and beyond the classroom—because it can be perceived as punitive and bureaucratic in nature. Furthermore, often the emotional aspects of observations are ignored, possibly because articulating feelings can be considered a weakness or even dangerous territory. As a result of the increased commercialisation and marketization of education in the UK, it appears that often 'objectivity' in this context is perceived to be accomplished through being dispassionate. However, authentic reflections about our emotional lived experiences *should not* be neglected; these emotions form an intrinsic part of the processes of teaching and learning and the global contexts in which we exist.

'Objectivity' and judgements of 'good practice' are terms rarely explicitly problematized in tertiary sectors (Coffield & Edward, 2009). Yet, some UK managerial policies have sought ways to make observations appear more 'objective'. Observation strategies have therefore often taken a technicist approach, for example where the observer is unknown to the teacher prior to the observation. Hence, an 'effective' observer might be perceived as remaining 'detached' from the teaching by observing a lesson unannounced. Although for some teachers an ambiguous anonymity may be helpful in what is perceived to be a process based on a deficit model, the danger of this 'detachment' may be to de-humanise. This approach inevitably encourages arbitrary judgements based only on the externally observable. Crucially then, an observer may lack the *context* of the teacher, students and the lesson (O'Leary, 2013). This can lead to unhelpful assumptions.

Levels of stress and anxiety in UK teaching professions are the highest of any comparable job, with teachers within some tertiary institutions in particular being subjected to longer teaching hours, fewer holidays, lower salaries and poorer working conditions than any similar UK public sector teaching position. Inevitably, staff turnover is high, with many teachers leaving after the first year. The perceived unending bureaucracy of department meetings, government inspectorates and managerial agendas all add to the on-going stressors and potential 'burnout'. Research suggests that one of the main causes of this tension stems from staff feeling they do not have enough space for pedagogic autonomy (Colley, James, & Diment, 2007), a factor that a more humanistic approach to lesson observations could potentially improve.

A replication of the global educational audit culture that is so dominant in the UK is not inevitable. New Zealand has a unique opportunity to begin an organic, *ground-up* approach for sharing effective pedagogical practices and discussing classroom issues (face-to-face and virtual). Importantly, if an appropriate, supportive space is created for transparent, informal lesson observations, then it is possible that top-down managerialist policies can be avoided. As teacher-researchers, we have a responsibility to illuminate the 'how and why' of individuals' emotional lived experiences of teaching and learning. Let's begin now with a meaningful debate to develop culturally responsive, humanistic, developmental observation practices that have the power to enhance learning experiences for us and our students.

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