

Making Sense of Teaching through Shared Observation and Conversation

This paper examines how three colleagues interacted to enhance their professional learning. John, Peter and Sandy are teacher educators at an Australian university, and John's classes are the focus of this paper. This focus arose because conversations stimulated by John's teaching became interesting to the three of us for what they told us about the different ways we were viewing professional learning. We invited Tom to join us as a critical friend because he initiated peer observations during a visit in 2005.

Our interactions concerning our professional learning exhibit self-study characteristics, as they are initiated by and focused on self, improvement-aimed, and interactive (LaBoskey, 2004). Important features of self-study are the "other" and collaboration (Lighthall, 2004). Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue that teachers and other professionals negotiate their understandings of practice through reflection and conversations. In what follows, we highlight the importance of what Senge (1990, p. 9) as "the ability to carry on 'learningful' conversations that balance inquiry and advocacy, where people expose their own thinking effectively and make that thinking open to the influence of others."

The learning conversations were initiated by peer observation. Of the three forms of peer observation identified by Gosling (2002), one applies to our situation: Equal-mutual or reciprocal-reflective peer observations occur when peers observe each other over extended periods and engage in learning conversations. The value of this form, according to Smith (2003, p. 213), "is that the purpose is mutual professional development and not an examination of professional competence for summative evaluation purposes." Observing others teach is a learning experience for both the observer and the observed (Martin & Double, 1998). The peer observation discussed here has a reciprocal-reflective nature and the paper investigates the learning experiences for all involved.

Peer observation is desirable in self-study of teaching. Its role as a stimulus for learning conversations was central for us. Doubt has been cast on the merits of peer observation with feedback alone as a strategy for

improvement (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). However, these authors argue that, with conversation, peer observation provides "a vehicle for encouraging academics to develop their reflective thinking about their role as professional lecturers, and to seek and engage in developmental processes as a result" (pp. 222-223).

AIM

Our observations and conversations had the initial goal of enhancing our practice. We are also trying to understand better the nature of professional learning through interactions involving observation and conversation.

METHOD

This exploration of professional learning used peer observation and conversation as tools for self-study. John invited Sandy and Peter to observe his classes. Following the observations, Sandy and Peter used their reflective notes as a basis for discussion with John. A series of three-way conversations developed because Sandy and Peter had shared the experience of John's teaching. The conversations seemed ad hoc and serendipitous as they occurred during coffee breaks or whenever one of us wished to initiate a conversation. Sometimes meetings were immediate; others were scheduled a week in advance. Some conversations were sustained over many days, some lasted hours, and others lasted only minutes.

Data included notes from observations, reflections and conversation. The records varied in depth, tidiness and immediacy. Notes during observation were typically detailed and immediate. Reflective notes following conversations were often sketchy and made some time later. Analysis progressed with each person sharing reflective interpretations of data and noting differences and commonalities. A second phase of analysis, to identify themes, was guided by the question, "What is important here?" In a cyclical progression, this stimulated recall of events, more discussion and more notes. Interpretations of the interplay between reflections on events and conversations were included in accounts of

our experience. Sandy and Peter wrote their accounts and then John wrote his in response. Tom acted as critical friend, commenting on these accounts and interpretations. In response to feedback from authors and reviewers, accounts and commentary extracts have been edited to improve clarity and accuracy.

INSIGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES

Sandy's account

I entered John's classroom that first time to observe his teaching after we discovered a shared passion for enhancing our practice. My primary reason for observing his class was to see some different teaching practices. John teaches in a different area (Social and Environmental Education) from me, so I knew I would see something different in terms of content. I wished to observe his class as he had previously observed mine and we wanted to have a greater understanding of each other's practice to add depth to our discussions about teaching. I also wanted to learn about my teaching practice from observing his.

My first observation of John's teaching felt confrontational as I quickly realised that I had many preconceived ideas of what good teaching looks like. My preference is to orchestrate learning through careful preparation of activities that can be done collaboratively in groups and then to take a minor role in the activities as they ensue. If I were asked what good teaching looks like, I would describe a class of students discussing the activities with each other and making meaning of them. I see my role as similar to that of a travel agent, making arrangements for the learning voyage and then leaving it to the students to experience the journey. John's teaching challenged my personal vision; here was a passionate, highly knowledgeable and professional person teaching in ways that did not match my preconceptions. John took a central role as teacher, guiding the discussion, presenting superb illustrative resources, and leading students from one activity to another. He was not a travel agent but a tour guide, showing students the sights and then leading them to the next amazing attraction.

My first thoughts were, "What is going on here?" and "How does this fit with my ideas about teaching?" While I was mulling over these questions, I looked at the students and noted they were highly engaged. I felt a little disturbed: Had I got it so wrong with my teaching? I know that John's students value his classes and that it is not uncommon for students to be challenged and provoked by ideas raised in class, long after the class is over.

When we discussed the class over coffee, I did not share with John my personal turmoil. We talked about the resources and we discussed his reasons for raising certain topics. Yet I did not feel comfortable talking about how his teaching had challenged me since I was still trying to make sense of it myself. Only a year later, when we started planning this paper, did I share the challenges presented by my observation of this class.

Peter's account

I did not think much about my purpose for observing John's lesson, although subconsciously I felt that I was doing John a service, providing feedback and information. I knew it was a privilege to be invited to see him teach, but somewhere I had forgotten that observing John was not only about John's teaching and not about John's professional learning, but about my own professional growth and learning about my own teaching. What did I have to offer John? He was clearly a consummate teacher. I had in the back of my mind something that Tom had said after observing a mutual friend teaching: Because he had known him for a long time, he felt able to tell the friend exactly what he thought. I decided I could do no less for John.

After the class we discussed John's teaching and I commented on my sense of discomfort with observing and commenting, expressing my preference for learning together through co-teaching rather than observation. Throughout the conversation I spoke of the wonderful things he had done, the resources he used, what he knew and how the students obviously had learned. As the conversation was ending, I braced myself to finally say what I was thinking: "John, you had terrific resources, but you didn't seem to get as much from them as you could have. Overall they learned a lot about culture, but..."

Students had learned deeply, so why did I fuss about the extent to which a role play had been exploited or the depth of questioning associated with some music and images? I fussed because I see these as weaknesses in my own teaching. This could have been a minor point until I went on to offer advice:

"John, there is just one thing. I hesitate to give advice and I'm a little uncomfortable about doing so [pause] but they didn't respond very well to some questions and you seemed to just move on. I think it would be a good idea to use some strategies to enable them to engage with the challenging questions you ask. [Oh, dear! Yet I went on...] Perhaps you could ask them first to discuss ideas in pairs or small groups and then invite them to respond again." (Reconstructed conversation, August, 2007)

I went on and on; John listened politely and our conversation came to an end. He moved off, but I felt a little uncomfortable. I chased him down the hall and called out. I explained that I thought we had left things unsaid, adding that the advice regarding questioning seemed to be associated with awkwardness on my part.

Here the rich professional conversation began. Gone was any semblance of observer and observed or reviewer and reviewed. In its place was an experience shared from different perspectives. John explained why he was unconcerned that students at times did not respond to his questions and he noted the other cues that helped him to interpret the extent to which his students were engaged with and thinking about ideas he put to them. I feel very uncomfortable in my teaching when I raise a ques-

tion and I am greeted by peace and quiet, yet peace and quiet is not what I feel. Anxious and disturbed would be closer to the mark. Now, in the face of my explicit criticism of his teaching, John was calmly explaining how he not only felt no disquiet but could use such events in different ways. He tried to help me see how the quiet associated with pondering a question could be a good thing and that taking time to consider a question was not only just as important as responding to a question but also an entirely appropriate response. Undaunted, I opened my mouth once more and changed feet: "Maybe it's the has-been scientist in me, but I want to see evidence that they are learning something." I went on to explain further why I saw an "answer" in response to a question as critical information for me as teacher.

For more than a week, the conversation progressed over countless coffees with John and Sandy. What was clear was that the observation of John was, for me, not about John, but all about me. I had homed in during my observations and initial discussions on areas of concern and disturbance in my own teaching rather than in John's. This had resulted in a long-term professional dialogue about my teaching, my understanding of my teaching, and the implications for learning, probably including unfounded consternation about silences in my classes and my self-perceived ineptitude in not wringing every drop of analysis, reflection and thinking from every resource and activity.

John's account

As Peter and Sandy spoke with me, the eyes of several demons were opened; roused and irascible, these demons listened intently to every word. If I appeared calm in the face of observations, it was not because I was feeling so, but because I believed it was healthy and timely for me to be exorcised, even though I feared the process might be uncomfortable and confronting. I have seen movies on this subject; I cannot deal with imperfections until I know what they are. Both Peter and Sandy, and Tom on an earlier visit, had commented on various aspects of what I interpret to be teacher-centredness in my approach. I was amazed that this had been a "sleeper" for Sandy for a year, and I was all the more grateful that she had eventually shared it with me.

Sandy's reference to the travel agent metaphor is instructive. I am more likely to see myself as a tour guide, pointing out all the attractions. This has the potential to position the students more passively and to treat material more superficially. I also worry that I do not devote enough time to deconstructing what makes a teaching-learning strategy work or not work, another casualty of the arguably superficial Social Science Highlights Tour approach. Another recent visitor to my classroom also commented on "drilling down" to derive more from resources and the students' responses to resources. All of this is disturbing, which is helpful.

I was momentarily taken aback by the questioning comments. After all, I am fairly good at asking questions, am I not? And I do think that rhetorical questions

can be powerful. The awkward silence following a question does not mean that no heavy mental work is going on in the students' minds; that belief, at least, has given me succour until now.

"John," Peter called to me as I was returning to my office after our conversation. As we talked in the corridor, a metaphor for my invitation to answer questions emerged, an invitation to a barbecue. My feeling is that if there is no obligation and people do turn up to my barbecue (respond to my question), they are doing so of their own free will, which gladdens me. Are my invitational questions so non-binding that they could be construed as indifference to whether or not the invitation is accepted? I could not afford to pay for the quality of professional feedback generated by Sandy's and Peter's observations. Bring out the holy water, even if I scream. The rapport that we have in terms of open and honest sharing is invaluable and improves with each conversation. Ironically, this rapport is a potential impediment to the frank exchange of views. The desire to be polite and spare feelings has to be balanced with professionalism requiring the examination of evidence and robust argument. I have not changed into my travel agent's uniform, nor has Sandy donned a tour guide jacket. If we just swap places, teaching is none the better for it, but we have each gained added insights about the multiple forms that teaching can assume.

Tom's commentary

Does it matter if a student prefers a travel agent or a tour guide? Like self-study, peer observation is not an end in itself. These three accounts detail aspects of teaching with less specificity about student learning. The ultimate value of peer observation is realised when we are inspired to change our teaching in ways that improve the quality of student learning. It is entirely normal and customary to focus on teaching; this focus reflects the pervasive practice in which most conversations about teaching fail to make direct links to the learning effects experienced by students. Hiebert, Morris, Berk and Jansen (2007, p. 48) "propose that assessing whether students achieve clear learning goals and specifying how and why instruction did or did not affect this achievement lies at the heart of learning to teach from studying teaching."

I have shared many coffees with John, Sandy and Peter. Their accounts here bring back images of my visit to their university in 2005, when I observed John once and Sandy at least twice. As Peter indicates, the observation of a colleague can be a rich and stimulating opportunity to review one's own teaching by seeing someone else teach quite differently. As Sandy indicates, it can take a long time to raise an issue that touches one deeply. As John reports, the conversations are invaluable. Teacher educators interested in self-study find it challenging and rewarding to observe each other and discuss their observations, and we usually see the experiences as helpful in moving self-study forward.

When teacher educators build the trust required to move beyond discussions of teaching, they are ready for discussions of evidence of student learning. Working together and sharing coffees over many years allowed John, Sandy and Peter to initiate self-study observations of each other's teaching and start to explore its potential. The early observations of John's teaching have reminded them that good teaching can take many forms and that observing someone else teaching can be a powerful stimulant to re-thinking one's own teaching, even as the person observed imagines that the entire focus is on what is being observed. When we move beyond teaching to consider the learning effects of teaching, we move beyond our own apprenticeships of observation to dialogue about how student learning is or is not fostered by various teaching approaches.

CONCLUSION

Peer observation with conversation may benefit from an examination of what the teacher does, but it is likely to be most productive if it focuses on how students are learning. Self-study peer observation and conversation may have its greatest potential when others (Lighthall, 2004) include colleagues who share trust. This strengthens our professional learning through discourse and reflection (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001) embedded in shared experience.

Teacher education involves teaching about teaching and thus is doubly complex; the more we can make our teaching moves explicit to ourselves, our students, and colleagues, the more productive teacher education will become. Teaching is an explicit, public, overt act rendering it susceptible to observation. By contrast, learning in the classroom setting is socially mediated but relatively private and tacit. In peer observation there may be an impression or judgment about the quality of learning: the observers may be convinced students are learning but may not know how they know this. This impression informs the analysis of teaching: What, how and why overt acts of teaching work or do not work, and thus whether particular teaching acts are actually worthwhile. Hence, the "learningful" conversation (Senge, 1990, p. 9) which ensues is most effective where it demands evidence and generates argumentation about teaching and learning.

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