

# **Introducing collaborative feedback into lesson observations: A study of an Initial Teacher Education programme for Post-Compulsory Education trainee teachers**

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## **Abstract**

This paper introduces a small-scale study of a dialogic approach to feedback that follows a lesson observation of a trainee's practice when on an Initial Teacher Education programme in a further education college. The focus of this research is collaborative feedback, which involves the teacher, mentor and trainee sharing views together. Alexander's (2004) theory of dialogic teaching plays a crucial part in the collaborative process as the trainees' pedagogical understanding develops through reflective discourse. A small number of trainees were involved in the research, and questions were emailed to gain an insight into the participants' perception of the effectiveness of the collaborative approach. The responses are positive in favour of collaborative feedback, with some trainees feeling that the process results in more comprehensive feedback due to its dialogic nature.

**Keywords:** Further Education; Initial Teacher Education; collaborative feedback; dialogic teaching.

## **Introduction**

The Further Education (FE) sector offers a rich and diverse provision that satisfies not just the needs of individuals, but those of communities and businesses in line with government policy (Foster, 2005). By linking education and skills, FE is an attractive choice for students of all ages and cultural and ethnic backgrounds, as well offering opportunities for hard-to-reach and disadvantaged adults to learn and improve their job opportunities (Frumkin et al., 2008; Kennedy, 1997). Consequently, it may be fair to assume that college lecturers face many challenges in their pedagogic approach to ensure that all students are given equal opportunities to achieve. FE is traditionally the centre of vocational education, and therefore the teachers are based in vocational settings (such as workshops and work-based placements), as well as traditional classrooms. The subjects offered range from the vocational, degree level qualifications, to remedial work, such as Functional Skills in English and Mathematics.

The focus of this research-based practice is within the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) department of a large, inner-city FE College. The Teacher Education department within the college offers a variety of initial and in-service training programmes for internal and external teachers in the Post Compulsory Education (PCE) sector. One of the programmes is the Professional Graduate Certificate in Education/Certificate in Education (PGCE/Cert Ed) in partnership with a higher education institution (HEI), which attracts practitioners with a broad range of subject specialisms, from vocational to non-vocational.

The PGCE/Cert Ed qualification is a flexible, part-time programme running over a two-year period, enabling the trainees to fit the programme around their personal and professional lives. The trainees

must organise their own teaching placements (paid or voluntary) that will give them the opportunity to teach for a minimum of 50 hours per year. These placements include prisons, PCE institutions, private academies and community centres.

### **Background to the study**

The ITE programme includes a variety of assessment strategies to gauge the trainees' development as practitioners over the course of the programme. In the FE environment, one of the key formative methods to evaluate trainees' development of their practice is observation, which can be useful when collecting evidence about classroom practice (O'Leary, 2012). Observations are primarily carried out by the teacher educator, who for the purposes of clarity, will be referred to as the 'teacher' in this research. This process is used to generate information relating to a trainee's progress on the course, appraising wide and varied facets of learning and the application of pedagogical understanding.

In common with other such ITE courses, the programme requires observation of the trainees' practice by teachers and suitably qualified mentors as part of the assessment process to engage the trainee in an evaluative discourse about their development. The focus of these observations is for the teacher/mentor to engage with the trainee to reflect upon their practice (Lawson, 2011) in order to establish an enhanced learning environment for their students. Thus, the observations are on the whole 'developmental' (Olin, 2009, p. 8). The teacher's focus is on the pedagogy underlying the trainee's practice and the mentor provides the subject knowledge and expertise, both of which could be shaped by the institutional requirements where the trainee is based (Buchanan et al, 2008). This

observation process is generally considered to be essential in identifying and improving effective teaching and learning (Olin, 2009; Harvey, 2006).

Teacher and mentor observations with their trainee are usually conducted separately, including the subsequent feedback. Following the HEI guidelines, the feedback following the observations is designed to be valuable and constructive, yet it can often be perceived as not so much varying, but rather separate perspectives from the trainee's point of view. As the basis of our research, we examined the feedback processes commonly used following lesson observations, since this is the time when trainees can engage in reflective discourse as an opportunity to reason why they implemented certain actions, and be encouraged to focus on the learning of their students.

Following a paired observation at the college, a trainee was eager to receive immediate feedback from both the teacher and mentor, so an informal discussion took place between us. This three-way discussion proved to be illuminating for all concerned, and subsequently, over the following two years, where timetables permitted, more observations took place in this manner.

It is important to emphasise that lesson observations in this ITE context are not about evaluating a trainee's capability (Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker, 2006) but rather an opportunity to share views and discuss the events in order to develop understanding of the pedagogy and its application to practice. The discussion following the observations is critical to all concerned; for the teacher to appreciate the trainee's thought processes in structuring the observed session, the mentor to gauge the effectiveness of the lesson in relation to the subject and topic, and it offers the trainee the

opportunity to verbalise their own thought processes, critical for dialogic teaching as defined by Alexander (2004).

Dialogic teaching has a powerful impact when it is ‘collective... reciprocal... supportive... cumulative... purposeful...’ (Alexander, 2004, p.28). Alexander continues by stating that dialogic teaching enables a more ‘equal’ power relationship between teacher and his/her students because of the above factors. The teacher and student recognise that ‘...knowledge and understanding come from testing evidence, analysing ideas and exploring values rather than unquestioningly accepting someone else’s certainties’ (Alexander, 2004, p.32). This can perhaps be seen as the foundation of our perception of ‘collaborative feedback’. Offering feedback after an observation can be problematic; the teacher/mentor may believe that their views of the observed session are definitive and the trainee may feel reluctant to offer their reflections because of this. Collaborative feedback may offer all three the opportunity to share ideas and thoughts in a ‘supportive’ environment because it is ‘collective and purposeful,’ as referred to earlier.

Mercer (2013) stipulates the value of ‘collective thinking,’ where individuals think and learn together as critical for us as social beings. His research highlights the importance of being able to talk through our perceptions as essential to evolution because ‘...the inherently social nature of our species shapes our cognition and development ...[so] we frequently learn, reason and solve problems collectively’ (Mercer, 2013, p. 152). Following an observation as part of their ITE programme, it is important that the trainee has time to reflect on their students’ learning during the observed session. In this research, teachers, mentors and trainees work together to share views on the observed

session. Consequently, it can perhaps be said that a discussion where each participant plays an equal part may be beneficial for all, an opportunity for 'collective thinking'.

Tilstone (1998) outlines a process that she refers to as a 'partnership' where two teachers work together to discuss and evaluate the events in a classroom following an observation. However, the elements she describes can be linked more closely to the principles of lesson study, which is an approach that can be explored if this study was to be developed further.

### **Feedback and dialogic teaching**

Feedback refers to the identification of a trainee's strengths and weaknesses relating to a wide range of assessment task designs, including verbal exchanges (through question, answer and discussion). Feedback can be seen as having two or more purposes. It can provide a summative assessment of the standard achieved as well as formative feedback on the trainee's success and how they can improve. In this context, feedback needs to address the difference between the actual level of achievement and the desired level constructively, and must be directed towards encouraging the trainee to think about the learning rather than themselves (Gipps *et al.*, 2000; James, 1998; Sadler, 1989).

Dialogic teaching is a way forward as it engages the trainee to think about more than the subject matter (Alexander, 2004). Thus, rather than only focusing on their own planning and behaviour in the classroom, the trainee can be encouraged to think about the process of learning and perhaps

reflect on how their students formulate their own perceptions in the session. The teacher and mentor can encourage the trainee to develop their own understanding through sharing their own experiences, and it may be that the relationship between the three undergoes a subtle change as the dialogue ‘...nurtures the student’s engagement, confidence, independence and responsibility – all...conditions for the successful personalisation of learning’ (Alexander, 2004, p.35). Therefore, it may be that feedback in this manner leads to a discourse about interpretations of pedagogy, and its impact through application in specific contexts.

### **The collaborative approach**

This study is not about one-to-one feedback or the quality of it, but how the feedback is shared and whether it is valuable. Feedback is a two-way process between a teacher and their trainee, however, this study highlights the value of three-way dialogue that involves the teacher, the mentor and the trainee. We refer to this as “collaborative feedback,” and offer perhaps a new way of discussing developments through dialogic teaching; to actually move away from feedback in a formal sense and to engage in three-way dialogue to reflect on practice. So what are the specific roles of the teacher and the mentor when observing the trainee’s lessons and subsequently being able to offer constructive feedback?

### **The roles of the teacher and mentor**

The role of the teacher is not only to develop the trainee’s understanding of pedagogy but also to engage in dialogue and encourage their trainees to synthesise the pedagogy in practice. This is where the lesson observation becomes a useful process. It enables the trainee to demonstrate their skills

within the classroom/learning environment by applying the pedagogy in their practice. The teacher is able to observe this from a 'technical' aspect, in terms of pedagogy, and an administrative aspect, by addressing the criteria of the teacher education programme as designed by the HEI.

In contrast, the mentor's focus is on subject-specific material and how it is broken down for the students the trainee is teaching. The mentor should have a similar subject specialism and broad experience of delivering such subjects to a range of students; they will have a better understanding of which methods the trainee is using in the classroom that will support the learning of their students in the particular context.

### **Collaborative feedback**

With the teacher concentrating on pedagogy and its effectiveness in the trainee's practice, and the mentor focusing on subject specific elements, all aspects of the observation process are considered. This should contribute to more comprehensive feedback. There may be potential for the synthesis of the two perspectives with the trainee being at the centre. This collaborative feedback could contribute to enhancing the trainee's learning as the mentor is given the opportunity to understand the demands of the ITE programme, and the teacher gains insight into the subject specific pressures, and even institutional expectations.

The advantage of the teacher and the mentor engaging in observation feedback collaboratively with the trainee is that three-way dialogue brings everyone's perspectives of the session together. In our

experience, if the teacher and mentor are familiar with this observation and feedback process, then their respective views will often support each other. If the teacher and mentor were to disagree on certain aspects of the session, it may suggest complexities between the technical aspect of the subject specialism and the context in which it is being delivered. Therefore, the inclusion of the trainee's view in the dialogue is valuable for clarity and context.

Feedback and evaluation is undertaken in three stages. The first of these is to ask the trainee to give their opinion of the observed session and the effectiveness of it in terms of their students' learning. This iterative process generates a three-way dialogue with their teacher and mentor, engaging in reflection on action (Schön, 1987), an integral part of most ITE courses, and one which enables the link between the theory and practice of learning and teaching to be clear (Furlong and Maynard, 1995). The teacher will give their perspective of the session and justify this, taking the opportunity to relate the observation findings with the ITE module/course criteria. The mentor can then give their perspective on the subject specifics and the effectiveness of the methods to communicate the information in context. The mentor's feedback should also highlight points made by the teacher and, where possible, narrow the focus to finer points in relation to the topic. The trainee's role is essential in this as s/he is the focus of this dialogue. His/her contributions must be central to the collaborative feedback process to engage in reflective practice. The trainee needs to appreciate the responsibility they have for their own development (O'Leary, 2013), thus a reflective discourse of the context and information about the students is central to the collaborative feedback process. At this initial stage, the trainee is able to offer their own reflections of the observed session, and to then perhaps consider the wider context of their own philosophies of pedagogy and the possible

challenges within the institution in which they are employed (O'Leary, 2013). This may lead to more critically reflective trainees who are able to examine their own actions from different perspectives.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this research was to gain a degree of opinion of the trainees' experience of the collaborative feedback procedure, and what it meant to them in terms of its usefulness and value. Knowledge and understanding of the process were developed through socially constructed and subjective interpretations of the trainees' views of collaborative feedback (Thomas, 2013). Therefore an interpretivist approach was considered to be the best choice as this accepts that there can be more than one reality and way of accessing it. However, we did accept that this approach can make elucidation difficult (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

The seven participants who agreed to take part in the study over a two-year period were both male and female, from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds and aged between 25 and 55. Their subject specialisms included motor mechanics, mathematics and engineering, with their teaching environments ranging from comprehensive schools to FE colleges and the majority being employed at the college in which the study was conducted. It was made clear from the beginning that the participants could leave the study at any point. As part of the data collection, we also asked a mentor from an external institution to offer their views on the process, which gave another perspective on the effectiveness of collaborative feedback.

Initially, the discussion began during the feedback tutorial subsequent to the observed session. The teacher and mentor briefly shared their views prior to the tutorial with the trainee. The three-way dialogue then took place with the trainee offering their perspective of the session and elaborating on relevant information about particular students in the group where appropriate. This was followed by the mentor giving their views, and finally the teacher. Consequently, each individual was involved and the trainee was able to use the salient points during the discussion to reflect further.

Data was then collected in the form of questions sent via email. This gave the participants time to reflect on the questions and answer in a time and place of their own choosing, with the distance from the research and ourselves allowing for more personal answers. Our transcripts of their answers were also sent via email for the participants to check and agree that our interpretation and contextualisation were correct.

### **Trainees' responses**

The trainees were questioned about their views on the paired observations as well as the process of the three-way collaborative feedback. To formalise the process, the teacher and mentor discussed their observations and agreed a time to meet with the trainee to provide feedback (the process of “collaborative feedback”). The aim of these paired observations is not to monitor the quality of the mentor’s feedback, but rather to share views on how best to support the development of the trainees’ practice. As identified by Jones *et al.* (2006), it is useful for the teacher and mentor to observe the same session using the same observation reports, and then to share the information noted and simultaneously debate any discrepancy in their analysis of the observed session. The focus

is therefore not on the mentor, but rather the trainee and his/her development needs to become an effective practitioner, which Coffield (2009, p. 10) likened to a 'tandem bike,' although in this teacher and mentor are initially sharing the lead. The lead during collaborative feedback can be shared between the teacher and mentor initially, however the trainee should be able to take the lead intermittently as this is about their understanding and development as educators.

Generally, the teacher is not a subject specialist, and the mentor, albeit suitably qualified, is not the expert on pedagogy. For these reasons, discussion between the two proves to be extremely insightful in understanding how both can encourage and support the trainee's development and understanding of pedagogy and its application.

To gauge the effectiveness and value of the different approaches to feedback given, the trainees were asked to respond honestly to the following questions:

**What did you learn from receiving feedback from just the teacher?**

'An 'academic' view, including teaching methods, communication between the students and myself, classroom management, setting up group work, and the general theory analysed on the PGCE course in practice'.

'More about theory and managing my students, focussing on the learning'.

'A discussion of how the theory in class can be put into practice in my class'.

**What did you learn from receiving feedback from just the mentor?**

'More focus on the communication and resources used from the subject specialist view'.

‘Because the mentor has great experience in teaching the subject, he was able to suggest ideas on improving the resources used, and how to explain the theory to my students. A lot of discussion around effective questioning as well’

‘A discussion about departmental guidelines that helped me to see who I could turn to for advice about subject specific elements’.

**What did you learn from receiving feedback from both the teacher and mentor together?**

‘It was ‘great’ because it was collectively given, and more rounded. It allowed the teacher to understand the personality of the mentor and their language’.

‘They worked together to give feedback that was constructive from an academic and knowledge of the subject point of view.’

‘I felt as if I was trying to keep both of you happy, but I didn’t feel any extra pressure as a result. What I mean is that I wanted to make sure my students were learning and you both could see that I was trying different ways to engage them’.

‘Both aspects of the process – things we learn on the course, and subject specific parts’.

**Which method of feedback do you prefer and why?**

‘Definitely both together because the two were more detailed and observant together than if they were on their own, pointing out far more in detail [sic] aspects of how to improve my practice’.

‘The detail in feedback was greater and more helpful to improve my practice at a faster pace’.

‘The two together was much better, ‘brilliant’ because it helped me to see what I can improve in and what I’m doing well in’.

‘Two people observing me at the same time is good for me as I get two different angles and I can get more pointers, but I like the balance of having single observations, as well as a paired observation. When the two of you did not agree on a few points, it was good to be able to air these views and discuss them together’.

‘The two together is better because things were justified more; you had both clearly discussed what you had observed’.

‘I got a more balanced view and some great tips on actually teaching the subject balanced with the theory of teaching and learning. I had a very ineffective mentor last year so this year, the new mentor assigned to me has been able to understand what I was aiming for, and along with the teacher, they have been able to guide me much more’.

‘I asked for a paired observation because time was running out and I also wanted the two perspectives together. I felt it was very useful for me because both of you seemed to be saying the same thing, so clearly you had observed similar things’.

In addition to the above comments, the opportunity to question a mentor from an external organisation arose. The mentor requested that he and the teacher carry out a paired observation of the trainee together as it was the first time he had been asked to be a mentor. Below is a summary of his views:

### **What did you think of this way of feeding back?**

‘It was a very positive experience. It enabled two experienced teachers to openly discuss their views about the learner’s standard of teaching to come up with feedback that has been thought through and agreed by all parties’.

‘I would argue that observers come from a variety of disciplines... this will impact on their views on a particular observation – feedback needs to be personalised to each individual and should be a judgement about the learner’s performance in managing a successful class that is measured against proven teaching practices shared across a number of disciplines and not judged against an observer’s personal experience... this produces feedback that is more representative of educational practices which are academically respected as opposed to one’s own practices’.

‘One’s own experience is valuable... but should be offered as informal advice’.

**Apart from time, are there any other drawbacks to this way of feeding back?**

‘There is a risk that teachers become too critical, which is often the result of their lack of experience in observing new teachers’.

‘There is a risk that the observers do not agree which can cause confusion’.

**What do you feel are the benefits for you as a mentor?**

‘I get to hear about the latest teaching practices’.

‘You become more reflective of your own teaching’.

‘The feedback provides me with new techniques and activities that I could use in my own practice’.

‘I get to meet lots of new people from other colleges, schools etc and hear their ideas and views which impact on my teaching’.

**Conclusion**

When planning this study, we were concerned that the trainee may feel pressurised or anxious when being observed by two people at the same time because any observational process can be considered ‘judgemental and loaded’ (Hatzipanagos & Lygo-Baker, 2006, p. 98), but none of the participants mentioned this as a factor. This may be because the observations and the subsequent feedback are part of the assessment protocol for the PGCE programme. Therefore, the trainees do not question the process in depth.

The trainees were all of the opinion that the discussion following the observation was extremely valuable. Although it could be argued that the research is not robust due to the low number of trainees involved, the responses from the participants indicate that the practice of collaborative

feedback warrants further investigation. This approach can stimulate discussion around pedagogy and practice where all concerned may learn and develop deeper understanding (Alexander, 2004).

At this stage, it is essential to review the notion of power relations and the breakdown of these through dialogic teaching. Although the notion of collaborative feedback allows for equality with the three participants involved, we have to accept that the trainee may consider the teacher and mentor to be pedagogical and subject specialist ‘experts,’ so may not contribute to the dialogue as fully as they could. For this reason, the teacher and mentor may need to facilitate the process to some degree.

Feedback, whether written or verbal, is a critical part of the assessment process and requires a great deal of thought and care in its execution to ensure positive outcomes. This is the opportunity when new methods and approaches can be shared, and any issues that arose during the observed session can be debated openly (Harvey, 2006).

In an effort to bring consistency amongst teachers and mentors, and to increase the quality of the observations, and to possibly re-evaluate how observations are conducted on ITE programmes in FE in the future, this study has raised points of interest. For that reason, it may be worthwhile to conduct a larger study to investigate the value and effectiveness of collaborative feedback further.

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