

Observing Senior and More Experienced Colleagues in Action: A Useful Tool for Early Career Teaching Staff at Higher Education Institutions

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Highlights

- Teaching staff at higher education institutions need exposure to different teaching approaches and technologies to bring excellence to teaching and learning.
- This can be actualized through observation of senior and more experienced colleagues in action.
- This paper, therefore, examines how teaching staff at the early career stage can benefit from teaching observation, and also presents the author's self-reflection on teaching observation.

Keywords

Colleague, early career, higher education, observation, peer, teaching

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Introduction

Hundreds and thousands of students graduate from colleges and get admitted to higher education institutions, while new courses and programmes are rolled out at such institutions (Number of

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University Applicants in the United Kingdom from, 1994 to 2021, 2021). This makes the recruitment of academic staff, especially teachers, a necessity. This set of academic recruits can be broadly categorized into an early career and experienced teaching staff. Unlike their experienced colleagues, an early career teaching staff at higher education institutions need exposure to a range of teaching styles and approaches to make great positive impacts and bring excellence to the teaching and learning process (Zimmerman, 2021). There is also a notion among early career teaching staff that they need a relevant experience that will fully prepare and equip them with the skills that will enable them to teach and provide pastoral support to diverse learners (Hulme & Wood, 2022). This is in addition to the continued calls in related work (Griffiths, 2021; Hollywood et al., 2020; Hulme & Wood, 2022) for support for early career teaching staff that will not only enhance their practice but also reduce the high rate of turnover and attrition among early career teaching staff. One tool that these teaching staff at higher education institutions of learning can find very useful is the observation of their peers, especially senior and more experienced colleagues. Teaching observation, as its name implies, is the process of observing a teaching staff member in action (Engin, 2014). Specifically, teaching observation at higher education institutions involves attending a colleague or peer's teaching session by one or more teaching staff of such institutions to observe the session and learn new things that are beneficial to their profession. Early career teaching staff can observe how their senior and more experienced colleagues deploy their teaching materials and relate to students during face-to-face teaching, online teaching, tutorials, drop-in, and laboratory sessions. Therefore, this study examines the benefits of teaching observation in early career teaching staff and presents my self-reflection, as a teaching staff at a higher education institution, on observing senior and more experienced colleagues.

Benefits

Teaching observation can aid the professional development of early-career teaching staff (Gore, 2013; Siddiqua, 2019; Teachers Observing Teachers, n.d.). Observing others while teaching tends to provoke introspective and self-analytic thoughts that can cause early career teaching staff to become more aware of their skills, strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas of improvement. Early career teaching staff who find it difficult to manage lecture rooms and arouse their students' interests can benefit from observing experienced colleagues. They can study how they can better interact with students and get their students to actively participate in the teaching and learning processes.

It can also accelerate the careers of early-career teaching staff. New approaches and technologies are being introduced to improve the teaching and learning processes. By observing colleagues who are already in the system while using different approaches and technologies, early career teaching

staff can quickly learn how to deploy these at firsthand and work towards putting them to good use. It can therefore be viewed as a way of sharing teaching approaches and skills that are capable of bringing early-career teaching staff up to speed in their careers.

The observer's students can also benefit from this process in terms of experience and academic performance (Teachers Observing Teachers, n.d.). Teaching observation is usually student-focused as it aims to enhance the observer's ability to deploy successful teaching approaches to improve the experience of the observer's students and enhance their academic performance (Feedback and Professional Development, 2017; Zaare, 2012).

Another benefit of observing senior and more experienced colleagues is its cost-effectiveness. Individual teaching staff members tend to attend workshops, webinars, and conferences to learn and acquire new teaching skills and get introduced to new teaching approaches and technologies. A lot of money is expended on registration, travelling, and accommodation by the attendants of these workshops and conferences. Selected teaching staff who are already in the system can attend such events, while early career teaching staff can be assigned to observe their teaching skills and techniques.

By observing others while teaching, early career teaching staff can gain inspiration for their work and learn how to bring their own teaching to standards—in terms of the teaching approaches they deploy and their expectations from students (Mitchell, 2020; Support for Geography ITE Trainers/Mentors, n.d.). Early-career teaching staff can relate the standards of those being observed and the response of students in the observation class, to their own standards and experience with their own students. By doing so, they can know if their standards are below par or if they need to raise the bar. This ensures conformity to the required teaching standards. Early-career teaching staff can be inspired by what they see in their senior and more experienced colleagues—how they do it, and the level of energy they put into it.

Teaching observation also provides an avenue for early career teaching staff to meet and work with others in their field. This can, in turn, foster collaboration among the staff (Baier, 2018). While this study focuses on the impact that early career teaching staff can make on their students using the experience and exposure they gain from observing the teaching sessions of their senior colleagues, the observing staff could also provide feedback to the staff whose teaching session is being observed in terms of what went well during the teaching session, and suggest areas for improvement (Santos, 2016). This can also lead to an enhanced learning experience for the students in the observation class.

My self-reflection

As a new and early career teaching staff member at my university, I was assigned as a tutor to some modules. I delivered tutorials and assessed the work of undergraduate students. I had the

opportunity to observe the teaching of the module leaders. Teaching observation was neither a mandatory task for me nor part of my plan from the outset. It happened accidentally but has been a great motivation for writing this paper.

As a new staff member at my university, I was not well versed with the systems and needed to familiarize myself with the different approaches used by module leaders and tutors during teaching and tutorial sessions. I was deliberating on how to go about this until one of the leaders urged me to attend their tutorial session for observation. I joined the session as encouraged, which motivated me not only to continue attending the teaching and tutorial sessions (for that module) throughout that semester but also to replicate that feat in other modules.

I remember how I used to reach on time to witness the students' arrival and not miss any part of the teaching. I also ensured to sit in the front, at a far left corner, where I could turn my head around to fully observe the students' responses and interactions with the module leader. I also helped and contributed in some ways to the sessions. This, I believe, was necessary to ensure that I was not only taking something from the observation process but also giving back. For instance, I supported one of the module leaders in attending to students' questions or doubts during group discussions. This is in addition to my core duties, such as tutoring a subset of the whole class and assessing students' submitted assignments.

The first thing I gained from this experience was an increase in my confidence level. It exposed me to different teaching approaches at my university. I was able to draw up plans for my own teaching sessions using the insights I obtained from the teaching observation. Although I was still at the early stage of my career and very new to the system, during my first session as a tutorial leader, I felt like I had been involved with the students for a very long time. I was inspired by the ways in which module leaders coordinated their sessions to ensure the active participation of students in the teaching and learning process. I was able to identify areas for improvement, effect necessary changes during my own teaching session, and gain positive responses from the students in my own class. This experience has helped me to develop professionally. Therefore, teaching staff should take advantage of teaching observation at an early stage of their careers. Training units and policymakers at higher education institutions should, wherever possible, include teaching observation as part of the training programmes for academics who are early on in their teaching trajectory to enhance the students' experience and academic performance, foster collaboration among colleagues, and reduce the staff training cost.

Conclusive remarks

Early-career teaching staff should observe the teachings of senior and more experienced colleagues to gain exposure to different learning approaches and learn how to better engage their students.

Other benefits include their professional development and accelerated careers. Higher education institutions of learning should also take advantage of this opportunity to enhance students' experience and academic performance, foster collaboration among colleagues, and reduce staff training costs. While this study focuses on the benefits that early career teaching staff stand to derive from teaching observation due to their lack of exposure to a range of teaching styles and technologies, more experienced teaching staff could also gain insight and identify areas for improvement from the process.


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