

## Lesson Observation in FE Colleges

NEU believes properly conducted classroom observation can be a powerful tool in the continuing professional development of teachers. However, there is concern about how lesson observations have been used in some colleges, particularly as part of a wider teaching and learning observation system (TLOS). This factsheet outlines NEU best practice models for both the conduct of lesson observations and the TLOS framework within which they are conducted.

### Good practice model for conduct of lesson observations

Lesson observation and colleges' understanding of their own quality of teaching and learning should contribute to a lecturer's professional development. Observations therefore should be conducted in a manner that creates a professional dialogue.

NEU believes the following:

- The purpose and focus of lesson observations should be clear and agreed between the lecturer and observer (who could be a peer) and a record of this put in a planning and review statement.
- Lesson observation should only be undertaken by a qualified lecturer.
- Lecturers should be given adequate notice of a proposed lesson observation. Where the observation is related to formal college procedures this should be at least five working days. For drop-ins, walk-throughs and observations for other reasons it is good practice to notify lecturers that a particular programme or subject area may be observed at some time during a week as this will help lessen any disruption to the class.
- The person observing a lesson should have the appropriate training, expertise and experience of the lecturer's work in the agreed focus.
- Feedback and professional dialogue following the observation should centre upon the previously agreed focus. However, lecturers should recognise that, in a spirit of professional support, observers may wish to comment on other aspects of the lesson where there may be developmental resources or advice available. Such suggestions may form the focus for future observations or objectives.
- Oral feedback should come within 24 hours of the lesson being observed and take the form of a professional and supportive dialogue where the observer gives due weight to the lecturer's knowledge, insight and judgement.
- Written feedback must be received within five working days.
- Written feedback should be evaluative and developmental with emphasis on

supporting further professional development (eg pedagogy, experiential learning, theoretical understanding, classroom practice, differentiation). In all professional practice, thinking through the strengths and areas of development is always appropriate. Any grading system based upon allocation of a number or letter to a supposed level of performance will be over simplistic and fail to have the validity that is claimed for it.

- Observers should see their work as part of a professional dialogue in which they should evaluate objectively and report fairly and accurately.

## Good practice framework for TLOS

Working as a teacher in an FE college – or any educational institution – can sometimes be lonely, particularly if things are not going well. The class could be extremely hard-going, there may be some very challenging students; you could be under the weather or be going through a stressful time. You may simply feel that your teaching has become stagnant and has lost its spark.

A well-designed teaching and learning observation system (TLOS) should provide a framework within which classroom observation provides both constructive and sympathetic professional development support in a range of circumstances.

A properly devised TLOS could also identify areas of development for college management – if implemented and established in the right way.

One way of creating such a system is by answering the following questions as suggested by A Fuller and L Unwin at an NEU workshop in January 2013:

**Conception:** who conceives the system, its imposition and its timing? Is there a teacher interest group or a curriculum group headed by teachers that devises the system? Can this group allocate administrators or managers to support facilities and resources?

**Execution:** who completes the reports and documents the activity of the system? Who should observe the lessons? What should they record? How should they record it? These are all questions that need staff ownership to make them meaningful to professional practice.

**Evaluation:** who judges the activity and the system as a whole? Do practitioners have a voice in evaluating the system and how useful and worthwhile it is? If not, why not? How can they affect the system for the better?

These systemic elements can provide a strong ground for a holistic, transparent and accountable way of collaborative working; one based on trust. Each element is a set of processes and practices within an overall approach to lesson observation and professional practice. Therefore, the formula should not be applied over-simplistically, nor should each element be treated independently.

## Lesson observation for inspection purposes

It is NEU's belief that where there is frank and honest consultation on objectives, lecturers face fewer problems. The previously described good practice and TLOS framework for engaging lecturers in the process describes an observation process that involves the lecturer as a fully involved professional partner. More than this, working with lecturers via the mechanisms of the conception, execution and evaluation model would go a long way in transforming a college culture to a more collaborative way of working.

In some colleges, an onerous and poorly implemented lesson observation regime supplements observations for other purposes – primarily, inspection planning. In England, the reason generally given for this monitoring is that it is required for self-assessment review (SAR) and that it is also required by Ofsted or in preparation for Ofsted. However, Ofsted does not require this kind of monitoring process.

Neither does Ofsted require the grading of individual lessons by or on behalf of college management and leadership. NEU further holds that teachers should not have their lessons graded in a simplistic manner (eg with a single number) merely to facilitate the self assessment review. The college SAR does not therefore require individual lecturers to be graded if it is to be consistent with Ofsted requirements; college managers are expected to know the overall standard of teaching in their colleges and rate this in one grade for the college.

NEU does not see that performing some kind of number crunching exercise is the best way for college management to understand the overall standard of teaching in the college.

The feedback from properly planned, focused and used lesson observation (undertaken using the practice and mechanisms given above) should enable college management to understand the standards of teaching in their colleges. There need be no further monitoring process in addition to this at any time.

## **Drop-ins and other observations**

NEU accepts the right of college managers to ‘drop in’ on any lesson for the purposes of quality assurance. However, such visits should not take place excessively.

Drop-ins and other observations, such as learning walks, should be planned with lecturers given notice when they will happen (see above). With careful planning and coordination, observations undertaken in the way described can be used to inform all other management processes such as subject reviews.

## **Coaching and mentoring**

NEU distinguishes between observation done for the purpose of performance measures and that done to develop and share teaching and learning strategies. Ultimately, the former is concerned with judgements that may influence career and pay progression; the latter with non-judgemental support between colleagues, although that can be equally challenging, particularly if related to occupational standards (to be launched in April 2014 for all teachers of post-16 learning in any context, apart from sixth form colleges).

NEU strongly supports a concept of new professionalism in which teachers can readily access development opportunities, which gives them a sense of ownership. NEU believes mutually agreed observation systems, along with associated peer mentoring and coaching, to be a powerful CPD tool.

## **Probation periods**

There are separate procedures for the support and review of the work of newly qualified lecturers or those taking up a teaching role. Please see your college policies for this.

## **Lecturers causing concern**

Where a lecturer’s performance is identified as causing concern, additional lesson observations may be required in line with college capability policy. In such policies an action plan, with the

agreement of the lecturer, should be used to address issues with their performance. The pattern and focus of observations should also be agreed.

## Summary of NEU policy

All formal lesson observations (relating to probation or capability) should be conducted by line managers, or other appropriate professionals, to take place within the relevant policy procedures.

- Observation should be done once and used many times.
- No simplistic grading of lessons should facilitate reporting for inspection.
- Observation for coaching and mentoring should continue to be supported, as and when colleagues have mutually agreed to such observation being necessary and useful.

## Further support

If your college imposes or introduces a TLOS that falls short of NEU's good practice models, or if you need further support to improve lesson observation at your college then NEU reps or members should contact NEU for support, either by contacting their local branch/ district, or else by emailing [post16@neu.org.uk](mailto:post16@neu.org.uk). If you do not have a rep why not become one and give NEU members a voice? Contact [organising@neu.org.uk](mailto:organising@neu.org.uk).

Your first point of contact for advice and support from the union is your National Education Union workplace representative. If there is no representative in your workplace, you should contact your District or Regional office. For immediate advice see the help and advice pages, and in the event of no other option, Advice Line.