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Telling stories about practice: the role of teaching observation discussion in developing lecturer reflective identity (0187)

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Participation in the discursive elements of teaching observation is widely regarded as having a transformatory role in the enhancement of teaching. Changes that emerge out of this process are seen to occur in response to the greater self-awareness that arises out of collaborative reflection between observer and lecturer. However, despite the perceived significance of discussion within the teaching observation process, as researchers we know little about how such conversations operate or if and how they contribute to changes in either lecturer identity or practice.

This paper reports on a small-scale study of post-observation dialogue drawing on transcribed discussions within teaching observation in the context of a postgraduate certificate for new lecturers. Using analysis of the transcriptions, it is argued that the often overlooked narrative practices used to describe and connect a lecturer's pedagogic practice to their identity are fundamental to understanding and enhancing the developmental potential of teaching observation.

Telling stories about practice: the role of teaching observation discussion in developing lecturer reflective identity

Introduction

In the UK higher education sector, formative teaching observation is widely used and often integral to postgraduate certificates in higher education teaching (Fullerton, 2003). Pre- and post-observation discussion between observer and lecturer in the normal practices of teaching observation precisely focus dialogue around practice that "encourages constructive talk about teaching" (Gosling, 2005: 5). Yet despite the critical importance of discursive practices within the teaching observation process and the anticipated direct application of such conversations back into improved teaching through the act of reflection, as researchers we know little about how such conversations operate or if and how they contribute to change in practice.

Developmental approaches to teaching observation have increasingly been identified as having a transformatory role in the enhancement of teaching (MacKinnon, 2001; Hendry & Dean, 2002). It is argued in the literature that such approaches to observation can lead to the alteration of both practice and perspective with "technical", "pedagogical" and "critical" changes reported by individuals as outcomes (Bell, 2001: 33). Such changes are seen to occur in response to the greater self-awareness that emerges out of the collaborative reflection between observer and lecturer central to the process (Fullerton, 2003; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). As such, observation constitutes a

fundamental process for enabling participation in dialogue about learning and teaching (Brown *et al.*, 1993).

Despite the importance attached to observation in developing a lecturer's "professional self-concept" (MacKinnon, 2001: 22), there is a lack of evidence that observation feedback from others can materially contribute to the enhancement of practice (Cosh, 1998). Nor is it certain whether change in either conception or practice is occasioned principally by the experience of observing, reflecting, being observed, giving and receiving feedback or any combination of these processes (Hendry & Dean, 2002). As such, it is important to theorise how participation in observational feedback discourses is enacted and how the potential technical, pedagogical and critical ways of knowing that emerge in this process inform practitioner identity.

Methodology

The aim of the study was to conduct a qualitative inquiry into the discursive practices enacted in post observation discussion with a view to understanding how and why participation in discussion is reported by participants as having profound outcomes for their practice. The study draws on audio-recording and transcription of post-observation discussions of five observer-lecturer pairs on two occasions. Each lecturer was completing a postgraduate certificate at one higher education institution. The observers are all academic members of staff who teach on the programme. The context of the study is a pre-1992 UK research-intensive higher education institution. The programme is accredited by the Higher Education Academy and as such represents a typical case of developmental teaching observation within a new lecturer programme.

In analysis of the transcribed data, Bleakley's critique of modes of reflective writing is regarded as a significant lens through which to understand the discursive practices of observation discussion. With reference to written reflective narratives, Bleakley suggests that the "kinds of writing employed will constitute the kinds of reflection enacted". Whilst critical readers might expect to decode the genre of written narrative, the potential for spoken discourses to utilise different "genre" as a means to construct and interpret experience during observation is rarely acknowledged in the theoretical literature on observation. Analysis of the data, therefore, sought to explore how the "genre" utilised in discussion might inform the "practice identities" enacted in observation. In particular, whereas previous studies of teaching observation have asserted the importance of feedback protocols (e.g. MacKinnon, 2001) the analysis reported here suggests that the storytelling genre is an important way for observed lecturers to frame observed practice and reconfigure mutually witnessed events during observation in new ways that work to construct and reconstruct their practitioner identities.

Storytelling practices in teaching observation discussion

Stories about teaching can be seen not only as a way of representing practice knowledge but integral to ways of knowing as a practitioner. As Bruner argues, "we organize our experiences and our

memory of human happenings in the form of narrative – stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing and so on” (Bruner, 1991: 4). In the context of learning, Alterio and McDrury (2002) claim that stories about practice are told for two reasons – to make sense of particular events and for emotional release where the telling of a story can be a process of catharsis (Boud *et al.*, 1993; McDrury & Alterio, 2002). It is through stories, Witherell suggests, that the “self develops and finds meaning in the context of relationship – between self and other selves, subject and object, individual and culture and between aspects of the self, both across and within the time dimension” (Witherell, 1991:90-91).

In the analysis of the transcribed data, examples of storytelling practices were found to function as vehicles for exploring practitioner identity in both explicit and indirect ways. Practice stories were used to represent the self as teacher, to negotiate the relationships between the self and others in the context of higher education and, through metaphor, to explore culturally-embedded values and beliefs about learning and teaching. The following examples, presented in more detail in the conference, illustrate these different storytelling practices.

Self-representation

In the first example, a lecturer’s story reveals her awareness of the performative nature of her identity, a front stage/backstage persona. The story provides an opportunity for the lecturer to explore her representation of herself in a confessional frame and so negotiate her private and public identity, her personal and her professional identity and how these identities might relate to her listener as observer.

Self and others

In the second example, a lecturer discusses difficulties in managing student behaviour. The account focuses on his attempts to negotiate a number of different responses to his practice from colleagues. The story provides the opportunity for exploring the self through the perspectives others as well as exploring different selves across time.

Metaphor

In the final example, the lecturer provides an account of students that are exam-focused and the account revolves around the figure of “Malcolm” – “the old British” student. Within this account are examples of how “exam” functions as an important metaphor for authority in the classroom. The lecturer’s account articulates the challenge for him in giving information he wants to keep – not giving students previous exam papers, not revealing results etc. Within this story structure, “Malcolm’s” pragmatic approach to studying serves as a foil to the lecturer’s own attitudes towards knowledge and his beliefs about the purpose of higher education.

Conclusion

This paper argues that storytelling operates within post observation discussion in ways which challenge firstly, the theorising of observation as a socialisation practice whereby storytelling permits

the resistance as well as the co-opting of socialising discourses through acts of self-representation. Secondly, storytelling acts permit complex opportunities to negotiate power relationships within the observation and outside of the observation through exploring the relationship between self and others. Thirdly, the creative possibilities of metaphor and projection facilitate a way of thinking about practice and reflection that resists a technologising agenda in which self-surveillance is the correct outcome of reflection. These acts of figuration enable multiple and projected identities rather than a contained and monitored identity aligned to practice.

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