

Refreshing peer observation through Walkabout Weeks: observers as voyagers, not vampires

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Abstract

When one observes, two learn. This viewpoint piece argues that peer observation can serve an important role in facilitating profound conversations about teaching, expanding tutors' 'significant networks'. HE tutors are traditionally wary of inviting spectators into their classrooms, observers relying on invitations in the same way that vampires require invites before they can enter a room. It is argued that observers are better conceptualised as voyagers, exploring new environments for personal development. It is within this context that Walkabout Weeks were born, a fortnight each year where science tutors open their classrooms to colleagues. This initiative has enhanced the visibility of casual peer observation, further normalising this practice, and has provided a rich source of diverse observation opportunities for inexperienced staff. By also welcoming non-academics into classrooms, administrative staff have gained deeper insights into the academic lives of the students that they support, a distinctive feature of the scheme.

Keywords

peer observation; networking; reflection; teaching excellence; vampires

Please cite this paper as:

Denton, P. (2019) 'Refreshing peer observation through Walkabout Weeks: observers as voyagers, not vampires', *Innovations in Practice*, 13 (1): 5-9



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Be careful who you invite...

MAX	Don't <i>ever</i> invite a vampire into your house, you silly boy. It renders you powerless. [<i>Sam turns to Edgar and whispers</i>]
SAM	Did you know that?
EDGAR	Of course! <i>Everyone</i> knows that.

‘The Lost Boys’ (1987)

In this comedic exchange from Joel Schumacher’s classic horror movie, Max (who is revealed as the head vampire) alludes to one of the lesser-appreciated articles of supernatural lore; vampires can only enter a home when invited. Consequently, I have always felt there is a tantalising connection between vampires and teaching observers; they both rely on invites. While teaching observers might not render the observed tutor powerless, welcoming a spectator into a classroom undoubtedly introduces a new element beyond the control of the lecturer and can provoke understandable wariness.

While countless horror movies have depicted the grim consequences when mortals unwittingly invite a vampire across their threshold, the organisation, completion and reporting of teaching observation has yet to trouble the major Hollywood studios. The only filmed depictions of peer observation that I can recall are those casual interludes where Dr Brody (Denholm Elliot) pops into the classroom of Dr Jones (Harrison Ford) in Steven Spielberg’s, ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ (1981) and its sequels. The fact that Dr Brody enters Dr Jones’s classroom on a whim, apparently without invite, ruined the believability of the entire saga for me. I could accept the discovery of the Ark of Covenant, the

Temple of Doom’s magical stones, and even the 1,000-year-old knight, but not that an academic peer might casually walk into a lecture, unannounced and while teaching was in progress.



Within contemporary HE, academics do not generally feel empowered to enter colleagues’ classrooms for ad hoc observation. University teaching, after all, is acknowledged by many writers as being a solitary vocation (for example, see Gizir and Simsek, 2005). Again, there are parallels with the depiction of vampires in popular culture. In Tomas Alfredson’s celebrated romantic horror, ‘Let the Right One In’ (2008), an inexperienced vampire entering a room without invitation endures uncomfortable consequences. Perhaps casual teaching observers are concerned that they may suffer a similar fate, albeit one involving less bloodshed.

Voyagers, not vampires

These playful comparisons with vampire lore associate teaching observation with a spectre of gloom, but this need not be so. In my reckoning, teaching observers are optimally conceptualised as voyagers, not vampires, exploring new ground for personal betterment. Just as American science fiction writer, Robert A. Heinlein remarked that, “when one teaches, two

learn,” I would argue that teaching observation can be encapsulated by the parallel idiom, “when one observes, two learn.” Accordingly, it has been found that teachers who observe diverse classroom contexts are empowered to adopt different approaches to teaching within those contexts (Lindblom-Ylänne et al., 2006).

Of course, teaching observation by peers is not a new concept and is the subject of contemporary sectoral conversations, although the operationalisation of such schemes has attracted scrutiny. In a recent appraisal, Scott et al. (2017) warn against peer review schemes perceived as ‘tick box’ exercises, and they support fresh approaches that rely on collaboration. In a similar vein, Williams et al. (2013) have advocated a reliance on existing social networks to weave the scholarship of teaching and learning into an institution’s culture.

Observation is a powerful means to initiate conversations around teaching, this being indirectly beneficial to students given that teachers’ conceptions of pedagogy relate positively to the quality of learning (Ho et al., 2001). Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) have probed the conversations that academic professionals have about teaching; whom they talk to and what they talk about. They found that conversations with colleagues possessed common attributes: privacy, mutual trust and intellectual intrigue. Given the small number of colleagues that lecturers were found to converse with, Roxå and Mårtensson (2009) describe these discussion groups as ‘significant networks.’ Discourses within these linked communities provide a basis for learning and conversational partners are described as the, “gatekeepers for [personal] development and change.”

I would argue that the peer observation can start new conversations that have the power to expand tutors’ significant networks. One

potentially “fresh” (Scott et al., 2017) approach would be to acknowledge and sate the natural curiosity of academics; how many of us have wandered down a university corridor and wondered what is going on behind each door?

- What if Dr Brody’s behaviour was the norm?
- What if we could, as professionals, take the time to observe our colleagues’ teaching on a whim, without the need for prior arrangements?

Walkabout Weeks

It is from this context that that my idea for the Faculty of Science’s ‘Walkabout Weeks’ was born, these comprising the week before directed study (‘reading’) week in each of our autumn and spring semesters. The intention was to adopt a relaxed, Dr Brody-style approach to teaching observation: once Faculty academic staff had consented to be involved, their advertised lecture topic and nominated classroom(s) would be open for casual observation by Faculty colleagues during the identified weeks. ‘Walkabout’ alludes to the observer as voyager, learning from their journey and developing from these experiences.

During the genesis of the scheme, our Faculty Education Committee felt it was important to stress the desired emphasis on learning from experiencing taught sessions, not observing staff, LJMU’s formal requirements in the latter respect occurring in parallel. The only obligations for observers were to stay for the full session or its scheduled length (50 minutes), whichever was shorter, and to book a place in advance. This latter condition emerged from consultations with academics’ line managers, it being acknowledged that some staff may want to place a cap on visitor numbers in some teaching scenarios.

The Faculty of Science encourages all colleagues to request and consent to informal observations with peers and Walkabout Weeks provide a means to celebrate this activity. Observations within the scheme are decidedly 'no-strings-attached', with no requirement for any reporting or formal follow-ups. However, all participants were invited to complete an anonymous and optional online evaluation survey that elicited some insightful feedback.

I always wanted to visit other lectures... but never devoted time to it. Having it slightly formalised, it motivated me to for once take the chance. I enjoyed it more than the rather formal observation scheme because I was able to choose a topic that also interests me. That made the whole experience more enjoyable. (Observer)

This comment acknowledges the natural desire of academics to explore and indicates that the scheme initiated casual observations that would otherwise not have occurred. Reported satisfaction with the scheme is reflected in quantitative evaluation, 17 out of 20 respondents reporting a positive experience from participating in the Walkabout Weeks as either observer or observee. Participants also noted how Walkabout Weeks had provided a greater understanding of the student experience.

[I] had an interesting conversation with an observer with respect to Vevox use by students, after the session. (Observee)

This sentiment reflects my experience of Walkabout Weeks, although conversations were not just limited to those between observer and observee. In one session that I observed alongside two colleagues, periods of active learning provided opportunities for the trio of observers to discuss the teaching approaches that were being employed.

I think that Walkabout Weeks have enhanced the visibility of casual teaching

observations, further normalising this practice. They also provided a rich source of diverse observation opportunities for inexperienced staff, an outcome welcomed by our Programme Leaders. Following a request from the Faculty's Head of Operations during consultation on the proposed scheme, non-academic observers were also welcomed to participate.

As an administrative staff member it was a pleasure to experience a lecture, not only from the content, but from the understanding the student experience point of view. Clickers! Whiteboards! It was illuminating! (Personal Assistant to a School Director)

By providing non-academic staff with deeper insights into the academic lives of the students they support, the scheme has already evolved beyond my original vision.

Conclusion

Walkabout Weeks have promoted a culture of talking about teaching within my faculty, fostering a sense of shared responsibility. In accordance with the findings of Roxå and Mårtensson (2009), we should therefore expect an associated expansion of tutors' personal significant networks, ultimately enhancing student learning. The first year of Walkabout Weeks provides a solid foundation on which to build and the scheme is ripe for greater involvement by students and closer ties with the scholarship of teaching and learning, both being attributes of effective peer review schemes (Scott et al., 2017). The seamless integration of student-facing non-academic staff into teaching observation provides, I think, another example of good practice and is a distinctive attribute of Walkabout Weeks.

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