Understanding on-line teaching practice: the importance of the observation
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Executive Summary

This project captured and identified the practice of tutorial observations from two different perspectives: the perspective of the distance learning tutor, and the perspective of their manager or staff tutor. The project has a number of closely linked objectives: it aims to understand what happens during a tutorial or class observation; understand what good observation feedback is; what considerations need to be made regarding the observation of online tutorials; how to observe team teaching and offer feedback that is appropriate and useful for lecturers; how to best influence and develop teaching practice; to understand attitudes of different groups of staff across the university.

The project began with a literature review. Fifty nine publications were identified. These included journals, books, and professional development conferences. Following the literature review, two categories of focus groups were organised: one for associate lecturers who are observed, and another for the academic managers who regularly carry out observations (known as staff tutors). Two focus groups were run at an associate lecturer development conference in May 2017 involving up to 30 tutors. During the session, tutors were asked two questions: 'how should staff tutors and faculty managers run effective observations?' and 'what feedback would help you the most?' A further focus group took place in November 2017 within a regular meeting that is scheduled for a similar number of tutor line managers.

The tutor discussions that took placed can be summarised by a set of keywords: purpose, importance, dimensions, acknowledgment, dialogue, frequency, practicalities, negotiation, feedback, differences, opportunities and connections. Discussions from the staff tutor focus group can be summarised as: philosophy, relationships, dialogue, guidelines, feedback, online, experience, priority and opportunities. One of the immediate outcomes of these focus groups was to uncover a set of practical and adaptable guidelines that have been used for Science tutors.

Looking towards the future, a systematic survey of tuition practice, attitudes and experience could be established. Also, since the research has been carried out within the Faculty of STEM, it may be useful to extend this work to other faculties to uncover a more detailed and broader attitudes surrounding tutorial observations. A further action is to complete and the writing of a formal academic paper that summarises the literature review and the findings from the two focus groups.

To conclude, there are a number of key themes that are key to successful tuition observations, and this is reflected in the results from the two groups. These themes are of course, the importance of trust between tutor and line manager, and the importance of clear communication.

Aims and scope of your project

- What were the main aims of the project?

The aims were to: understand more about tuition observation practice within STEM, particularly with regards to online tutorials.

- What were the more specific goals?

The main goal of the research was to uncover observation practices with a view to disseminating and sharing practice within the school. There was also an objective to write an academic paper that related to the practice of tutorial observations in its different forms.

Activities

- What was the overall approach (e.g. observe current practice, develop technology, plan and evaluate change, etc)?

There were two main approaches: (1) to carry out a literature review which informs the project and ongoing institutional research, and (2) to carry out qualitative focus groups with a view to uncovering different perspectives from two groups of staff: tutors and staff tutors. In some respects, it was to study practice with a view to improve and enhance practice.

- What were the planned activities of the project?

The main project activities involved running focus groups. These were for tutors and for staff tutors. The tutor focus groups ran at an AL development conference that was held in Leeds. The staff tutor focus group took place at a staff tutor meeting for staff tutors who work across the whole of the STEM.

- What changes did you have to make to your plan (aims, project activities, etc.) and why (e.g technical problems, difficulties in involving users/stakeholders, etc)?

The main change to the project plan related to time scales. The dissemination activities were to take place during the second half of 2017, but the final dissemination activity took place during the middle of 2018. The proposal suggested the completion of the report by October 2017; the final report was considerable later due to the need to continually attend to urgent institutional issues, which included the recruitment of tutors and the challenges of helping to support the running of a journal called Open Learning.

- What data and evidence did you gather and how did you gather it (e.g. survey, interviews, focus groups, user studies, cultural probes)?

Qualitative data was gathered through the use of focus groups. Within each group, members were encouraged to draw rich pictures, or capture features and elements of their discussions through the use of flip charts. During the staff tutor event, a plenary session was used to gather key themes, which were then reflected back to the group.

A very important aspect of the project, which will feed into work outside the timeframe of the module is the completion of a comprehensive literature review. This work, and accompanying report, has the

potential to positively influence going publication, dissemination and research that relates to tuition observation.

Findings

- What are your main findings? What evidence supports these findings?

As mentioned in the executive summary, the themes that emerged from the tutor discussions included: purpose (of observations), importance, dimensions (of formality), acknowledgment, dialogue (between tutor and staff tutor), frequency, practicalities, negotiation, feedback, differences, opportunities (for personal develop) and connections. The themes from the staff tutor focus group can be summarised as: philosophy (of observations), the importance of developing personal relationships with tutors, an opportunity to engage with dialogue, observation guidelines, approaches for feedback, online observation, experience of tutors and the observed, priority and opportunities.

- Do you have you any particular successes to report?

During the project, I was invited to speak at the staff tutor liason group (STLG) where I made contact with staff tutors from other faculties. This invitation reflected one onf the implicit motivations of the project, which was to facilitate discussions and to raise the profile of the importance of tuition observations.

Two key outcomes to note include: the completion of a literature review report (which is currently internal to the project), and the identification of different themes that were identified as important to the different university communities.

- Has your project generated any unanticipated outcomes or unexpected opportunities and how have you taken account of these?

An unexpected outcome was a really useful observation form that was used by colleagues from Science. This emerged through a focus group discussion, where staff tutors from different schools was sharing their views about tuition observations. A summary of this resource is now presented through my public Open University blog https://learn1.open.ac.uk/mod/oublog/viewpost.php?post=200062 and is able to be used by anyone, internal or external to the university, to help with the running of different types of observation.

Impact

a) Student experience
- In what ways has your project impacted on student learning?
- How is your project contributing to increasing student success (i.e. retention, employability, etc.)?
- Have there been or will there be any benefits to students not directly involved in your project?

The project does not have a direct impact on the student learning, success and retention. Instead, the benefits of the project come through the practices that are applied by staff tutors to develop the associate lecturers who facilitate tutorials. The application of a thoughtful and reflective approach to obsevations to develop practice can, in turn, have a positive impact on student learning.

b) Teaching
- How have you affected the practice of both yourself and others within the OU?
- What has been the impact of your project outside the OU?

There are two impacts on practice: the practice of staff tutors and the practice of tutors. The development of staff tutor practice lies with the fact that experiences and approaches have been direcly shared amongst the staff tutor community. Tutor practice can be developed through the use of a constructive and developmental approach to tuition observation.

There has been external impact in the sense that the outcomes from the project have been presented at an international distance education conference, a national UK higher education conference and key findings have been shared through a series of public blog posts.

c) Strategic change and learning design
- What impact has your work had on your Unit's or the University's policies and practices?

Tuition observation practices has historically been different between the now closed university regional centres and curriculum areas. Observations have traditionally been considered and thought of an activity that is informal and carried out by a line manager or staff tutor. This means that this work will not immediately or formally affect university policies and procedures, but the discussions and dissemination of the findings may influence personal and individual practice.

A formal survey or evaluation staff tutor practice was not a part of this project. In retrospect, a formal evaluation process should have been more directly embedded into the project plan.

List of deliverables

Reports

- Tutorial observation literature survey, Sarah Chyriwsky. 4462 words. Appendix A

Internal events and conferences

- Understanding tutorial visits, Lightening talk, Berrill Lecture Theatre, October 2016
- Understanding online teaching practice: the importance of the observation, eSTEeM 2017 conference, April 2017
- Understanding online teaching practice: the importance of the observation, Staff Tutor Liason Group meeting, June 2018
- Teaching computing at a distance: the importance of the observation, Computing and Communications seminar, February 2018
- Approaches and perspectives of tuition observation, SHARE scholarship group, February 2018
- Understanding tutorial observation practice, eSTEeM 2018 conference, April 2018

External presentations

- Developing STEM teaching: understanding the importance of the observation, HEA STEM conference, February 2018
- Understanding tutorial observation practice, EDEN Conference, Genoa, June 2018

Blog posts

- Tutorials and tutorial observations: what works and what helps tutors?, personal blog, October 2017
- eSTEeM Annual Conference: April 2017, personal blog, May 2017
- Tutorial observation guidelines, personal blog, November 2017
- 7th eSTEeM Conference: 25 and 26 April 2018, personal blog, May 2017