Developing practice in online synchronous tuition by peer observation, feedback and reflection

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Executive Summary

An issue in adoption of online synchronous tutorials (such as OU Live) is that training and development tends to focus on technical usage rather than reflection on teaching practice. This project investigated the role of peer observation as a developmental tool for staff involved in online teaching.

Aims and scope of your project

The aim of this project was to develop an environment where tutorial staff are encouraged to develop their practice in the online environment by a process of peer observation, feedback and reflection. The project carried out a peer-supported development exercise with 12 Associate Lecturers in 2012.

We had an expectation that this process would both develop skills and highlight areas where further staff development could be targeted. It is clear that there was a variety of practice within the cohort of Associate Lecturers who were already teaching though this medium, and so sharing of good practice would clearly be desirable. However, a noticeable feature of synchronous online tuition is the relatively low levels of student interaction with tutorial material. The peer observation and feedback process was designed to encourage ALs to consider how to increase student interactivity in on-line tutorials.

The project explored the effectiveness of peer-support as a developmental tool for synchronous tuition, and has reported on its findings through presentations and a peer-reviewed paper.

Activities
Design phase
A peer observation and feedback exercise was designed, drawing on ideas of how peer observation has been used to develop practice in the face-to-face tutorial setting.

Peer observation, feedback and reflection exercise
The peer observation and feedback exercise took place in 2012.

Follow-up study
Following the conclusion of the peer feedback exercise, the effect of this approach will be evaluated, through a series of structured conversations with ALs who took part in the exercise. The conversations were held in Sep 2012.

Presentation of outcomes
A report on the impact of the peer feedback process was submitted for publication in late 2014.

Findings

The findings are discussed in Jones, Mark H. and Gallen, Anne-Marie (2015)

The abstract of this paper is as follows:

Peer observation of teaching is an established developmental tool in face-to-face settings. While there have been studies into peer observation as applied to asynchronous online

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teaching, less is known about its application to teaching online using synchronous communication systems. We describe a small-scale study of an online peer observation scheme with a group of associate lecturers in physical sciences at the UK Open University. This cohort of teaching staff was engaged in a series of peer-observed tutorials, with the aim of fostering their development through subsequent reflection and dialogue. The study was evaluated through the thematic analysis of subsequent structured conversations. Emergent themes lead us to consider the value of peer observation in the context of synchronous online tuition.

Impact

It has given me a greater appreciation of the benefits and disadvantages of peer-observation. The paper contributes to the literature on peer-observation and does so in an important and novel context.

List of deliverables

Jones, Mark H. and Gallen, Anne-Marie (2015). Peer observation, feedback and reflection for development of practice in synchronous online teaching. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* (In press).
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2015.1025808

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