

‘In their shoes’: exploring a modified approach to peer observation of teaching in a university setting

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Peer observation of teaching (POT) has become common practice in many universities.

However, it could be argued that existing models often have limited scope for understanding the student experience. This study presents a modified approach to POT in which the researchers adopted the roles of (1) lecturer, (2) peer-participant and (3) peer-observer. Four lecturers in a university in Ireland were involved as participant–researchers in the study with an external observer acting as an ‘outside eye’ to the process. Findings reveal that the process provided opportunities for reflection on own and other teaching styles, strategies and contexts. In particular, lecturers noted the value of sharing the student experience more authentically or being ‘in the students’ shoes’. The study demonstrates that modification of the traditional POT model, where the lecturer adopts several roles (lecturer, peer-participant and peer-observer), creates multiple perspectives into the teaching and learning process and therefore may allow greater scope for the development of professional practice.

Keywords: peer observation of teaching; student experience; university teaching

Introduction

This study examines the experiences of four university lecturers who sought to enhance their teaching practices through engaging with a modified version of the traditional peer observation of teaching (POT) model. POT is usually characterised as a process by which an educator observes the teaching of another educator, with the purpose of providing constructive feedback on the teaching process (Swinglehurst, Russell, & Greenhalgh, 2008). Several benefits have been found to result from the POT process, such as improvements to teaching practice (Bell, 2001), enhanced collegiality (Martin & Double, 1998) and furthering professional development, including reflection and action planning (Bingham & Ottewill, 2001).

While POT took several years to become common practice it is now widely used in many universities and the focus of much research in a variety of disciplines such as law (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004), engineering (Martin & Double, 1998) and medicine (Siddiqui, Jonas-Dwyer, & Carr, 2007), to recent trialling in an online environment (Swinglehurst et al., 2008). POT has formed an element of institution's quality assurance agency systems in the UK for several years. In Ireland, however, while POT is evident (Donnelly, 2007; McMahan & Barrett, 2007), it is not necessarily widespread and it largely remains a optional process for academic staff, as was the case with the institution in this study.

While key aims and benefits of the POT process have been documented (Martin & Double, 1998), it is acknowledged that the results of engaging in any POT process will ultimately depend on the persons involved, the focus identified for the observation session and the model utilised. Several models of POT are evident in the current literature. For example, Gosling (2002) puts forward:

- a) the 'management' model (observation by a senior peer for the purpose of evaluation or performance appraisal),
- b) the 'peer review' model (observation by a colleague whereby each participant is both observed and observes) and,
- c) the 'development model' (observation by an educational developer).

It could be argued that the 'management' and 'development' models are not actually peer models, because of existing power relationships in the earlier two models (Siddiqui et al., 2007). Furthermore, POT has been criticised in that the assessment of peers may become too self-congratulatory (Bingham & Ottewill, 2001). Cox and Ingleby (1997) cited in (Blackmore, 2005) assert that peer review via observation of teaching can be a perpetuation of conformity of teaching. Similarly, Weller (2009) argues that peer models of observation are potentially reinforcing parochial constructions of teacher professionalism that ultimately enable resistance to changes in practice. If the lecturer and observer have similar views regarding personal approaches to curriculum, teaching styles and 'subject understanding', then little development will be forthcoming (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004).

In addition, while it has been suggested that POT should increase participants' awareness of the student experience of learning (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005), in reality, it may not adequately capture this perspective as the observer is very much 'external' to the learning environment, with a focus on the teaching and learning strategies employed by the lecturer rather than situating oneself in the students' practice. It has been proposed that students could be involved in peer review of teaching as 'participant observers' (who report their findings to the lecturer) or by collecting data relevant to the area of interest being pursued (Gosling, 2005). An alternative approach to POT reported in Shortland (2010), included a 'peer partner' who joined the class as a 'student' rather than as 'observer'. This study extends such a modified approach.

In order to overcome several of the aforementioned shortcomings, this study sought to explore a model of POT in which viewpoints from staff in various disciplines were sought and insight into the student perspective was central to the process. Furthermore, to gain a multi-dimensional perspective of what was happening in each lesson, the validity of peer review was augmented by increasing the number of participants, and consequently observations, in the peer observation cell (Muchinsky, 1995). The main research question of this study concerned how a modified POT model, which employs composite roles of peer-participant, peer-observer and lecturer, might provide multiple perspectives into teaching and learning processes. Thus, as a collaborative practitioner-research led initiative, the study aimed to develop practice through action and reflection. This study reports on the experience of four university teacher educators who engaged in a novel approach to the POT process, involving each participant acting as lecturer, peer-observer and peer-participant.

The study

Four university teacher educators took part as participant–researchers in the study during the 2009/2010 academic year at Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland. This institution (www.mic.ul.ie), is a third level college of education and the liberal arts and offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in education, the arts and early childhood care and education. The researchers involved in the study are all fulltime members of the faculty of education. This study included lectures with students undertaking a three-year bachelor of education degree. Each yearly cohort comprises of approximately 450 students. The classes described here in this study consisted of 30–60 students. Three different subject disciplines were involved, all of which included practical pedagogical elements (music education, visual art education and physical education). The lectures typically involved teaching strategies such

as whole class presentation, small group tasks, practical participation in activities, pair questioning and group discussion.

The study was approved by the institutional research ethics committee and all student–participants gave written informed consent. As an action research study, it used a theoretical framework of a participatory worldview where meaning is sought through practice and interaction with ‘living theories’ (Whitehead, 2000). For the research study, each lecturer took on the following roles across the four lectures (see Figure 1):

- 1) Lecturer, that is, teaching while a colleague is observing the class.
- 2) Peer-observer, that is, observing the lesson of a colleague.
- 3) Peer-participant, that is, participating with students in the lesson of a colleague.

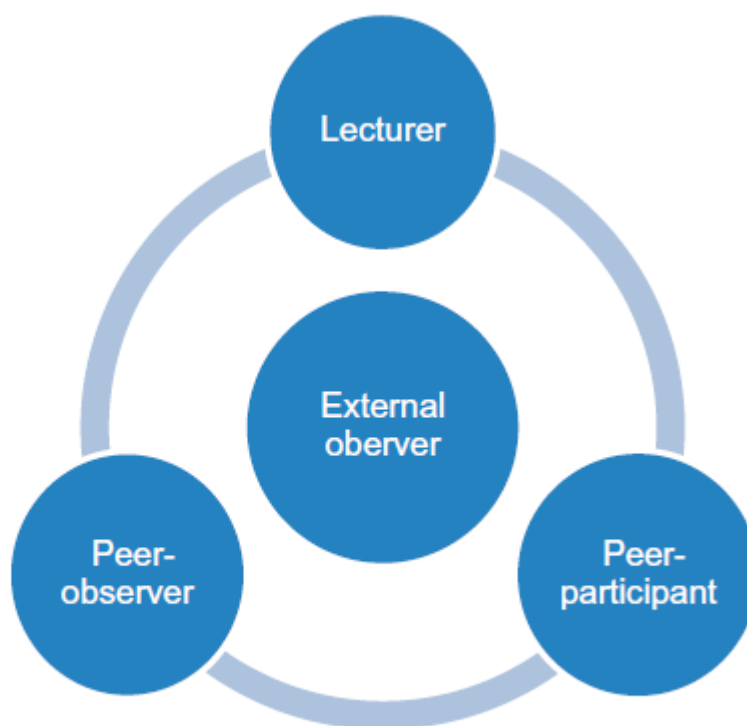


Figure 1. Roles adopted for modified POT model in the present study.

Researchers acting in each of the above roles were present at all four lectures. In addition, an external observer, in this case an educational developer from the university’s centre for

teaching and learning, was in attendance for all lectures. The presence of an external observer was decided upon at the design stage of the study with the aim of soliciting an ‘objective’ view of what happened during each classroom session. In this way, the external observer contributed to the trustworthiness of the study in terms of recording the incidents and events in the class that the peers used to bolster their observations and experiences as they related them. As well as this, the role entailed contributing to the discussions and reflections of the modified POT model.

Lecturer

Prior to teaching a lesson the lecturers completed and shared with colleagues a ‘lecture outline’, which included learning intentions and teaching context. After teaching the lesson, the lecturer compiled a reflection on the lesson, paying particular reference to whether the set learning intentions were accomplished. This reflection was then forwarded to the peer-participant for comment.

Peer-observer

The peer-observer did not actively participate in the lectures but observed from an unobtrusive position, normally at the back of the class. The observer was given the lecturer’s ‘lecture outline’ document prior to the class and made notes throughout the lesson.

Peer-participant

The peer-participant joined in the lecture with students. He/she participated in all activities that were required of the class. Peer-participants then provided written reflections on their

experience as 'students' and commented on the lecturer reflection document. The peer-participant often stated whether he/she agreed or disagreed with the lecturer reflections.

External observer

An educational developer from the institution's Centre for Teaching and Learning was present for all lessons and completed field-notes throughout the class. The analysis of lecture outlines, peer-observer field-notes, lecturer reflections and peer-participant reflections were reviewed by the external observer as a means of triangulating and strengthening the validity of the observations and conclusions.

Data analysis

A thematic approach was utilised in this qualitative data analysis. A holistic analysis across the data sources of lecture outlines, peer-observer field-notes, lecturer reflections and peer-participant reflections from all four lecturers involved in the project served to illuminate relationships, themes and issues and relate them to the overall research question of the project. The use of computer-assisted tools, in this case the qualitative software package NVivo (version 9; QSR, Victoria, Australia) was used to assist the data analysis.

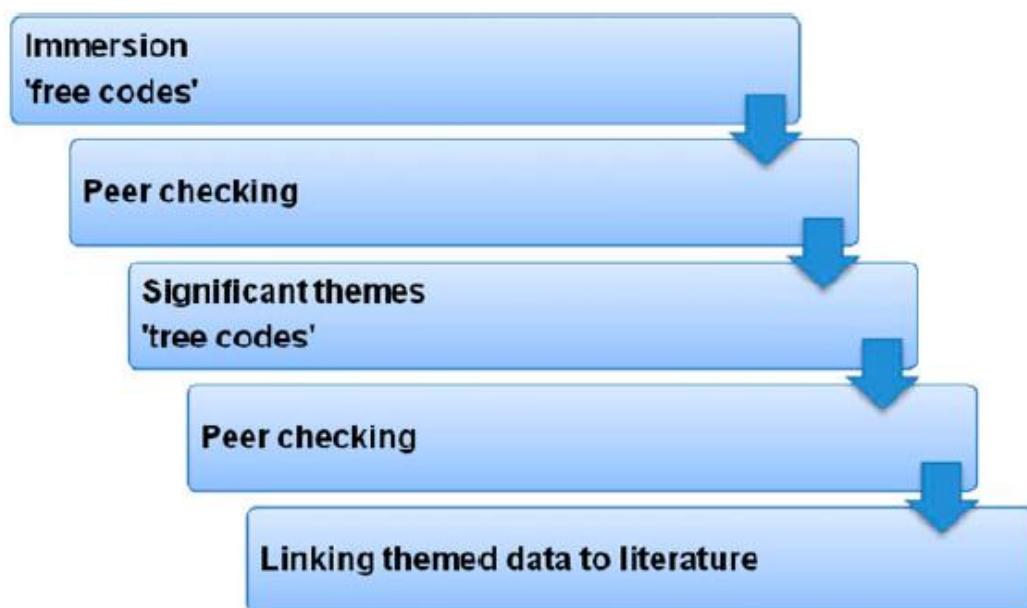


Figure 2. Outline of data analysis stages.

Transcribed data were impthese themes to be discussed and funnelled down for sorted, given headings, labelled and organised within an Nvivo project. The data gathered then went through a five-stage process of analysis as shown in Figure 2.

As seen from the figure, the first level of analysis occurred through 'free' codes which are akin to an 'immersion approach' whereby the coding is mainly interpretive and fluid (Robson, 2002, p. 458). This allowed for initial thoughts and reflections on the data analysis to occur between the two lead authors separately. The second level of analysis involved the two lead authors (Kenny and Murtagh) debriefing on the 'free codes' found and allowed for these themes to be discussed and funnelled down for the next stage of analysis. Following this, the data were sorted into four broad themes, or 'tree codes' as they are classified in NVivo. The free codes from the first level of analysis were referred back to and assigned to one of the tree codes where relevant.

The fourth level of analysis involved further lead author debriefing and discussion and then finally significant themes, incidents and 'voices' within the data analysis were woven into the

discussion of findings and linked to the relevant literature. Throughout all stages of analysis memos and links were used in NVivo to add comments and reflections during analysis. Using such a process ultimately leads to drawing conclusions within the research.

Themed findings

The four significant themes that emerged from the data analysis were as follows:

- a) perspectives from multiple roles
- b) apprehension
- c) reflection and
- d) learning through the modified model.

Perspectives from multiple roles

The approach taken to this POT model was one where the peers (in this case, the four lecturers) were involved in differing capacities, which shifted and rotated throughout the project. All lecturers adopted the peer-participant and peer-observer roles at one of the lectures and these roles were taken to be equally balanced. The peer-observer fieldnotes and peer-participant reflections offer some significant insights into what was valued by the participants in teaching and also what is important for students in their learning.

The peer-participant role attempted to place the lecturer in 'the student's shoes'. All of the lecturers adapted to this role quite well and appeared to share the student experience authentically. The peer-participant notes reflected this well where atmosphere, participation

as well as emotional responses were all taken on board. This is illustrated in the peer-participant reflection below:

The physical space coupled with the very focused and effective teaching strategies all led to a very pleasant and more importantly educative experience. The overall atmosphere of enjoyment and engagement that was strongly apparent throughout this session testifies to this. (Alice, peer-participant reflection)

The peer participant's experiences of the lecture further emerged as authentic to student perspectives as illustrated by Emer's difficulties within a music education lecture:

I was a bit lost in the small group task when were asked to identify instruments/structure etc in the traditional Irish song and would have liked a bit more instruction. (Emer, peer-participant reflection)

Dolores also relates to difficulties encountered within another lecture:

I was tired and I engaged enough to make a sketch but the group I was with were tired, unfocused ... (Dolores, peer-participant reflection)

Comments such as these were common throughout the peer-participant notes and reveal an important aspect of the study whereby the lecturers adopted a participant or student role in order to assess and reflect on the student experience of their peer's teaching and student learning.

Throughout the peer-observer fieldnotes, the role of the lecturer as a teacher and the wide spectrum of responsibilities this entails were referenced widely. The language used in the fieldnotes centred around words such as 'questions', 'teases', 'probes', 'guides' and 'explains', with this. However, this was overridden with a strong desire all pointing to the facilitative nature of the lecturer role as teachers. Alice observing another lecturer notes:

Teacher facilitates, double checks, further explanations (all very active lots of chatter and participation) ... teacher, focusing on group questioning then, how are you ... Enda follows groups and gives further explanation/asks questions while students are engaged in the task. (Alice, peer-observer fieldnotes)

As well as this, all of the observations referred to the hub of activity occurring in all of the lectures observed and the links made to the application of such activities to the primary school classroom. Enda states in his observation of a music education lecture:

Relating practice to the classroom ... warnings of subjectivity/bias/stereotyping ... links to community – getting a live performance ... tips for classroom. (Enda, peer observer fieldnotes)

It was clear from all of the peer observer fieldnotes that drawing of parallels to classroom practice was seen as an essential part of their teaching roles.

Apprehension

All four lecturers expressed some level of apprehension throughout the research though often for varying reasons. As the project involved lecturers participating in other subject disciplines there was a certain fear of the unknown or unfamiliar associated with this. However, this was overridden with a strong desire to try something new and different among all lecturers.

Dolores related in her peer-participant reflection; ‘This was my first visual art lesson ever in my life and it was all new and different’. Alice also commented in her peer-participation of a physical education session:

I was a little apprehensive going into the session considering it was physical education but very soon realised that essentially fun and participation were the overriding types of experience in the session. (Alice, peer-participant reflection)

Interestingly, it was found that some lecturers were quite apprehensive about teaching in front of their peers, Enda remarked:

I couldn't believe it! I felt as if the entire session would collapse! My heartbeat ticked like it had not, since ... I began my lecturing ... I was stressed before it even began! (Enda, lecturer reflection)

It is obvious here that the pressure of being observed by a peer was quite strong for this lecturer. This was not the case for all lecturers however. Alice reflects that the involvement of peers gave her an opportunity to discuss problems with her lecture that she would not have otherwise:

Having my peers present was for me quite comforting as I find this group difficult to teach. Due to this, I was interested to hear their comments and suggestions on how best to deal with this issue and gain an outside perspective. (Alice, lecturer reflection)

There was also a certain amount of apprehension found among all of the lecturer reflections regarding the student's experience. Dolores noted:

I really wonder what the students thought of the lesson ... I am a bit concerned about them not finding this lesson worthwhile or good ... (Dolores, lecturer reflection)

Alice was concerned about a particular student group who were typically unresponsive and quiet. Enda felt under huge time constraints in his lecture and was worried that the students gained a limited experience as a result. Emer in trying something new with the students related:

This was the first time I tried 'working backwards' from a generic game and then getting students to identify the skills & strategies that were required and develop practice activities. So I wasn't sure how it would go. (Emer, lecturer reflection)

It was clear that such apprehension in this regard links to the lecturers own reflective practice as well as the collective peer reflective practice advocated for through this research study. This multi-dimensional perspective of teaching and student experience was a central aspect to this collaborative practitioner -research.

Reflection

This POT project through its very nature encapsulated reflection. How the theme of reflection manifested itself throughout the data gathered was revealed in number of ways. As well as reflecting on lecturer and student practice, there was also a preoccupation with self-reflection and an encouragement for student self-reflection throughout the study.

In all of the lectures the place of student reflection was present and encouraged. This was both implicit and explicit in the lecturers teaching. For example, through questions, probes and opportunities for pair and group discussion the reflection happened quite organically throughout all four lectures. As well as this, there were often times when the lecturers made the place of reflection more obvious. For example, one self-evaluation activity in a lecture involved students attaching clothes pegs on a washing line to indicate on a scale how they rated their own listening skills during the previous activity. These types of self-evaluation reflective activities were very pervasive in all lectures involved in the research.

The lecturers' own levels of self-reflection were also strongly evident in the data gathered.

This self-reflection was often quite critical of their distinct lecturer practices. Dolores wrote:

I don't think I did as well on the application to their upcoming TP [teaching practice] ... I don't think I created a good enough space to allow students to interrogate my practice and consider other ways of doing things. I could have used the 'thinking out loud' strategy more effectively to prompt this. Next time ... (Dolores, lecturer reflection)

In a similar fashion, Enda questioned his time management:

... I felt pressurised for time and resources to facilitate ... I was rushing way too much! Did I just want to go home like all the students and peers before me? It was 5:45 pm! (Enda, lecturer reflection)

Despite the high levels of self-criticism found in the reflective data, there was also widespread evidence of learning through self-evaluation about their own teaching styles but

also on a very pragmatic level in relation to what they would do differently next time. For instance Emer remarked:

In hindsight I should have given them more information during the explanation of this task, promoted them a little more and directed them to certain considerations when preparing the group activity. (Emer, lecturer reflection)

The time, space and priority given to self-reflection through this study clearly indicate decisions to improve and develop one's own teaching practices and styles drawn from a collaborative process.

Learning through the modified model

The modified peer observation model taken in this project allowed for some perceived benefits to arise. Through the lecturers adopting peer-observer or peer-participant roles, the approach provided multiple opportunities for the lecturers to reflect on their own teaching, teaching styles, teaching strategies and teaching contexts through their involvement in both these peer roles. For instance, Alice as a peer-participant commented:

Dolores was extremely structured in her instruction. Everything was clear, promoted opportunities for discussion and questioning and generally Dolores summarised key points before moving forward. As a participant I, like the other students felt interested and excited about the content ... and found the breaking down of what, how and why questions very intuitive and accessible for learning. The IT resource was hugely beneficial in assisting this instruction and allowed for further participative opportunities ... (Alice, peer-participant reflection)

As well as this, new ideas were commented on to borrow for future teaching, albeit typically in different subject areas. For instance, Enda during a peer observation of the music education lecture noted:

Alice positions in front of CD player. Head down ... Body swaying moving silently slightly (in rhythm) ... NO EYE-CONTACT at all ... A space for students to engage perhaps? Removing trace of herself from the space ... Does this allow students to engage without the lecturer? A strategy! (Enda, peer-observer fieldnotes)

Not only did the model encourage opportunities for learning from each other but it was also apparent that it encouraged reflection and questioning of one's own practice as a lecturer.

Alice related through self-reflection:

From a teaching perspective, I feel the students would have benefited from the use of paired or group discussion earlier on in the session ... the students seem to be uncomfortable with sharing their thoughts and ideas, which may be due to their youth and comfort with a more traditional didactic way of teaching and learning often promoted in secondary school. (Alice, lecturer reflection)

In addition many of the lecturers commented on the opportunity to spend some time 'in the students shoes' as highly beneficial to extending their perspectives on student learning:

...what do they [students] see? What do they [students] value? I have never had this opportunity before and it is definitely something I would like to pursue again as I think it might be a really helpful way to get feedback that is one, relevant and in context and two, immediate. (Dolores, lecturer reflection)

Discussion of findings

The approach employed in this POT study, through collaborative practitioner-research, allowed for each of the lecturers involved experiencing a shared approach to learning about not only their own practice but also the student experience of lectures. POT as a process of peer development (Byrne, Brown, & Challen, 2010) or peer review through collaborative and collective endeavour is often seen as highly beneficial (D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Siddiqui et al., 2007; Swinglehurst et al., 2008). Such an approach in this study led to both individual self-reflection of teaching styles, values, approaches and methods but more significantly led to group reflection and meaning making. This was apparent in the collective sharing and discussion of outlines, field notes and reflections. This shift to collaborative reflection ensured multiple perspectives informed such critical reflection as well as providing a collegial sense of professional development.

The adopting of multiple roles (lecturer, participant and observer), in addition to employing an overall external observer, increased trustworthiness in the research findings as well as ensuring multiple perspectives for each of the research team to bring to the study. This multiplicity of roles ensured a balance of power relationships within the POT process as all participants had to try on ‘different shoes’ at various times. Furthermore, similar to findings by Shortland (2010), the adoption of a sustained peer-review partnership as opposed to a ‘one-off’ encounter appeared to offer more in the way of deep reflection and hence professional development. This ultimately led to critical reflection within a shared safe environment for the participants to critique and develop their teaching and so alleviated much of the apprehension that is often associated with peer observation.

There are limitations to the modified POT approach taken in its time-consuming nature and of course questions about ‘authenticity’ of a lecturer taking on a student role. Despite this, the opportunity for the lecturers to act as peer-participants or be ‘in the student’s shoes’ does extend Gosling’s ‘peer review model’ (Gosling, 2002) to attempt to gain a peer insight into the learners’ perspective. This allowed for an increased understanding (as opposed to a complete understanding) of the student experience within this specific third level institution.

While the study is small-scale and rooted in a particular context, the research does also promote a widening out of data sources to ensure an effective review of teaching and learning as advocated by D’Andrea (2002). Furthermore, in keeping with Bingham and Ottewill’s (2001) recommendation to involve a variety of subject specialisms in POT, the research findings revealed that working across three subject areas opened the lecturers up to new and expanded approaches to teaching. If as Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2005) and Wubbels and Korthagen (1990) suggest, reflective teachers are more open to innovation and relationships with students and colleagues are more favourable for teachers with higher levels of reflective thinking, such a modified approach warrants further use and possible extension.

In keeping with the insights gained from this study the following recommendations are proposed.

Recommendations

- (1) Student perspectives of teaching and learning should be addressed in any holistic POT project in university settings.
- (2) Modified or new approaches to incorporating the student perspective into POT through peer involvement should be carefully considered, extended and developed.
- (3) The adopting of multiple roles (such as participant, observer and reflective practitioner) within a POT process may allow for multiple perspectives and deep reflection into teaching and learning.
- (4) A mix of subject disciplines as well as numbers greater than two within a POT model will allow for broad and varied perspectives from peers.
- (5) Increased time given for both group and individual reflection during the POT process may promote innovation, develop teaching styles and approaches as well as encourage high quality teaching and learning.
- (6) Collaborative practitioner-led research into POT can support an authentic, triangulated approach for further studies in this area.
- (7) Sustained peer-review partnerships over long periods should allow for greater deep reflection as opposed to a short-term, once-off engagement.
- (8) Further research across multiple contexts and disciplines is required into adapted or modified POT models within universities to share knowledge and inform future directions for POT.

(9) In conclusion, modification of the traditional POT model, where each participant adopts the roles of peer-participant, peer-observer and lecturer, creates multiple perspectives into the teaching and learning process and therefore may allow greater scope for development of teaching practices.

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