

Supervision of classroom practice: Giving feedback; a tertiary study

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Introduction

Within pre-service teacher education institutions there is a long standing tradition of supervision of student teachers' school classroom practice as an essential feature of lecturers' work. A more recent trend is the supervision of lecturers' teacher education classroom practice by colleagues for accountability and appraisal requirements. The underlying issues involved in such supervision are basically the same in both situations. This paper explores some of these issues in a case study of an experimental supervision of a lecturer's classroom practice in order to consider elements of pre-service supervision in school situations.

For the case study a repeated cycle of talking about the session content and planned approach prior to the observation of the session followed by discussion and specific feedback was carried out (Haynes, 1996). The transcripts of the discussion and feedback were then analysed in terms of the observer's success in assisting the lecturer to view the session from the student teacher's perspective, any barriers to doing so and the lecturer's reaction to the observer's feedback. (In an attempt to protect identity – a difficulty process in a small community – I have ascribed the pronoun s/he to conceal gender).

Setting the scene

My observations of a lecturer's delivery were carried out in a class of final year student teachers taking an optional mathematics education course focussing on 9 to 11 year olds. The session plans were discussed with the lecturer beforehand and specific observation foci established; minimising teacher talk for the lecturer, and lecturer perception versus student perception for the observer. With the follow-up interviews I 'went with the flow' of the observation notes in the first with a particular focus on 'modelling'. With the second I had developed an agenda which was more focussed on student teachers but still closely related to the observation notes. This was partly due to the greater time gap between the second session and follow-up interview.

The approach used in the follow-up interviews was based on that used when I visit, observe and give feedback to student teachers during their Practicum experiences.

That is, using my observation notes of what I saw happen during the session, I raise issues for discussion with the student teacher. Within the discussion, which is intended to allow for student identification and acknowledgement of issues, I may or may not offer a range of suggested activities for them to trial. This depends on the nature of the issue, whether it is something requiring urgent 'remedial' action or something which is more ongoing and developmental. In doing so, I am trying to leave the ownership of choice of action and method of implementation with the student teacher as they have the responsibility for classroom activity not me. (Kilbourn, 1991).

In working with the lecturer, who has significantly more experience working with teacher education students than I do, giving specific advice was not a realistic course of action. The issue of classroom behaviours modelling what student teachers should be aiming for in their own practice was discussed several times in the first interview. I revisited this at the beginning of the second interview.

“... Just one thing ... Last time we talked about the modelling role of [the lecturer] emphasising how your own lesson modelled what you would like them to be doing. You thought that you might have picked that up at the beginning of this session. And obviously you didn't. Did you have any particular reason for that?” (Observer)

“I think, it was haste to get on to the choosing of the topic strand and developing it and so I chose not to ... I could well have done it and it probably would have been worthwhile. But it might have taken another five or six minutes. It was really quite important that they did have that flexible time to work in the study groups.” (Lecturer)

After raising the matter, I accepted the lecturer's rationale for non-action on this issue as a matter of course and moved on.

After any observation the first stage of discussion is to give the student teacher the opportunity to talk about their view of what happened and why. Following this observation notes are given to the student teacher to read. They act as both a starting point and focus for further discussion and can be annotated or amended by agreement during the discussion. This is all part of the process of creating an accurate and mutually acceptable record of events and their interpretations. The whole process highlights the 'evaluation bind' of attempting to establish a sense of collegial trust and a climate of openness with student teachers when there is a clear summative assessment role to be carried out via the observation data. This in turn tends to

distract, or take over, from the more formative and developmental aspects of the observation data and related discussion.

In approaching the lecturer to ask for cooperation, I believed that there was a significant climate of trust and mutual respect between us built up over the three years we have worked together. There was, however, a supervisor/supervisee relationship arising from our relative positions within the institution, myself as Head of Centre and the lecturer as a senior lecturer within that centre. This was minimised as the observations and feedback took place outside the normal confines of institutional relationships. In this sense there was a deliberate attempt to attain an equality of power or 'symmetry' as described in Wallace and Louden (1991). Thus, the observation and feedback process was carried out on the basis of professional cooperation and collegial support. It was part of a research approach, and experimental, while any evaluation was of the observers' effectiveness in supplying feedback rather than on the performance of the lecturer. Additionally, there was to be no feedback into any institutional systems, such as appraisal. It is interesting that the lecturer commented after the end of the process. 'If appraisal's like that, it's okay with me.'

Giving Feedback

One difficulty in giving feedback was that in trying to focus on students' perceptions, I first had to focus on them in the classroom while observing the ongoing lesson. I found that, although I was sitting in the classroom 'like a student', adopting a student perspective was problematic. After all, I was not a student in the same sense as the others. Although my focus was on how the students were perceiving the session, the notes made came from my perception of intended outcomes and what happened. My perception of what was intended developed from the lesson plan, initial discussion with the lecturer and what I saw the lecturer doing. My impressions of what happened came from how I saw, and interpreted, the student teachers reacting and responding to the lecturer's delivery during the session.

Another difficulty in giving effective feedback was lack of practice for both participants. This was not part of a regular, ongoing engagement in focussed discussion based on a joint experience nor was it part of a reciprocal arrangement where each 'partner' shared the risks equally over time. (Wallace & Louden, 1991). An aspect of this was the lack of a truly shared understanding of, and language for, this form of dialogue. I was very aware of trying to 'tread softly' in the issues I raised and the words I used so as to minimise possible discomfort and tension in order to enhance the possibility of productive dialogue.

A practical difficulty was finding the time to carry out the initial discussions, the observations and the feedback sessions. I had to arrange cover for one of my sessions to be able to attend one of the lecturer's sessions while attending the other was only possible as one of my classes was on Practicum. The feedback sessions had to be slotted in whenever we could find a mutual time. The first worked well but the second was squeezed into Friday afternoon at a time when both of us were not really able to give our full attention to the matter in hand.

Throughout the interviews, I attempted to focus on the dichotomy of lecturer intent and possible student teacher perceptions. The lecturer responded to a number of issues raised such as; modeling, students making connections,

“Well, I've just been thinking, ... I missed that. ... but it was interesting that none of the students said, “Oh well, that says that there, and this relates to that.” ... and didn't relate it themselves.”

pulling it together ,

“This thing of finishing or leaving open as you say ... I mean you have different people in that group that you need [to deal with] ... that there are different needs for. And the ones who need ... the ones who you could leave it open for will probably get as much as ... of having it finished. ... Because they're still going to make their own constructions anyway. But for the ones who are perhaps weak, maybe it will help them move in the direction that we would like them to.”

and the specific workings of groups of students in response to a particular approach to a task.

“Just trying to think of ... J was in that group. Because J's very, very insecure. S's very quiet. I'm just starting to get to know him. Having marked his assignment today [it shows] he's a very knowledgeable person ... But no, it hasn't been symptomatic with that group ... symptomatic with J.”

In each case there was significant discussion and an exploration of the student teacher's position.

At the end of the second interview the lecturer acknowledged the usefulness of the feedback in highlighting aspects of the classroom sessions.

“... I know we covered an awful lot of stuff and I found myself thinking back, because of this [observation] process too ... Because I did some teaching strategies stuff ... and I did some content stuff. I planted a whole lot of ideas for them. We talked about questioning and rolling-on activities. We worked at curriculum matters and I could probably go on ... I felt good about that. But some of the delivery ... and I think it’s come through here quite strongly ... like the explanation of the two lessons to [outline and] come back [to the diagnostic] didn’t go across well. I knew that at the time ... and you picked it up and that was good. ... I don’t know how could I have done that clearly. ... As we all know, some days they work and some days, they don’t.”

Lecturer’s reaction to feedback

The lecturer’s reaction to my efforts was positive and s/he readily engaged in discussion of the matters I broached. These covered classroom procedures such as group discussion and feedback, grouping, and classroom and individual behaviour patterns; issues such as modeling, making connections and pulling work together at the end of discussions; and delivery approaches. In a number of cases s/he returned to the topic, as with modeling, for example.

“But you make the point that, maybe I should parallel that as a model, ... and just say, ‘Can you see how we’re working here?’”

“No, it just happens. Once again it comes back to this modeling thing. I think I’ve got to model [the] co-operative type of classrooms that I’m trying to get them to think about.”

Further explanations were given as when the lecturer brought up the idea of ‘snowballing’,

“I think ... one of the things I tried ... one of the major points to me, that I hope got through from that session was that the teacher’s job is made much easier if there is a snowballing effect [with] maths activity ... maths activity that develops from previous math activity.

There's a heck of a lot less teacher's stress ... It probably requires more skill to take ..."

and the detailing of themes within the session.

"See, I'm trying to do three things here. One, I'm trying to give a repertoire of introductory type activities like the bingo model and I do that sort of thing and those actually had come to 'Silence' from the previous ... discussion on those 60 starters ... so I'm trying to build [on] that. The second stream of the lecture was [that] I'd given them a number sequence handout which we were actually working through and that was part of that. And the third one was to prepare for [the visit and] may not have been blatantly obvious to you ..."

S/he provided more detail to clarify situations where necessary as when discussing particular student teachers and in contextualising M's contribution to class discussion.

"Well, can I just add to that? I don't know whether this is relevant for your tape, but M sitting over in the corner who latched on to that rain stuff - he's quite a reticent fellow and that was the first time, since the beginning of the course, that he really came out. And I really wanted to encourage and make sure that he got some feeling of satisfaction doing that, so he will do it again."

The process was seen, by the lecturer, as being of value, and by implication, that the feedback was constructive, as evidenced by this statement.

"They're very thought provoking comments ... And they make me think about ... I mean, you can never put anything on that's perfect but they make you reflect on what you've done and say, 'Yeah, well, maybe I should have done that and should have done this.'"

And, as mentioned above, s/he found the process sufficiently valuable and non-threatening to consider it as part of an appraisal system which is not something s/he has, to date, viewed with much favour.

Relating the experience to pre-service supervision

Key aspects present in this case study that led to its relative success are not present in many instances of lecturer supervision of pre-service student teachers. In such

supervisions the supervisory relationship is a compulsory credentialling one as opposed to a collegial one based on choice, trust and mutual respect between colleagues. Although the classroom practice briefs are 'standard' and 'known' by both visiting lecturers and student teachers their respective interpretations may well differ. In this case study significant time was spent on negotiating a clearly understood basis for the observation and feedback cycle. Practical constraints restrict the possibility of such negotiation between participants in student teacher supervisions making this sort of clarification unlikely. Similarly, there is no chance of developing a 'practice' of dialogue between the participants as there are minimal shared classroom practice experiences and limited opportunities to engage in related dialogue.

Indeed, there is little reciprocity in the relationship or any chance of such developing. The inequality of power between the supervisor with considerable experience and expertise, in a context of institutional authority, and the novice supervisee is crucial. It reinforces the 'evaluation bind' created by assessment requirements on the supervisor and supervisee which acts against the establishment of a climate of openness and trust so necessary for an effective professional development focus.

It is clear that while there is a summative assessment function to be fulfilled within the supervisor/supervisee relationship there is a correspondingly limited opportunity for effective professional development. In light of this the supervision role of lecturers, with regard to student teachers, might well need to be restricted to assessment purposes in terms of productive use of lecturer time or have the assessment aspects removed to allow a more realistic focus on student teachers' professional development.

Footnote:

I would like to acknowledge the cooperation of my colleague in allowing me access to the classroom and for the time s/he spent in discussion.

References:

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