Author's response to reviews

Title: Peer Observation of Teaching as a Faculty Development Tool

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Mr Atienza,

Re: MS: 1005044014607674
Research article
Teaching Faculty development in an undergraduate pediatric course: the use of peer observation of teaching
Peter B Sullivan, Alexandra C.E. Buckle, Gregg Nicky and Atkinson Sarah
BMC Medical Education

Note new title: Peer Observation of Teaching as a Faculty Development Tool

Thank you for your kind comments and those of the reviewers which have helped us improve our manuscript. Responses (in italics) interleaved with comments:

Reviewer #1 Comments for the Author

It is a very interesting article for educators who want to introduce Peer Observation of Teaching or are looking for new models of Faculty development.

My suggestions are

Major Compulsory Revision

a. Change the title to Peer Observation of Teaching as a Faculty Development Tool and delete Teaching and undergraduate course.

We agree that the suggested title is an improvement and have changed it accordingly.

b. The article is really about the perception of teachers who volunteer for PoT using a qualitative approach but it is not very clear.

The aim of this article is two fold. Firstly to communicate to educators the process by which peer observation can be (and was) implemented within a Teaching Faculty,
including possible pitfalls in implementation. Secondly, as stated, this article communicates teachers’ perceptions of peer observation. These aims have now been made clearer in the last paragraph of the introduction as stated. “The aims of this project were firstly to implement PoT methods as a constructive, developmental process for members of the Pediatric Teaching Faculty and secondly to assess teachers’ perceptions of the PoT process. Our overall aim was to improve opportunities for student learning in pediatrics in our institution.”

c. Methods: In the observation section authors have stated that a short questionnaire was administered at the end of every session and a copy is also attached but it is not clear if this questionnaire was adapted/modified for different types of session e.g. group discussion.

The questionnaire itself was not adapted for different types of session as we felt that it was important to have a consistent questionnaire across the different teaching methods. However, the students were given verbal instructions to complete the questionnaire in a manner that was appropriate for the teaching session (for example the section on the use of the OHP or audiovisual aids would not be appropriate for a group discussion or teaching ward round). In addition to the written questionnaire the students also gave verbal feedback on the session to the observer.

d. Similarly in the post observation feedback does the written summary include both observer’s report and students’ evaluation or just the observer’s report.

The written summary of the post-observation feedback included both the observer’s report and the students’ evaluation. We thought that both the observer’s and the students’ feedback contained important feedback that might benefit the observed teacher. One of the purposes of the students’ feedback was to provide a degree of independent validation of the comments made by the observer and there was in fact a high degree of concordance between the points made by the observer and those made by the students. This has been clarified in the last sentence of the Post observation feedback section in the Methods:

“Each teacher received a letter providing a written summary of the outcome of the observation process assimilating both the observer’s comments and the students’ comments together with potential solutions to any concerns raised.”

e. Results Section: The details provided may be included in Methods and Results should just focus on the analysis of the qualitative data.

We agree and the first two paragraphs of the Results section have now been moved to the Methods section.

f. Similarly in the Discussion Section it should clearly state that the Faculty perceives PoT as a useful technique….

A clear statement has now been added to the second paragraph of the Discussion stating that the Faculty perceive PoT as a useful technique.
“Teaching Faculty unanimously described the PoT process as very useful and relevant to their teaching practice and teachers appreciated the opportunity to discuss their teaching and to have constructive feedback.”

g. Fig 1: has missing alphabets

The missing alphabets have now been added to Figure 1.

Minor Essential revision

h. There are no details about observers what training they receive? Does this process help them in their professional development? (if this data could be included that would add value).

Two of the observers (PBS and AB) had received a detailed training in Peer Observation techniques in the Institute of Learning in Oxford (both are Fellows of the Higher Education Academy). This training had been subsequently consolidated by considerable practical experience. SHA was trained in Peer Observation by both PBS and AB. The training included one-to-one training in the approaches involved including pre-observation, observation, post-observation feedback and reflection, and this was followed by the trainer peer observing the observer’s teaching sessions. For all the observers the process of PoT promoted awareness and reflection on one’s own teaching style and content and it was also extremely useful to learn from and borrow teaching techniques from other teachers. We would recommend that all teachers both peer observe and have their teaching peer observed.

A summary of this data has been added to the Methods:

“Peer observation was undertaken by Faculty members (PBS and SHA) with specific training in PoT provided by a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy with specialist knowledge of PoT. There was one-to-one training in the techniques involved followed by peer observation of trainee observers’ teaching.”

To the results:

“The process of training to be an observer and implementing peer observation was also of benefit to the observers’ professional development. It promoted awareness and reflection on one’s own teaching style and content and it was useful to learn from and borrow teaching techniques from other teachers.”

And to the Discussion:

“Moreover, as noted in another study, PoT also gave the observing teachers the opportunity to reflect on their own teaching practice and to borrow effective teaching techniques.”

i. In the post observation session was there any discussion on how to go about any concerns raised or identified by the observer/students or was just a feedback session where the findings were discussed? It would be helpful for readers to know.

In the post-observation session, after the findings were discussed, there was a collaborative, constructive discussion about how any concerns raised by the observer/students could best be addressed. This was usually a brainstorming session, which included both the teacher’s and the observer’s ideas about how any issues
might be overcome. This was always approached in a constructive and sensitive manner. Examples of a few concerns addressed were:

“I thought a couple of slides which you used could be ditched and we discussed that in our post-observation de-brief. I think this will help deal with some of the time pressures that you were experiencing towards the end of the session.”

““One of the disadvantages, of course, of using the white board is that one can end up talking to the white board with one’s back to the students. Also under the inevitable time pressure required to cover a pretty substantial topic, I noticed a tendency for you to answer your own questions”

The last paragraph of the Post observation feedback section of the Methods has been revised to include this data:

“Potential solutions to any concerns raised were collaboratively identified and discussed by the observer and observee. Each teacher received a letter providing a written summary of the outcome of the observation process assimilating both the observer’s comments and the students’ comments together with potential solutions to any concerns raised.”

Discretionary Revision
a. Abstract. The last line in the Conclusion can be deleted or perhaps rephrased.

We agree and the last line in the Conclusion has now been deleted.

b. Introduction: The second quotation on page 4 has got some words in bold which does not seem necessary.

We agree and have removed the bold font.

c. Methods: The general approach that was adopted for PoT was based on Bell’s model? If so it may be indicated here rather than referring to the Fig.1

The general approach that was adopted for PoT was based on Bell’s model, which is illustrated in Figure 1. We have now indicated in the Methods that our approach was based on Bell’s model.

“The general approach that was adopted for peer observation of teaching was based on Bell’s model 2. Figure 1 illustrates the cyclical nature of the process.”

Reviewer #2 Comments for the Author

Overall, this is a well written paper which is of interest for the medical education community.

I have some suggestions for improvement, which I envision as compulsory before a decision on publication can be made:
General comments:

If the papers main focus is the development of the peer observation of teaching, then the process on how this was developed and why in exactly this way should be described more in detail. E.g. has there been a needs assessment?

The paper had a two-fold focus, firstly to describe how PoT was implemented within our Teaching Faculty and secondly to describe teachers’ perceptions of the process of PoT. PoT was offered to teachers as a developmental opportunity, as part of a wider ongoing process of course and Faculty development. Our undergraduate pediatric course is consistently rated by students as the most popular of the medical student courses. The PoT programme was developed out of our aim to continue to improve the learning experience for our students and followed extensive research by the authors into the area. We agree that more detail is required since this is a central focus of the paper.

The process on how PoT was developed and why in exactly this way has now been described in more detail in the first paragraph of the Methods (there is also additional information in each of the subsections on the process of PoT).

“Our 8 week pediatric course is presented 6 times a year with the ensuing danger of becoming mechanical and stale. We therefore assessed that there was a need for PoT to keep our course material and lectures up to date and to affirm the efforts of our teaching Faculty. Critically, and this was emphasized to teaching Faculty, the PoT process was developed to be constructive and developmental. As discussed in the literature 3, an inappropriate methodology might lead to de-motivating feedback and would not achieve our aim of improving student learning.”

If the focus is more on the evaluation of this, evidence by asking faculty how they perceived it by email is rather weak as this is not anonymous and therefore might cause a biased picture. The reason why this “email” approach was used should be evidenced by the literature or a more structured anonymous feedback sought if still possible.

We considered that an important component of implementing PoT was to receive feedback from the observed teachers on how they perceived the implementation of PoT. We particularly wanted to know whether the teachers found the process useful to their teaching and how they thought that the process might be improved. We chose a novel e-mail ‘sound-bite’ based approach to Faculty feedback because: i) we considered that this was approach was most likely to get a high response rate (a 100% response rate was obtained); ii) we did not want to burden our time-pressured colleagues with yet another questionnaire or a form to complete and iii) we wanted teachers to be able to give a free-form assessment of the process. We agree that the e-mail approach is not anonymised and may be open to bias. However, we think that it is unlikely that this will have influenced our results since, as the feedback indicated, teachers felt very comfortable with the peer aspect of PoT and overwhelmingly described the process as constructive and non-threatening. We have included the use of e-mail sound-bites as a possible limitation of the study.

Abstract:
Teaching methods description in the results section has to be transferred to
methods section.

We agree and have now transferred this to the methods section.

In the methods section it must be stated that feedback was sought via email.

This has now been stated in the Methods section of the Abstract:

“Twenty teachers had their teaching peer observed by trained Faculty members and gave an e-mail ‘sound-bite’ of their perceptions of the process.”

Introduction:
The research question should be made more concrete, e.g. incl. to name by whom the PoT method was assessed.

The research question has now been more clearly stated in the last paragraph of the introduction. Naming by whom the PoT method was assessed has been included in the Methods section.

“The aims of this project were firstly to implement PoT methods as a constructive, developmental process for members of the Pediatric Teaching Faculty and secondly to assess teachers’ perceptions of the PoT process.”

Discussion:
In the discussion the results of the study should be discussed in the light of the existing evidence (literature). So far there is almost no literature cited in the discussion.

The results of the study are now more fully discussed in the light of the existing evidence citing the relevant literature.

Furthermore there is no paragraph on the limitations of this study.

We agree and a paragraph on the limitations of the study has now been included as follows:

This study had a number of limitations. The department of Pediatrics is relatively small and only three peer observers have been trained to date although there are plans for more Faculty members to be trained in this process. There was also a challenge with other time pressures to complete the post-observation meeting and letter in a timely fashion. However, we believe that giving immediate feedback is one of the most important aspects of the process and consequently prioritized the post-observation feedback. Another potential limitation of the study was the lack of anonymity with the e-mail ‘sound-bite’ received from the teachers. We do not think that this is likely to have influenced our results as feedback revealed that teachers felt very comfortable with the peer aspect of PoT and did not view the process as threatening.

References

All authors have seen the revised text and agree to this resubmission. I trust that we have now adequately addressed the questions from the reviewers and that this paper is now acceptable for publication in BMC Medical Education.

We look forward to the response of the editor in due course.

Yours sincerely

Peter B Sullivan