“INTERVISITAS”: AN IN HOUSE STAFF DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY BASED ON CLASSROOM PEER OBSERVATION OF TEACHING STAFF

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Abstract: The activity “Intervisitas”, has been developed during two academic years, 2010-2012, within the Biomedical Sciences Department of the European University of Madrid, which objective is to coordinate and support staff in their teaching practice and professional growth. In spite of being offered many and valuable opportunities of staff development within higher education institutions, these usually do not include structured activities of peer observation as a tool for teaching improvement. In an effort to provide an opportunity for professors with different levels of teaching experience, content expertise and teaching methodologies interest to exchange best practices and participate in a shared reflection process, this voluntary activity is organized within the department. Some of the reported participants results include the value of being able to obtain constructive feedback from a knowledgeable peer in a safe context and being able to focus on other aspects of their practice apart from the acquisition and transferring of theoretical knowledge. We propose to continue our in-house department efforts to provide staff development opportunities which focus on reflective practice of each individual as a means to grow. Next academic year we will be starting “The Professor’s Portfolio”, which will include peer visitations an important component.

Key wards: staff development, peer observation, teaching portfolio, formative assessment and evaluative assessment

1. INTRODUCTION:

Teaching is a multi-dimensional profession, therefore its assessment should be compromised of a variety of methods. At the European University, student evaluation of professors is viewed as a relatively informal, informative feedback of a professor’s classroom performance to be used by the professor him or herself and for the Head of his/her department. These questionnaires have many items which refer to planning, delivery style, evaluation rules and the teacher’s mastery of the content knowledge. Most faculty
would agree that student evaluations do not provide a complete picture of their teaching. Although it is clear that students can offer their insight pertaining a teacher’s performance, their opinion is limited to their experience as students.

On the other hand, the European University provides its staff with many opportunities to attend in house professional development, with a wide variety of offerings. In addition to these, there are other opportunities such as joining an advanced training group and work on a project of Action Research, within a topic of interest for the professors involved with the objective of reflecting on their own practice.

Currently, classroom observations by either a peer or a supervisor, are not widely used in higher education environments, including at the UEM, either for evaluation purposes or for teaching improvement, as a staff development practice.

A peer is usually a colleague who does not have administrative authority above you (Roberson, 1998), either at the same level of expertise or with more experience and hence acting as a mentor. Depending on the purpose of the observation, it could be someone on your department, if you are interested in content related feedback, or outside your department if you would like a more general feedback about teaching concerns common to all disciplines. An observation could have a purpose of assessment or evaluation.

As Bill Roberson describes:

‘Assessment is the process of objectively understanding the state or condition of a thing, by observation and measurement. Assessment of teaching means taking a measure of its effectiveness. Formative assessment is a measurement for the purpose of improvement. Summative assessment is what we normally call “evaluation”.

‘Evaluation is the process of observing and measuring a thing for the purpose of judging it and determining its value, either by comparison to similar things, or to a standard. Evaluation of teaching means passing judgment on it as part of an administrative process’

Ideally, a fair plan to evaluate teaching should include many forms of evaluation, which should involve course planning stages, evaluation practices, classroom observations and evaluation of learning outcomes and not only the widely used student questionnaires.

Peer observation can be implemented with formative purposes or evaluation ones. The benefits of peer observation include:

1. Having a Knowledgeable colleague observe your lecture will mean you have someone who is aware of department’s objectives and expectations of teaching and learning. They will likely teach similar students and share your same concerns. Many will be effective teachers that can offer insightful feedback.
2. Peer observation offers a lot of flexibility; depending on the purpose of the observation we will choose a colleague with known expertise using a particular teaching method or extensive content knowledge.

3. There are some aspects of teaching effectiveness that are more appropriately assessed by peers rather than students. (Roberson, 2006). These include particular aspects pertaining to course organization, mastery over course content, selection of appropriate class materials and method of instruction chosen for a particular content.

Peer observation could be problematic as well, and this is why these types of activities should be voluntary and strict confidentiality should be observed. In addition, one should bear in mind that a particular observer may have a certain bias for a particular mode of instruction or behavior management style. Department politics amongst staff members can also play a role and tension amongst colleagues may arise. If the activity is organized with formative purposes, then participants should be provided a safe activity environment and not end up penalized for participating.

2.- ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

At the Biomedical Sciences department of the UEM, an organized voluntary peer observation activity has been organized and carried out during 3 academic semesters starting during the spring term of 2011, called “Intervisitas”. The objective of this activity is to improve teaching practices in the department by observing other professor’s approaches to managing the class, presentation style and ways to conduct different lessons, including more student centered approaches. This activity does not have a research focus, as in this case we would need to have repeated visits to the same class and have a different ways to assess each professor’s practice. The focus is rather to be able to reflect on our own practice and to be able to witness first hand our peer’s teaching, in addition to receiving constructive feedback in a safe professional network, with no evaluative intention.

The activity encompasses four steps:

1. OPENING MEETING: A first meeting with all professors that expressed an interest to explain activity’s objectives and address any possible concerns.

   The head of the department decides the members of each of the groups:

   a. Taking into account the schedule of the members of the group, in order to facilitate each other’s visits.
b. Avoid having professors from the same discipline in each group, thus trying to focus the observation on general aspects of teaching such as interaction with students, management style and approaches to teaching.

c. Having professors with different degrees of teaching experience work in the same group in order to provide less experienced teachers with an opportunity to observe more senior members of the department.

2. CLASSROOM OBSERVATION. - During the first year of “Intervisitations”, visits by colleagues were scheduled and visited professors were informed of the time and date of the visit. The second year visits were unannounced and all members of a group tried to observe the same lesson. The visiting professor must be punctual and stay for the duration of the entire class.

   a. Observers are to use the “Classroom Observation Worksheet” and take descriptive notes during the visit, (see figures 1a, 1b y 1c). Fields that do not pertain to a particular visit do not need to be recorded and additional descriptive notes are welcomed.

   b. The observed professor will also fill out a reflective exercise describing his experience in being observed. (figure 2).

3. STRUCTURED REFLECTION OF WORKING GROUPS. Once the observation is over, all professors involved must fill out a reflection exercise. Team meeting where feedback is shared, positive aspects of each lesson are discussed and areas of improvement are suggested. Another reflection exercise is to be done individually. The objective is to share the recorded information during step 2. This is a key element of the process where team members share what they have observed suggesting areas of improvement. In order to follow a productive flow, each professor should share the items of the questionnaire and each observer’s turn should be respected. (Figure 3).

4. END OF ACTIVITY MEETING. - An end of activity meeting was organized with all participants, with a focus to develop, in a common effort, the following objectives.

   a. Shared discussion to evaluate if activity´s objectives have been met.

   b. Ways to improve future staff development activities within the department.

   c. Evidence of professional growth: specific areas.

   d. Ways to improve this particular activity.
3.- CONCLUSION

After completing one cycle of the “Intervisitas”, the professors involved had a group meeting where we shared the highlights of the experience

- Professors share a benefit in being able to witness different thoughts and opinions on what constitutes a conflict with a student and how to manage it.
- Less experienced teachers realized the effectiveness of having clear sections of a class: Introduction, presentation and share.
- Benefit of “feeling like a student” and being able to receive relatively new information the same way they do.
- Focus on other teachers power point presentations, their style and format.
- Being able to see someone else can provide excellent ideas for lecturing style and the use of different teaching methods.
- Having the Head of the Department participate in the activity serves as an inspiration and leading example.

Areas of improvement and plans for future years:

- Professors would like to select their own working groups.
- Grouping should be done with the purpose of observing a particular methodology.
- We should be able to observe the same professor several times throughout the year to provide a more accurate picture of his or her practice.
- We should provide information to the observers as to how to give constructive feedback, which is nonjudgmental and descriptive.
- We should include a pre observation meeting, in addition to the reflection meeting.
- We are planning to expand this activity and make it part of a more intensive, in house professional development which would be a “Professor’s Teaching Portfolio”. This portfolio would include as of current plans:
  1. A statement of the professor’s beliefs in education and his or her teaching philosophy.
  2. Syllabus description, chronogram, evaluation criteria.
  3. Sample Unit and lesson planning.
  4. Student results.
  5. Student feedback or questionnaires
  6. Evidence of Peer Observation activities.
We believe that the activity has become limited and making it a part of a more extensive process, like creating a portfolio would be the right direction to go. A portfolio would focus a professor’s staff development on him or herself, as he or she would become a reflective practitioner that would take time and thought, as well as feedback, to improve the core of his daily activity.
4.- REFERENCE LIST
