

Lesson Observation: UCU Principles & Position

Introduction

Recently lesson observations and procedures around lesson observation continue to be a problem for UCU branches and members as FE colleges are faced with increasing financial pressures and possible poor OFSTED grades which can impact on college funding. This paper is a summary of UCU position on lesson observation and is largely taken from the guidelines that UCU issued in 2009 which can also be downloaded from the UCU web site.

The main issues around lesson observation for UCU members remain broadly the same as they were when the 2009 UCU Guidance was published. What has changed is the increasingly draconian way that lesson observation is being conducted. Some colleges where lesson observation policy and procedures had been negotiated and which did follow the UCU Guidelines, are now seeking to or have changed these policies. This further guidance will make reference to some of the changed procedures that some colleges are seeking to implement or are now using.

UCU recognises that there is an appropriate place for lesson observations within institutions so long as they are conducted with the right safeguards and procedures in place. UCU's concern and our Guidelines are to ensure that this is a fair, valid and reliable process that does not focus solely on the lecturer's competence, but takes into account the totality of the learning experience, the environment and the context in which it takes place. The focus should be on resources available, generic skills and competencies, and not just on individual performance. The main purposes of lesson observation have been and are:

- As part of initial teaching training
- As part of performance management and appraisal systems
- As part of the processes of probation and professional formation
- Part of quality assurance
- Part of external inspection and internal self-assessment/evaluation
- Used in capability/competence procedures

UCU believes strongly that lesson observation procedures must be negotiated between the UCU branch and college management resulting in a formal agreement.

The issues remain very similar to those identified at the time of the publication of the 2009 UCU Guidelines:

- the amount of notice given by management for lesson with increasing use of no notice observations, 'walk-through' observations and attempts to cut down the amount of notice for observations
- observation itself: who selects which lessons will be observed and the manner in which the observation is conducted
- the frequency of observations; how often observations take place with some colleges increasing the number of observations in any one year
- who is undertaking observations: are those undertaking observations trained teachers?
- the way feedback is given
- the outcomes of observations especially bringing capability/competence proceedings following a grade 3 for the observation.

UCU principles and advice

What is lesson observation

Lesson observation is observation by a third party of the teaching and learning that takes place in a college, adult or prison education service. Its purpose should be to provide evidence of the quality of teaching and learning across the curriculum, including identification of good practice and weaknesses that need to be addressed and the necessary support to address such weaknesses.

The key principles for UCU underpinning the lesson observation scheme are that it should be:

- flexible enough to encompass the full range of contexts where lesson observations might be required, without duplication of effort or systems;
- supportive of those being observed.; that it is an opportunity for teaching professionals to receive advice and guidance from fellow professional teachers on their strengths and weaknesses, to provide material for professional reflection, and to identify areas for CPD and further training and support.

In that lesson observation can be used for a variety of purposes, it is essential that these purposes are clarified at the start of any observation, understood by the employer, and by both the observers and the observed and that different purposes are separated. It can never be acceptable for a lesson observation for example as part of the annual appraisal

system or as part of a self-assessment process to become a lesson observation for capability and competence. If there are lesson observations for the purpose of possible capability/competence proceedings, then this must be clear to the teacher being observed before the actual observation. Where lesson observation is used as part of capability and competence proceedings, then both the lesson observation and the capability procedures must make the links clear and consistent.

Acceptable aims of lesson observation

- To observe actual teaching and learning in order to raise the quality of teaching and learning and so enhance the students' learning experience
- To provide evidence for part of the college's/service's formal appraisal scheme and discussions(not linked to pay)
- To provide evidence for probation and professional formation reports where appropriate
- To provide evidence for appropriate formal procedures such as capability and competence
- To provide a system of identifying, sharing, improving and developing good practice
- To provide evidence for the college self assessment reports
- To provide evidence of teaching and learning during an OFSTED Inspection
- To provide evidence that would encourage staff to reflect on their delivery styles and build on their skills

Not all of these aims will apply to each observation and it should be made clear before any observation occurs, which of the above category the observation falls into and what the results of the observation will be used for.

Minimum number and frequency of observations

UCU would regard best practice as being one annual observation for each teacher. There should be no more than three observations per teaching year. It may be that there are particular situations where initiatives such as the delivery of a new curriculum area, may require more frequent observations. In these circumstances the more frequent observations should be negotiated and agreed and be for a set period and set purpose. For example if it is a new curriculum area has opened then additional observations may be useful to help and support lecturers with delivery of new curriculum.

Such circumstances such as a member of staff undertaking in-service initial FE teacher training, and professional formation may require additional lesson observations. These should be identified in any agreement on the frequency of lesson observation.

Similarly lesson observations as part of capability/competence proceedings may would require additional lesson observations as part of the support that a member of staff involved such proceedings would observations to see if the requisite support had worked. Lesson observations in these situations should be specified in the processes of

capably/competency. Any agreement should also specify the number of unsatisfactory observation grades that would lead to capability and competence proceedings to be triggered

In all circumstance the lessons to be observed should normally be representative of the lecturer's timetable. There other situations and times when observations should not take place. For example on a teacher's first day back from a period of sickness, if the teacher is acting as a substitute or if there has been a substantial interruption such as a fire evacuation or power failure.

Selection of lessons to be observed

The selection of which lessons are observed should be part of any negotiated agreement on observations. Good practice would include both the line manager and the teacher who is to be observed in the process of selection. Other staff/managers may be part of the selection process for certain circumstances. For example HR may be part of the selection of an observation for capability/competency. Lessons to be observed should normally be representative of the lecturer's timetable.

Who undertakes the observation

Observations should only be undertaken by trained teachers, and those undertaking observation should have had specific training on how to conduct observations. In many cases the observer will be the lecturer's line manager. UCU would advise that best practice be a cross-college team.

If peer group observation is taking place then it is essential that the observers are trained. Good practice on peer observation suggests establishment a panel of such trained observers. Teachers could then choose their observers from this panel. This should be on a voluntary basis. Where peer observations are used time spent being an observer should be classed as teaching and part of the normal workload of the observer.

There may be situations where the normal arrangements for observation need to be varied. For example if the lesson to be observed was a women only group and the observer was going to be a man. It is good practice to have some form of appeals procedure in any negotiated agreement so that difficulties can be dealt with.

Period of Notice and time window of an observation

This is the area of most disputes. UCU would wish to see a notice period of at least 3 weeks. A week seems to be common in many colleges. There is an increasing practice of colleges trying to impose no notice observations or what are sometimes described as 'walk-through observations'. These and having observations with no notice should be opposed. UCU would argue that having no notice of an observation is disruptive of both

teaching and learning and unnecessary as having a period of notice before an observation is not going to mean that a poor teacher will be able to set up a situation that disguise her/his performance. Some colleges state that OFSTED want no notice inspections. UCU has been unable to find any such written advice. There was an OFSTED report on improving colleges some years ago that stated that the colleges showing most improvement had no notice lesson observation. OFSTED has left details such as the amount of notice to be given to the college. There are examples where colleges have successfully resisted college proposals to impose or change existing policies to no notice observations. Branches have negotiated periods of notice. Regional Offices will have details of successful negotiations over period of notice.

The Observation

Lesson observation should neither be a burden for the teacher concerned, nor should it be an opportunity to 'police' a teacher's performance. When observations are part of a capability/competence procedure, the observed must be notified of this.

Staff to be observed should be fully briefed on the processes involved in lesson observation. The observation should identify main strengths and weaknesses of the teaching in the lesson being observed. Student perceptions of teaching and learning may be taken into account as part of the whole process. But students should not be involved in formal lesson observations. Some colleges have sought to do so. NUS is opposed to this. If a college attempts to introduce students in the formal observation process, Regional and Head Office should be informed immediately. If student perceptions are to be sought it should be with a representative sample of students.

UCU would recommend that the duration of observations should be negotiated as part of the procedures and processes for observation. However it should not be in excess of three hours and be no longer than is appropriate for positive and constructive purposes. It should be an opportunity for a teacher to demonstrate their teaching skills and receive constructive feedback. Normally observations should not be longer than is required to make valid judgements. The observer should arrive shortly before the start of the lesson. If the observer intends to leave before the end of the particular lesson, this should be agreed beforehand, and where possible timed to coincide with any scheduled breaks in the lesson's activities.

If lesson plans, schemes of work, individual learning plans, register and schedule of assessment are required this should be stated in any negotiated agreement.

Observers should not actively participate in the lesson. If the observer wishes to have discussions with groups or individual students, this should be discussed and agreed with the teacher being observed. It should take place either at the end of the lesson or at an appropriate stage during the lesson. During the lesson or lessons, the observer should

respond positively to any reasonable request from the teacher being observed. The observer should act in an unobtrusive, sensitive and professional manner.

It is recommended that notes on observations should be made on standard forms which have been agreed beforehand as part of setting up any scheme. The paperwork and bureaucracy accompanying any observation scheme must be as user-friendly as possible. It should only record the essential information including the main points summarising the relevant details of context and environment of the lesson being observed. It should also make reference to available resources and their adequacy.. There should be space on the observation form for the lecturer being observed to make comments.

Criteria by which lessons will be observed and judgments made should be open and transparent. These should have been agreed as part of setting up any scheme. Throughout the process of lesson observation, all participants are expected to behave according to professional standards in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Re-observations

There may be circumstances when re-observations are necessary and permissible. The most common of such situations would be where lesson observation is part of capability/competency procedures or where the lesson observed received a Grade 4 (more on grading below) or where the observer and the observed disagree on the summary and conclusions reached. The negotiated agreement on observations should specify the time line for re-observations, the support to be given to the observed teacher if the re-observation is part of capability/competency processes or is the result of a poor grade of the initial observation.

Outcomes of observation

Lesson observation should be part of the developmental processes of an organisation. It should be objective and transparent to those being observed. It should not be used to stigmatise and single out individuals. It should not be used as part of performance related pay scheme. It is good practice that it is known what grade of lesson observation will result in further action, and what this action may be. There must be proper and reasonable support and assistance to the lecturer concerned with clear time scales set out for improvement, offered to the teacher who is subject of these proceedings.

The most immediate outcome of an observation will be the feedback to teacher being observed. Such feedback should be an essential part of the process. All observed staff be offered feedback following an observation. Such feedback should be based only on the lesson observed. Observed staff should have the opportunity to comment on the observation and the feedback. Feedback should take place as soon after the observed lesson as is practicable. Good practice suggests that brief oral feedback should be given immediately after an observation. Subsequently there should be an agreed time for more

detailed feedback. There should be a written account of the feedback. This should summarise the purpose of the observation, the main points of the teaching and learning observed and any agreed subsequent actions that might follow the observation. All feedback should take place in private unless the observed is subject to capability/competence procedures and requests their trade union representative to be present for the feedback.

Any notes of the observation should be given to the teacher who has been observed, and to other relevant and appropriate staff such as appropriate line managers and curriculum leaders. It should be clear who will receive notes from an observation. There should be set time within which feedback would normally take place and for the production of any notes arising from the observation.

All comments on the lesson being observed must be supported by evidence. Any disagreement should be noted in writing by the teacher observed on the observation form. Feedback should wherever possible identify the positive points arising from the lesson and constructive advice on any areas for improvement. Discussion of the professional needs of each teacher should be built into any feedback and used to identify opportunities for support and continuing professional development.

For observation for the purposes of self-assessment, the aim should be to produce summary documentation for the purpose of making an overall judgement in relation to a particular programme or curriculum area. From this it should not be possible to identify an individual teacher.

Staff should have the right to appeal if they feel the process of observation has not been carried out according to the agreed procedures. There must be an agreed procedure where the judgement arising from observation can be challenged by the person being observed. Such procedures should specify time limits and include at some point, an appeal to someone outside the management of the observation process. If the lecturer being observed believes that the observation feedback has been inaccurate or unfair, or if the lesson being observed is not an accurate representation of their teaching, then this should be recorded on the observation form. If this is the reason why agreement cannot be reached about the observation, then the procedural agreement on observations should allow for a further observation to be requested. It may be that existing grievance procedures can be used where there is an alleged breach of procedure or professional behaviour by management or the observer.

Grades

If grading is used then it is the lesson that is observed not the lecturer/teacher. Since OFSTED moved from a 5 point scale to a 4 point scale a number of colleges are deciding that grade 3 satisfactory is unacceptable and some are instituting capability/competency proceedings and/or insisting that the teacher undertakes compulsory CPD. UCU is firmly

opposed to this. If a teacher is judged to be below acceptable quality, then reasons for this should be given and the rationale for such a judgement be clear and transparent. A teacher in this position should be offered the required support and training to improve their teaching

Where the lesson observation is for the purpose of self-assessment, any grades should be anonymous. Self-assessment grading should be aggregated up to programme area to a grading profile. This can then be considered by the appropriate team along with other evidence and a list of strengths and weaknesses and an overall grade arrived at.

OFSTED

OFSTED have moved to a regime of inspection of colleges that is proportionate to the risks that college faces. This means that those colleges judged to be outstanding will have far less inspections than the others judged to be good, satisfactory or failing. The Government has proposed that these 'excellent' colleges and possibly the 'good' colleges will not have any external inspection. The current Common Inspection Framework for FE will be revisited for 2012. A consultation exercise will be undertaken in the autumn of 2011.

Currently OFSTED do inspect classes where there is an actual inspection rather than a desk analysis of college data. Usually in the words of the current OFSTED handbook:

A smaller number of lessons will be observed, compared to the last inspection cycle, and the number will vary with the level of the inspection. The purposes of lesson observation are to allow inspectors to assess the quality of teaching and learning and to test the college's view of the quality of teaching as determined by its self-assessment process.'

Monitoring and Review

UCU would advise that all lesson observation schemes are reviewed regularly with the UCU branch. This can include surveys of the views of those being observed. This must be built into any system that is going to be used. Any monitoring and evaluation of lesson observation schemes should include union representatives. All monitoring and evaluation must be specific to the observation system to ensure that the system being used is valid for the intended purposes.

Initial Teacher Training

A key part of initial teacher training programmes are observations of lessons that the trainee/student is teaching. These should be kept completely separate from other lesson observations. The purpose of observations undertaken as part of an initial teacher training programme is to see how the student/trainee is teaching and to give feedback to improve their teaching. Such observations should be under the direction of the institution and or department/faculty providing the ITT programme. Depending on the programme this may

be a higher education institution or an FE college delivering an ITT programme from an awarding body such as City and Guilds. The number of such observations will be part of the programme and known in advance by the institution and the student/trainee. Time should always be available for feedback and comments made in writing. All those undertaking the observation will have been trained and approved by the delivering institution/faculty/department.

Newly appointed teachers may be required to be observed as part of a probationary period, or as part of a process of professional formation. Again the circumstances under which this may take place should be identified and agreed through negotiations when creating a lesson observation scheme.

Equality

Any lesson observation scheme will need to cover the equal opportunity implications of any procedures for observation. Lesson observation will need to be undertaken with sensitivity to issues of gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnic origin and to issues concerning perceived physical and mental ability. This may be essential when the teaching has been designed for a single sex or a particular ethnic group or those in some community settings. Any agreement between the UCU branch and local management should detail lesson observation for part time teachers. These must be proportionate to the amount of hours that are being taught by the part time teacher.

Conclusion

In the final analysis the procedures for lesson observation will be negotiated at branch-college level. UCU's ability to achieve a fair and proper lesson observation policy and procedures will come down to how well organised and strong a UCU branch is. Lesson observation affects all staff. Thus it can be a good recruiting tool for new members. If as a result of UCU action a good policy and procedures are achieved, it is important that all staff know that this has been achieved by union strength and action.