

### **‘Here to learn and ready to learn’. Transforming professional practice, perceptions and relationships through collaborative observation: a case study in Children’s Nursing**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explores the experience of participating in the HEFCE-funded project ‘*Improving learning and teaching through collaborative observation*’ at Birmingham City University, from 2016 to 2018. The project consisted of two ‘Cycles of Collaborative Observation’ (CoCO) which had been specifically designed to move from the traditional, performative model of observation to a reflective model – within a partnership between student and staff (O’Leary and Cui, 2018). Two students were recruited as co-researchers, to observe sessions that employed contrasting teaching strategies delivered by the two authors and to consider how effective the strategies were in linking theory to clinical practice as facilitated by the authors. Following the observations, the authors and student observers reflected individually on the teaching and learning experience and then met as co-reflectors, sharing their insights in a supportive and constructive way. The joint learning and the implications for learning, teaching and staff-student relationships will be explored further, demonstrating how collaborative observation is a powerful tool for teacher and student growth.

#### **Introduction**

Classroom observations are perhaps most commonly associated with job-performance evaluations, often resulting in increased anxiety for staff and having minimal impact on the development of teaching and learning (O’Leary and Cui, 2018a). The HEFCE-funded project ‘*Improving learning and teaching through collaborative observation*’ at Birmingham City University was markedly different from conventional observation practice. It re-conceptualised and re-configured observation as a method of inquiry, empowering students to play an active role in shaping their learning experience by openly discussing their experiences of teaching and learning with their peers and lecturers (O’Leary and Cui, 2017). The project was underpinned by the belief that improving student learning requires teachers and learners to co-construct a shared awareness of – and understanding about – learning collaboratively.

In the ‘Cycle of Collaborative Observation’ (CoCO – Figure 1) model, students and lecturers take an active role in observing and reflecting on the teaching and learning experience and share their perspectives and personal insights with each other (O’Leary and Cui, 2018). To increase the efficacy of this experience, CoCO began with training for both the authors and the student observers. The authors’ training focused – in accordance with the underpinning philosophy and the process of CoCO – on exploration of previous experiences of observation. The student-observer training also introduced the philosophy and process, though they were encouraged to reflect on their own identities as learners on a professional programme and the importance of making the links between classroom learning and clinical practice.

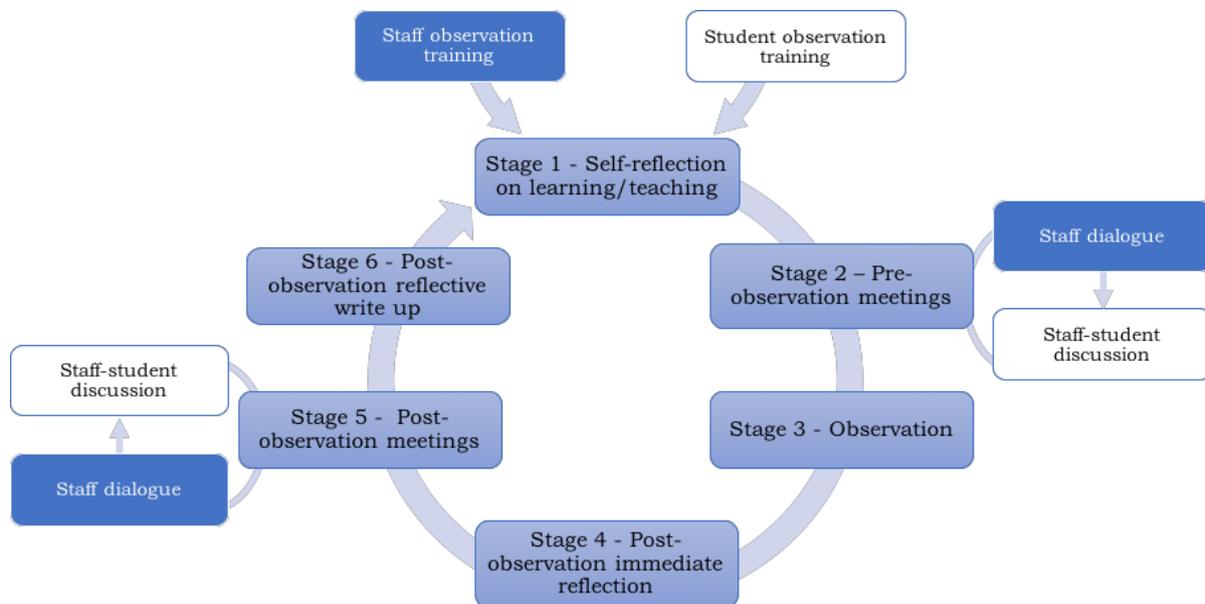
## Case Studies

The project consisted of two cycles over a period of eighteen months. This paper aims to explore the authors' experiences of participating in the project and their reflections on teaching and learning. Both authors are children's nurse lecturers – teaching on an undergraduate programme leading to qualification as a nurse – and jointly deliver a first-year module. This close working relationship was pivotal in maximizing the learning experience from participating in the project.

This paper is divided into two halves:

The first half presents Cycle One, capturing – with a more structured approach to teaching and learning – the student journey from the early experiences of higher education. In Cycle One, during Observations 1 and 2, two contrasting approaches to delivering complex ideas were explored. The purpose of having the two observations was to consider how effective each of these strategies was in linking theory to practice, as respectively facilitated by the two authors. The reflections of the authors and student observers and the implications for teaching and learning are summarised below.

The second half explores Cycle Two, with the authors re-joining the student journey with the two student observers in Year 2 of their course. (At this point, students on the nursing course are expected to be more effective and reflective learners.) Again, two observations were conducted, but this time the focus was on analysing the 'lightbulb' moments that occurred when the student observers recognised their learning. The key findings from the reflections of the authors and student observers are summarised.



**Figure 1.** Cycle of collaborative observation (CoCO). (O'Leary and Cui, 2018b)

## Introduction to Cycle One

The observations took place during the delivery of a Year 1/Level 4 module. This was the first module that focused on children's nursing and was delivered following the students' first clinical placement, so that they were able to reflect on their clinical experiences and explore their learning needs further. The module introduced the students to the fundamental knowledge, skills and attitudes required of a children's nurse. Two contrasting teaching approaches to delivering complex ideas were explored during Observation 1 and Observation 2. The purpose of both observations was to consider how effective the authors were in facilitating the links between theory and practice.

### Cycle One: Observation 1

The first approach used gamification to introduce the students to early-childhood brain development, the impact of positive and negative influences on the developing brain structure and the possible outcomes for the child. This session was led by Author 2, who wanted the observations to focus on the launch of the activity and the efficacy of the feedback and discussion at the end of the game.

The session took place in a lecture theatre with fixed seating and no natural light – it was the only suitably-sized room available at this time. It was an early evening session (16.00-18.00) and the students had been in the University from 09:00. The seventy-two students in the cohort were divided into smaller – friendship – groups. They were given the task of 'constructing a brain', by following the rules of the game and using pipe cleaners, Play-Doh and straws. Once the brain was constructed, the students were then led in a discussion to identify how effectively-built their brain was and what factors contributed to the construction. It was hoped that, at this point, the connections would be made between the game and the theory of child development.

### Cycle One: Observation 2

The flipped-classroom approach was the focus of the second observation. The session was led by Author 1, who also wanted the observations to focus on the launch of the activity, as this would contribute to student engagement and to the facilitation of the feedback. Two different case studies were used and there was a risk that students might disengage when the case study under discussion was not the one they had focused on.

The session took place in a large classroom with natural lighting and movable tables and chairs. The session took place in the morning with half of the cohort. The students sat in friendship groups of three students. They worked on one of two clinical scenarios using clinical observation charts and a communication tool (commonly used in clinical practice) to recognise signs of deterioration in a sick child, to decide upon appropriate actions and to communicate effectively the changes and proposed actions. Once the task had been completed, the students then took turns to feed back the answers using the communication tool. The purpose was to increase their confidence in using the communication tool in preparation for clinical practice.

### **Cycle One: Summary of the joint learning of the student observers and the lecturers**

Both approaches were enjoyed by the two student observers and they felt that the links between theory and practice were effectively made through the use of discussion and feedback. However, for constructive feedback to occur in the classroom, a more structured approach and explicit guidance are beneficial to enable deeper learning to take place (Zigmont *et al.*, 2011). For us, in the position of 'expert' practitioners as qualified and experienced nurses, it was easy to forget that these were potentially new and challenging subject areas to the students in the cohort. Each of the student observers perceived the facilitation of feedback differently, in accordance with their respective life experiences.

The impact of the physical environment cannot be underestimated and the student observers identified that the style of classroom encouraged expectations regarding the nature of the lesson and participants' subsequent levels of engagement. However, they suggested that participants, when sufficiently engaged by a stimulating or unique learning experience, might be able to compensate for the limitations of the physical learning environment by their enthusiasm for what they were experiencing.

Trust and team-working within the classroom were important in allowing participants to make mistakes from which they could learn by exploring them in a supportive environment. During the activity viewed in the second observation, participants were allowed to make an error that subsequently affected the answers in their feedback; though this might, under some circumstances, have caused participant discomfort, the student observers felt that it was handled positively and was a valuable learning experience.

The observers liked the strategy of having participants working in friendship groups, but recognised that this might not promote optimal learning, owing to possible distraction from the task or to limited experience for sharing. They both acknowledged that randomly mixing the students for group work would benefit their learning.

The value of having a 'critical friend' to reflect on the practice of teaching and learning was reinforced. The student observers were generous in their endorsement of the use of different teaching strategies and valued the observed variation in teaching styles. The reflective dialogues between the student observers and the authors demonstrated that the student observers were more confident about evaluating the teaching techniques than about identifying their lightbulb moments of learning. Consequently, it was decided that this would be the focus of Cycle Two.

The experience provided the authors with the opportunity to analyse practice, question approaches and beliefs about teaching and learning and explore the practicalities of delivering sessions to large groups, using varying techniques at times and in places that might not be ideal.

### **Cycle One: Implications for learning and teaching**

Incorporating different approaches to teaching are beneficial, though the learning must be effectively identified and not 'lost' in students' excitement at participating in a novel activity. There can be external challenges to implementing different approaches, yet these can be mitigated and the sharing of ideas is essential to overcoming issues.

Owing to the size of the student group (seventy-two students), it is often easier to leave the students sitting in their friendship groups. However, where shared learning and understanding can be enhanced by the range of participant experience, the time expended on putting students into non-friendship groups is very worthwhile. Working with new peers to focus on the task does encourage team-working and improve relationships within the cohort.

Teaching should not be a solitary activity and learning does not happen by chance. Both teaching and learning are enriched by opportunities for discussion, analysis and reflection in partnerships involving teaching colleagues and students. These dialogues also highlighted the importance of developing a community of practice around the shared identity of a children's nurse (Andrew *et al.*, 2008). This shared identity is the common factor in the classroom, in spite of differences in age, social class and ethnicity: nurse lecturers are instrumental in enabling students to develop the sense of belonging to the nursing profession.

### **Introduction to Cycle Two**

The second CoCO took place during Year 2 of the programme and the student observers were encouraged to reflect on those 'lightbulb' moments where they felt they had learned something new. The session for Observation 1 in Cycle Two was delivered as part of a module, but Observation 2 was, for the purpose of this study, an extracurricular workshop delivered to the student observers and two other students from their cohort.

### **Cycle Two: Observation 1**

The topic of the session was 'assisted reproductive techniques (ART) and parenting'. There were sixty-four students in the classroom, including the two student observers, sitting in friendship groups. The students were aged from twenty years upwards and some were in relationships and some had children. There were two male students.

Although the session was a more traditional lecture and structured with PowerPoint slides, videos were incorporated to promote discussion and provide a visual explanation of two of the most familiar fertility treatments. Personal and professional anecdotes were shared and extracts from an article written by a woman experiencing infertility were read out. Although sensitive and potentially embarrassing topics were being discussed, the occasion was not without humour. Author 1 had advised participants that there would be opportunity for questions throughout and that, since this particular session could evoke strong emotions, anyone feeling the need to leave could do so and talk to the author privately afterwards.

Although the focus of the session was still on encouraging the student observers to consider prompts to their learning, in this scenario, it was less about specific clinical knowledge but more about providing insights that foster empathy.

### **Cycle Two: Observation 2**

As Author 2 did not teach on the Year 2 modules, an extracurricular workshop was delivered so that the student observers and Author 1 could observe a different teaching approach. The workshop topic was negotiated with the student observers to meet their self-identified learning needs. They chose to learn about the clinical condition of sepsis and its impact on the patient and on the National Health Service. The student observers invited peers from

their cohort to join them so that they could all benefit from a more personalised teaching experience; however, only an additional two students attended. The teaching strategy used was gamification – the students played a board game, asking each other questions and discussing the answers. On completion of the game, they watched a short video clip that summarised the key content and applied it to the field of children's nursing. The session concluded with a scenario and student-led presentations.

This session was led by Author 2. Rather than focus on a pre-determined aspect of the session, the student observers were asked to identify when they felt that they had experienced new insights or 'lightbulb' moments and document what contributed to these moments for them. Gamification was chosen as a teaching strategy as Author 2 had used it in Cycle One. With the knowledge gained from Cycle One, greater emphasis was placed on extracting the learning from the experience of the game.

### **Cycle Two: Summary of the joint learning of the student observers and lecturers**

Once again, the student observers enjoyed both approaches to teaching. This time, they felt they were better able to recognise when learning had taken place and identify the particular stimulus or activity involved. Cycle Two had the positive impact of enabling the student observers to determine the barriers to their own learning and identify ways of overcoming them. They felt empowered to take more responsibility for their own learning and stated that they were 'here to learn and ready to learn'. The student observers understood that, for this to occur, they would have to change how they engaged with the lecturer, the subject matter, their peers and the environment. For one of them, this meant something as simple as changing where she sat in class and with whom.

The use of the sepsis game was an interactive tool that enabled the students to acknowledge and recognise their existing knowledge and, with this positive feedback, then build on their knowledge. The trigger for learning was the clinical relevance of the game, which was reinforced by real-world applications and statistics designed to prompt discussion and highlight the importance of the topic. The trigger during the ART session was not dissimilar, in spite of the different context and subject area. An unexpected insight was provided within a highly personal and sensitive subject. An authentic context was provided for the students, enabling them to explore the challenges of clinical practice in a safe and supportive environment.

### **Cycle Two: Implications for learning and teaching**

The authors and student observers felt that Cycle Two validated the role of the lecturer in the classroom setting as instrumental in enabling engagement with a complex, professional programme (Kahu, 2013). The authors have been encouraged to explore different teaching techniques and the classroom setting provided opportunities for meaningful debate about nursing practice and the role of the children's nurse. The student observers reflected on how their previously held common assumptions about the nature of 'teaching' had been challenged. They had believed that the lecturer would provide all of the essential knowledge that they would then 'learn' (Bristol, 2014), but, through CoCO, they had begun to understand how to become and engage as active learners. It can be posited that the transition to being an 'adult learner' needs facilitating and this raises the question: When and

how does this occur? For the two student observers, this was evident once they had developed understanding of their learning and were then empowered to overcome any barriers.

### Conclusion

Participation in the project afforded the authors a unique opportunity within the organisation to reflect on and evaluate performance as teachers with the student observers as the recipients of the experience. It repositioned the authors as 'learners', learning about the efficacy of teaching and their influence on the experience of students. Although regular staff performance evaluations – using a number of performative measures – are customarily undertaken, this one was more personal and meaningful and it can be recommended for use by other lecturers. Through volunteering to take part in the project, the authors too were 'here to learn and ready to learn' and the experience proved personally and professionally stimulating and reinvigorating. A third CoCO will be completed with the students now that they are in their final year and it will provide an overview of their journey through higher education and of the authors' contributions to their development as children's nurses.

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## Case Studies

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