Designing and managing a developmental and emancipatory culture of peer observation of teaching: a case study

Summary

In this case study, we discuss our experience in designing a developmental and collaborative protocol for peer observation at Padua University (Italy) and reflect on the related benefits, challenges, and tensions emerging during implementation. We do so in light of the limited available literature that addresses how peer observation activities and programs are designed and experienced in the Italian context where faculty development is still in an infancy phase.

This case study explores the way higher education teachers perceive and experience peer observation, and consequently how academic developers can design peer observation to stimulate academic buy-in. We analyzed our experience drawing on multiple data collected at different stages of our programme, particularly the questionnaires compiled by participants pre and post-activity, and the research team ethnographic notes based on conversations, formal meetings and training sessions with the academic teachers.

Following this line, the case study describes and reflects on the main challenges and tensions that can arise in designing and developing a peer observation practice and how they can be addressed. Finally, it discusses the role of institutional support and recognition, suggesting how to secure them to foster academic engagement and to ensure the sustainability of peer observation while at the same time guaranteeing that the activity remains developmental and collaborative.

Keywords

Faculty development; peer observation; peer feedback; micro-credentialing; professional learning; collegiality; collaborative reflection

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the imperative to enhance the teaching quality and improve the experience of students in higher education has gained more and more prominence across the world. In line with this growing attention, we witnessed an increasing move towards the professionalization of higher education teachers, with initiatives of teacher education and faculty development and the setting up of institutional structures devoted to quality assurance, teaching enhancement, and innovation. Within this framework, in recent years universities have seen the emergence of activities such as peer observation on teaching.

Often framed as peer review of teaching, peer observation is a specific approach based on classroom observation practice, and theoretically based on peer review and experiential learning principles (Peel, 2005). It involves one or more fellow teachers observing a colleague while teaching so as to offer feedback and help them to reflect on their teaching (Murphy, Weinhardt & Wyness, 2018). Therefore, peer observation can represent a developmental opportunity for observing and being observed in teaching sessions, to reflect on and review teaching with the assistance of colleagues (Race, 2009).

Despite the widespread use of peer observation, many scholars questioned its usefulness for the enhancement of practice. In fact, peer observation is widely promoted and used in higher education both to evaluate and enhance teaching, as it can be implemented in different ways depending on the model/rationale that underpins the tool, which consequently influences the teachers' subjective experience (Gosling, 2014).

In this regard, Gosling (2002; 2005; 2014) analysed the common practice of peer observation and identified three main models, which vary according to a range of factors: who performs the observation and who is observed; the purpose it serves and who benefits from the process; the relationship between partners; the outcomes; and whether or not it is mandatory for staff. The first model he identifies is the evaluative one, with managerial/academic senior staff involved in observing teaching for quality assurance and thus serving managerial purposes. This observation model is characterised by a deficit thinking or approach to the evaluation of teaching, with a major focus on weaknesses and potential lack of critical reflection (Gosling, 2005). The second one is the developmental model, based on good formative feedback (cf. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006), and often used in initial training. It involves educational experts acting as observers, with the potential of enabling teachers to manage their own learning by clarifying what good teaching practice might be, facilitating self-assessment, promoting dialogue and providing opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance. While the evaluative model is characterized by a hierarchy of power, the developmental model encompasses a hierarchy of expertise. Gosling (2005) adds to these models the collaborative model, where academic peers perform the observation within a mutual arrangement. This model is characterised - at least ideally - by reciprocal learning, enquiry, and a non-judgemental approach, and has the capacity of improving teaching through reflection, dialogue and innovation. However, the collaborative model has been criticised for potentially encouraging complacency, coinciding with an excessive focus on providing positive feedback and avoiding criticism, producing limited opportunity for change or development (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Yend, Weller & Kinchin, 2014).

On the contrary, the widespread adoption of peer observation schemes for quality assurance/accountability of teaching often coincides with a common view of peer observation as an evaluative process. Therefore, peer observation may be conducive to negative affective states, such as anxiety of being judged on personal competence by close colleagues, or lack of confidence about acting as an observer due to personal capacity to give appropriate feedback to fellow teachers (Bell, 2001; Cosh, 1998).

While some scholars suggest that promoting peer observation among academic colleagues may help to establish a departmental culture of teaching enhancement, others found that a top-down institutional approach may reinforce academics' reluctance to take part in peer observation due to these negative states (Peel, 2005), something that may be especially relevant for novice academic teachers.

Trowler & Cooper (2002) argue that the reasons why some participants positively embrace faculty development whilst others express dissatisfaction and unease could be found in teaching and learning

regimes, namely the constellation of rules, assumptions, practices and relationships related to teaching and learning in higher education. As social products, faculty development programmes always convey some teaching and learning assumption, which may be more or less compatible with those of participants, who need to be encouraged to recognize their preconceptions.

Teaching and learning regimes (Trowler & Cooper, 2002) encompass different aspects able to interfere in and mediate the experience and perception of faculty development activities. Among them, we can cite issues of identity and power relations, which may prevent academics from repositioning themselves as learners and objects rather than subjects of the educational activity. Further, tacit assumptions that are in contrast with the discourses conveyed in academic development programmes are often at play. For example, faculty development often stresses the relevance of the structural support of learning that characterizes learner-centred approaches, whereas academic teachers often assume that the autonomy of the learner will be a prerequisite for higher education.

In this regard, Wingrove, Hammersley-Fletcher, Clarke and Chester (2018) found that academic developers should carefully consider four main elements in order to foster meaningful engagement in peer observation. These may be summarized as: staff conceptions of peer observation; the perception of the developmental value and ownership of peer observation for garnering academic buy-in; managing and challenging the tensions emerging from the terminology used; and, finally, securing institutional support for successful schemes. All these factors raise the question of how faculty development activities based on observation and feedback can be designed and implemented in order to be positively embraced and shown to be effective for all academics, as well as being beneficial and not perceived as a source of mental distress (Bell, 2001; Shortland 2010).

Following this argument, the present case study aims at answering the following questions. How do academics perceive and experience the peer observation activity and how can academic developers can design it in such a way as to promote academic buy-in? What challenges and tensions can arise in carrying out this kind of professional development activity and how can they be addressed? How can one secure institutional support that fosters academic engagement and secures sustainability and recognition while guaranteeing that the activity remains developmental and emancipatory?

We will try to answer these questions with reference to multiple data we collected throughout our experience, namely questionnaires compiled by participants before and after the activity, and ethnographic notes collected from informal conversations and formal meetings and training sessions with the academic participants. These data are used and presented here with an illustrative purpose, so as to stimulate reflection rather than to corroborate our claim as generalizable.

The institutional background

Founded in 1222, the University of Padua is one of the oldest European universities. With a long tradition of scientific and teaching excellence, the university has around 60000 students and 2300 members of teaching staff. However, as described by Ghidoni, Fedeli and Barolo (2019), despite a greater emphasis on teaching, until a few years ago the latter was almost entirely a self-oriented activity. Teaching education and professional development were not provided, nor was formal interaction among fellow teachers promoted by the university. The class was a private relation between the students and the teacher, and the only way to receive feedback was through students' evaluation questionnaires at the end of the courses.

Historically, Italian higher education is characterized by little consideration for teaching and greater attention to research, which reflects how both recruitment and career progression have been implemented. Thus, few university lecturers have preparation regarding pedagogy, meaning theories, methods, and practices of teaching and learning. In addition, lecturing has so far been the main form of teaching in higher education, mirroring a content transmission format that long neglected interaction with and the involvement of students in their own learning (Guarda & Helm, 2016).

Centralised academic development in Italy is still in its infancy. At Padua University, the roots of faculty development can be traced back in 2014, when the university funded the PRODID project (2014-2015, see

e.g. Serbati, Felisatti, & Dirkx, 2015) aiming to develop strategies to support academic teachers to enhance their teaching and educational competences and actively involving them in their own professional development. The first year was devoted to mapping the state of art in the field of teacher training and academic professional development as well as carrying out a local context analysis (using a questionnaire) to identify teachers' needs, their beliefs and current practices. During the second year, based on the data collected, two training programs were organised, one involving new faculty and one for more experienced academics, in order to foster reflection on their teaching practices and to improve the quality of teaching and learning processes.

On this path, Padua university only recently formally introduced - in 2016/2017 – a faculty development programme named Teaching for Learning (T4L, see e.g. Fedeli, 2019) with the aim of promoting teaching innovation – especially around active learning. T4L offers workshops in key development areas, aiming at contributing to the enhancement and innovation of teaching. Teachers engage - mostly voluntarily - in training and sharing activities promoted by the programme, with the expected outcome of building Faculty Learning Communities mostly at a departmental level. The programme offers different training pathways and covers initial staff development for new faculty members, as well as professional development opportunities for lecturers interested in enhancing teaching or becoming coach/mentors contributing to academic development in their department. Participation in the programme's activities is not mandatory. Teachers engage voluntarily and after completing one of the paths they receive an open badge, a digital certificate highlighting the skills acquired, the learning outcomes achieved, and the methods used for the evaluation.

Regarding the implementation of peer observation of teaching in the Italian context, to the best of our knowledge there still no well-developed scholarship on peer observation, but rather a number of rather diverse and isolated experiments. These are most often characterized by observations made by senior colleagues or fellow teachers, who unexpectedly come to observe classes. Thus, in these experiences the ownership and agency of observed teachers – for example regarding the matching with the partner, the lecture to be observed, the teaching dimensions on which receive feedback – the principle of horizontality, and the use of video-recordings for observation have been not sufficiently problematized or are completely missing (see **O3 case study on video-based reflection**). Moreover, in order to observe and inquire into teaching, as well as elaborating feedback, many of these experiences rely on the use of checklists typically developed in a structured and scientific way, implying that observational data can be captured to represent reality. Such an approach has been found to limit the observer's gaze to what it is suggested rather than what the observed teacher considers relevant or would benefit from (Shortland, 2010). On the contrary, some experiences do not involve the use of specific reflective frameworks or tools supporting observation and feedback, resulting in non-specific and descriptive feedback, discussion, and reflection.

Implementing the Intref project and Intercultural Peer observation at Padua University

The IntRef project aims to enhance the internationalization and quality of teaching and academic development by proposing and testing methods for collaborative reflection on teaching that encompasses an intercultural dimension. Within the project, we developed and tested three methods that rely on digital technologies, such as video-recordings and video-conferencing, so as to facilitate collegial inquiry and discussion about teaching and learning with fellow academic teachers across countries and institutions.

In order to recruit and engage lecturers, we used different strategies to disseminate the project activities. Because these activities are transnational in their nature, the use of English as a Medium of Instruction was a prerequisite for peer observation, with peer partnerships constituted by lecturers of different nationalities using the lingua franca for communication and exchange (**see O3 case study on language**). Thus, to get participants on board we advertised the project among academics teaching in English via emails sent by the university office for the internationalization of teaching and the University Language Centre – which supports those instructors teaching in English by providing diversified training pathways. Moreover, we relied on personal and professional relationships with colleagues and gatekeepers (such as department/school heads or degree programme directors) to reach interested and motivated teachers.

We should note that several teachers taking part in the Intref project and peer observation already had experience of professional development activities linked with the Prodid project or T4L programme. Thus, these experiences acted as a trailblazer in prompting teachers' to become involved in the IntRef project. This fact highlights the deep motivation and interest of some participants in enhancing their teaching by taking part in professional development activities.

After collecting the expressions of interest, we presented the project activities to the interested teachers and offered training sessions about the methods during group meetings, which were organised at the beginning of each teaching term. These occasions were crucial for exploring and addressing teacher interests, needs, and expectations, as well as uncovering assumptions and preconceptions about teaching and learning and professional development, and for matching them with the range of activities proposed. In some cases, these meetings were realized with the presence of degree programme directors, something that in the first place undermined academic buy-in, leading to some resistance to participate on account of personal assumptions.

Afterwards, the teachers interested in peer observation were paired with teachers belonging to partner institutions. Academic developers worked carefully to find appropriate matchings based on certain characteristics such as age and experience (the peer partnership was composed of peers with the same position or experience, e.g. full professors, novice teachers), teaching subject or discipline (even if the partners were never paired with academics of exactly the same discipline or subject we always considered their expectations and needs on this matter, pairing them with a close disciplinary subject when needed – e.g. anthropology and social psychology; statistics and math; chemical engineering and chemistry), or teaching strategies (matching lecturers using the same or similar teaching methods, e.g. group work, problem-based learning).

All these matchings were always discussed and agreed with the academics involved, with academic developers encouraging short conversations before the observation to get to know each other and build a professional relationship.

To reflect back on our experience and answer the questions formulated above, we analysed the data coming from questionnaires compiled by the teachers and our ethnographic notes and identified three main challenges that academic developers should consider in designing peer observation schemes: a) personal assumptions about peer observation, feedback, and partnership; b) power and identity; c) institutional support and recognition of peer observation.

The role of personal assumptions on peer observation, feedback, and partnership

Throughout the project, we found that three main (pre)conceptions of peer observation and feedback influenced the academics' buy-in and experience. This can be summarized as:

- The perception of peer observation and feedback as evaluative processes
- The perception of post-observation feedback as a useful tool for professional learning rather than assessment of teaching performance
- The perception of feedback provided by oneself or fellow teachers of different subjects or disciplines as inadequate

Our experience data from evaluation questionnaires suggest that peer observation is usually conceived by most academics as an evaluative process of teaching performance. The following extracts from evaluation questionnaires exemplify this shared conception of peer observation:

"With this experience I increased my knowledge on how to properly assess teacher's performance through peer observation"
"A peer review evaluation of the teaching should be introduced mandatory in my university"

In line with Shortland (2004), we stress that peer observation schemes face barriers to securing academics buy-in as they associate it purely with evaluation. This implicit conception requires considerable effort on

the part of academic developers in encouraging academics to uncover their assumptions about the method, while making explicit and stressing the developmental rationale of observation and feedback and the nature of peer partnership, namely a mutually supportive, critical, but non-judgemental relationship benefitting both the observer and the observed.

Nevertheless, even when peer observation is framed such a way as to develop teaching through fellow teacher support, or as a tool for mutual professional learning, academic developers should consider the broader context in which peer observation is implemented, as well as subjective feelings related to observation and feedback. In this regard, as peer observation always involves relational work, the relationship between peer observation partners represents a delicate matter, as some can view and experience feedback as criticism rather than constructive advice (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005).

In contrast with some authors emphasizing the often-detrimental effect of peer observation and feedback (see e.g. Shortland, 2010), we found that the aspects most appreciated by our participants concerned the relational aspects of gaining feedback and perspective-taking, accompanied by self-observation (see Figure 1).
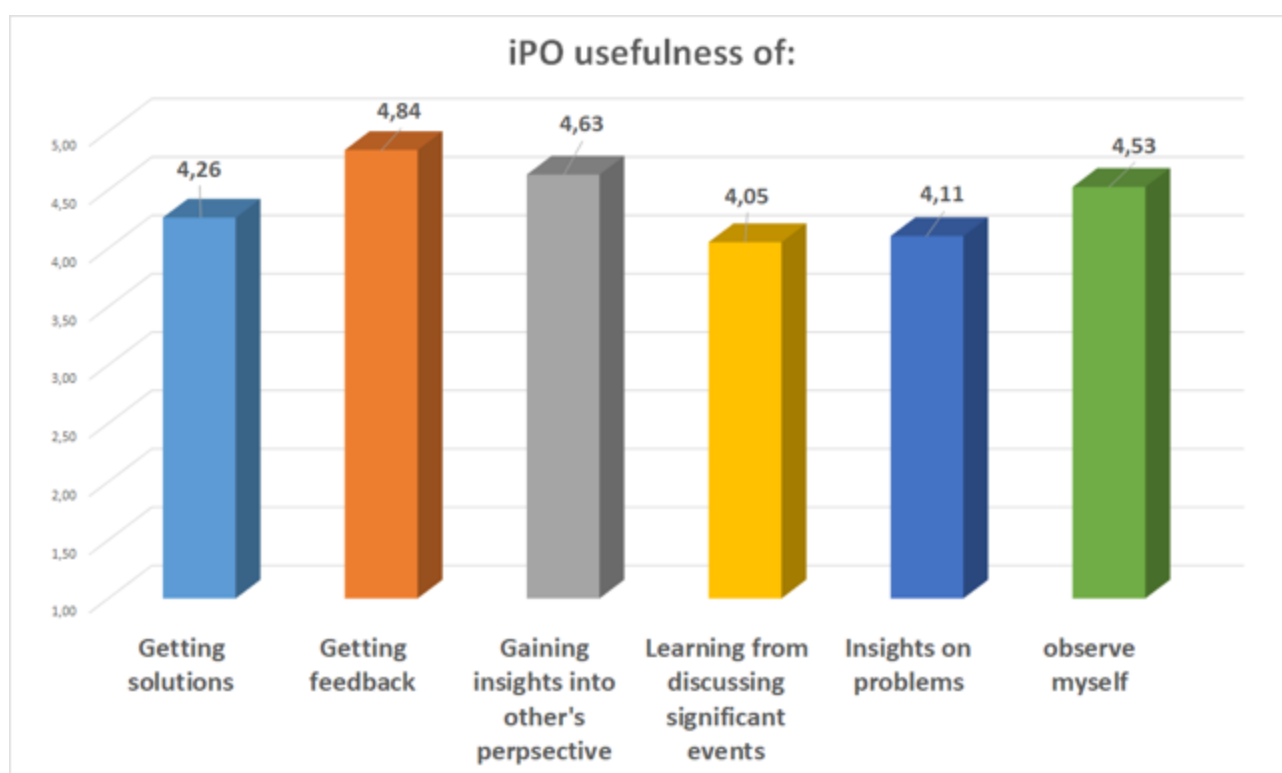

Figure 1. Evaluation of the peer observation scheme and its constitutive dimensions

These results from the evaluation questionnaires emphasize different aspects worthy of reflection. First, the matching between peer observation partners worked well and was appreciated by all participants completing the activity (N=20).

In line with Gosling (2014) equal levels of seniority or pedagogical expertise were crucial to put partners in the position to collaborate. But going beyond this issue, other factors were considered as fundamental to building a sense of common belonging and crucial in determining the positive perception and reception of feedback, and even more so for constructive criticism. The positive perception of feedback can be explained by three main factors. First, the guidance we provided in relation to giving and receiving feedback (i.e. the training and guidelines; **see O2 -LINK**) was crucial in supporting participants' elaboration and communication of feedback.

Second, we should mention the use of video-recordings, which resulted in more specific feedback empirically grounded to the recording with the possibility of checking back the coherence of feedback and

what has been observed. In fact, the Intref Peer Observation approach opted for enabling participants to make use of video recordings as the basis for tracking their teaching and for observing their peers' teaching. This "delayed" observation favours a non-judgemental understanding of observation, enhancing the formative features and peer dialogue, rather than implementing or evoking observation as evaluation and career control. Therefore, this approach is different from other models where younger colleagues are observed by senior colleague(s) during their classroom teaching (i.e. mentors and mentees). Moreover, teachers had the chance to write down their observations and feedback, and to prepare and communicate them according to the provided guidelines. The following extracts from the evaluation questionnaires and related to the perceived benefits and most important aspects of cross-institutional peer observation illustrate our claims:

"I mirrored myself. Critiques were appropriate and were communicated in a proper manner"

"Observee must make an effort to avoid being defensive when it comes to evaluate their own issues. This was a very good exercise."

"Giving feedback and receiving feedback were both very helpful exercises in order to improve my own teaching. I found the video conference as a final meeting essential since we could go into more detail and also have a personal connection, which I think is essential for honest feedback"

"I found the distance productive. The video recordings are an asset to this form of peer observation. Even though scary, being able to watch a recording of one's own session is a clear advantage over just having the memory of how the session went. It also makes it easier to discuss specific situations since both partners can go back to the recording and watch particular events."

Finally, the fact of working with fellow teachers belonging to a different institution was crucial in determining the positive evaluation of the peer observation activity. As previously discussed, in certain situations, working with close colleagues may be a source of mental distress and bring feelings of unease. One interesting finding from our experience is that engaging with colleagues that are external to one's own home institution can facilitate greater openness and sharedness, providing a safer space where even critical feedback is perceived as non-judgemental and well-received. Moreover, according to participants' responses, it provided a useful way to inquire into and question in-depth teaching practice and uncover what is normally taken for granted. The extracts presented below illustrate our claims:

"I would have been embarrassed to do it with colleagues of the same department"

"Receiving feedback from an outsider. No one (colleague, boss etc) has ever "sat in" on one of my classes."

"it might be difficult to suggest improvements to colleagues working in the same institution, so having external members helps overcoming this obstacle"

"The fact of working with colleagues at other universities makes the discussion easier, in so far as there is no 'internal etiquette' or invisible 'power hierarchy' or 'institutional norm' to cope with"

"I think the most relevant aspect of the iPO for me has been discussing what I am not sure about as a teacher. Sharing my experience with a fellow graduate teaching assistant in a safe environment and without judgment and learning hers has helped putting things into perspective"

"Yes, working in a transnational/cross-institutional group gave me the chance to reflect on approaches to teaching in general, things that are a given in my everyday teaching but not as much in another country"

Regarding participants conceptions of peer observation, we found that the assumption of peer observation as intrinsically a way to assess and revise teaching performance is well-grounded in academic teachers who are used to peer review mechanisms, which by the way were reported in training sessions as a basic principle that underpins peer observation of teaching. In accordance with Wingrove et al. (2018), tensions may arise due to the terms at the heart of peer observation, namely peer review and feedback. This required academic developers to address and change staff perceptions of peer observation, attempting to uncover the differences

between peer review in research and in teaching, something that can be done by underlining the difference between feedback for professional learning and feedback for teaching assessment, approaching peer observation as a formative rather than a summative process (cf. Bingham & Ottewill 2001). We illustrate this claim with the following two excerpts showing how peer observation and feedback can be conceived in very different ways even by professionals belonging to the same university, department and discipline.

"What is the <u>use of having the feedback after the class</u>? I'm used to sending the slides to a colleague and asking for feedback before the lesson to <u>evaluate and improve the delivery</u>. Honestly, I would prefer this type of approach, and make use of the feedback before the class" (Engineer, not recruited)

"<u>I will possibly receive feedback at the end of the term </u>I guess, and therefore, in an engineering context, within the feedback loop..we have, what is, two months of time? which is huge, <u>so not very effective to control the real time process</u>, but it will be effective next year. <u>The feedback I will receive will help me next year</u>" (Engineer, recruited participant)

The first excerpt reports the reaction of an engineering instructor during a meeting to introduce and train the teachers interested in the peer observation activity. The teacher had never engaged in any professional development activity or discourse about reflective practice and peer observation. Two aspects are noteworthy in this excerpt. First, the assumption about effective/good teaching, which strongly relies on a lecture-centred view of teaching, characterized by clear content presentation and explanation. Second, the emerging implicit assumption of peer observation and feedback as linked respectively with peer review in research and feedback for assessment. As he wondered about the usefulness of feedback after class, the implicit claim is that feedback should be received before class, to assess instruction and revise it before going public. This is very close to the peer review mechanism of research.

Instead, the second excerpt is selected from a recorded teaching session of an engineering instructor who, at the beginning of the class, introduces to the students the peer observation activity, and the reason the class is going to be recorded. This teacher was more aware and well-trained about peer observation and feedback processes, as he had already taken part in faculty development activities, and this is why he recognizes the potential of peer review in teaching and of feedback for professional learning. Analysing his discourse, in fact, it is possible to note that the main object of the activity is not the instruction, but the person, while the objective is not to improve the instruction, but rather using formative feedback for professional learning that may help him to restructure the course and improve teaching.

The role of power and identity

Following the line of reasoning just presented, in line with Trowler and Cooper (2002), we stress that in order to acknowledge and appreciate peer observation of teaching and feedback for professional learning academic teachers should first reposition themselves as learners and objects of observation and transformation. This means that issues of professional identity and power are often at stake, constituting a potential barrier to meaningful engagement. Indeed, the positioning of academics' professional identity usually coincides to that of a "master" who is in a position of power in relation to their students. In the context of professional development activities, however, the self-concept and allocation of power needs to be aligned and adjusted. Teachers should reposition themselves as objects rather than subjects of the educational activity. However, in line with the deficit thinking (i.e. the belief that a teacher that has to learn is someone who is not good or experienced enough), this operation may be perceived as a threat to personal identity, an uncomfortable position that can consequently be rejected or resisted.

One common assumption among university teachers - especially long-time teachers - is that whenever a teacher masters the content of a course or subject, no need for improvement in the way the content is taught is necessary or even possible (Ghidoni, Fedeli & Barolo 2019). This is exemplified in the following excerpt, which reports the reaction of a full professor during two moments in the peer observation activity, referring

to the beginning and the end of peer observation: the training session before the activity and a feedback meeting with academic developers afterwards.

Educational developer: So, to observe the teaching sessions and provide feedback you are also provided with a grid that can help and guide you in the video-viewing activity. As you can see, the grid reports teaching dimensions, such as content presentation and facilitation of learning, teacher student-engagement, use of technologies, etc., with illustrative examples you can rely to orient your gaze and spot aspects you may want to discuss further, giving or receiving feedback

Teacher: Excuse me, but, I am quite confident with the content of my course, I have been teaching for many years and I have enough knowledge of the topic..so I wonder why would I want someone to give me feedback on the content and how I present this content, especially from someone who is not from the field

[..]

Teacher: It was very interesting to see how the content of the lesson was taught by the teacher of another subject, and how what I taught was perceived by my partner. I was even able to follow the lesson and understand, assume the perspective of students..and then I was able to make useful comparisons between my way of teaching and his own. This was incredibly helpful to me. Learning from others what you sound like, what you look like and what impression you give is priceless in terms of improving the quality of your performance. And you can learn a lot on how you can teach in a different way, more engaging, and facilitating students' understanding and appropriation

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The excerpt illustrates an interesting re-positioning and transformative change in the way peer observation is conceived. In the first instance, the teacher positioned himself as a master with no need to revise the content and the instruction of his course. At that moment he externalized his doubts about the usefulness of the approach and whether the partner had the experience or disciplinary relevance that are required to provide relevant feedback, even rhetorically rejecting the feedback and potential critiques from a colleague who is not an expert from the same field. This illustrates that a threat to professional identity and practice was perceived and externalized. Despite this, after the activity, he re-positioned himself, making salient two different identity positionings: the educational expert on the stage, and the professional learner taking the seat of the student. This was made possible by recognizing the potential of being at the same time both the teacher who is observed and who learns from feedback, and the teacher who observes - taking the perspective of a student to offer feedback. Indeed, the particularity of the peer observation protocol is that it is a mutual task where roles and power positions dynamically change during the activity, with participants taking turns as observer and observed. Moreover, having a partner that is external to the field is recognized as a way to uncover assumptions about teaching, focusing on pedagogical strategies, and offering the opportunity to foster reflection on one's own practice by seeing others teaching.

On the other hand, while the first reaction might fall fully into a content transmission-oriented view of teaching, the second moment can be viewed as a hint of a potential transformation in the way teaching can be perceived within a path from a teacher-centred to a student-centred approach (see e.g. Bell & Mladenovic, 2015). The biography of the teacher involved in the excerpt, who took part in the PRODID project and peer observation, and is now involved in training and experimenting active learning and flipped classroom, represents proof of how academic development activities can lead to a transformative change overtime. Nevertheless, we should bear in mind that while most of the time nobody teaches academics how to teach, teachers often try to reproduce what they have experienced as students or seen in colleagues; they look for teaching recipes or techniques from others while being not completely aware of the plurality of educational approaches and their appropriateness.

The role of institutional support and recognition

Finally, the last challenge emerging in the course of our project implementation of peer observation concerns institutional support and recognition. As already mentioned, top-down support was crucial in reaching out to motivated teachers. Heads of departments or directors of degree programmes were fundamental in the recruiting phase to disseminate the project. In fact, thanks to their support we were able to reach out to numerous teachers and organize ad-hoc meetings with teachers belonging to a number of degree programmes

and departments. In some cases, even the heads of the department or degree program were present. In our experience, it is undoubted that on those occasions it was difficult, if not impossible, to let the teachers' assumptions emerge, while several teachers never followed-up these preliminary meetings to come on-board.

Since the first contacts, top-down support raised concerns about the confidentiality of project activities, bringing to light suspicion and preoccupation about inspection, surveillance, and evaluation of their teaching, and representing a potential barrier to their meaningful engagement. The following excerpts refer to informal conversations we had with two early-stage teachers we recruited from the same degree programme, and illustrate this point by making clear the vertical pressure often exercised by quality assurance mechanisms.

> *"The president of the degree programme is worried about the evaluation of the programme. This is why she is pushing us to take part in this type of activities"*
>
> *"Does the president of the degree programme have a role in this? Will she view my videos or supervise the activity?..is it possible I am going to be paired with someone from the university?"*

While the attitude of the director can also be viewed as appreciable, prompting early stage teachers to reflect on their teaching and to take the risk of innovating to improve, this kind of behaviour might be experienced as a form of control and inspection, coinciding with a source of distress and potential disempowerment that can hinder their engagement or be detrimental to their learning pathway. Indeed, as we showed, many lecturers found it crucial and beneficial to be paired and work with 'outsiders'.

These elements and situations should be carefully considered and addressed by academic developers both in communicating with participants and designing the activity, ensuring confidentiality and a safe and supportive space that allows teachers to share concerns and doubts, open themselves up, and question their professional practice to achieve transformative potential. On the other hand, a further vital theme and challenge concerns formal university recognition and the valorisation of peer observation experiences. Indeed, faculty development activities in general, and the peer observation protocol in particular, require a significant amount of time and work, often coinciding with extra work beyond usual academic activities and not formally recognized by the institution. Therefore, academics often struggle to find the time and motivation to participate in such activities, and even when they are highly motivated and make room for it, they may feel a sense of frustration about the lack of recognition of their commitment to their students and organization. The following extracts reporting participants' suggestions to improve the method and the project illustrate our claim:

> *"projects like this should be part of the formal teaching training and recognized from the different institutions"*
>
> *"To give more visibility to this kind of experience. Our participation in this project is volunteering and can be, instead, part of our formal teaching training. It should be better formalized and recognized from our institution."*
>
> *"The whole process is time consuming and having an official certificate/recognition would be something that a participant could appreciate. I myself would really like to have it."*
>
> *"Have you thought about assigning Open Badges for participation in the project? I believe there are the requisites, it would be greatly appreciated by those who have participated in the various initiatives and would certainly encourage other teachers to participate."*
>
> *"Elaborating some type of academic incentive to stimulate more people to participate in this process"*

These findings illuminate how even voluntarily highly motivated academics can experience a sense of dissatisfaction with the lack of institutional recognition and incentive, recognizing that without it academic colleagues may not be motivated enough to join a reflective and collaborative journey like this one. In this regard, linking professional development activities to systems of institutional reward, such as digital badges,

represents a way to recognize and value the commitment of academics to improve their teaching and students' learning experience. Digital badges are forms of micro-credentialing that provide a way to recognize and highlight skills, competencies and achievements, such as the completion of a project or the accumulation of experience, documenting the professional learning development attained (Bowen & Thomas, 2014). Therefore, digital badges may provide additional incentives, motivating people to engage meaningfully with professional learning activities, documenting informal and formal learning in a flexible way. However, digital badges also present potential disadvantages, such as the risk of alienating well-intentioned and self-motivated learners, stressing the achievement of digital badges as the main reason to pursue professional learning (Finkelstein, Knight, & Manning, 2013). In this regard, Abramovich et al (2013) claim that a badge in which both participation and skills are recognized can be more effective in increasing the overall motivation to engage in a meaningful way with professional learning activities. On the other hand, Janzow (2014) stresses that a flexible and versatile badging system, characterized by some degree of user control and therefore adapting to user needs, can help individuals to set goals, highlight their qualifications and share achievements with professional networks.

The design of systems of institutional rewards and recognition, however, must be carefully addressed by academic developers wishing to create a culture of professional development that is developmental, collaborative, and emancipatory, and not perceived as close to inspection and quality assurance schemes. The risk is that the pre-existing organizational culture of quality assurance can absorb and shape through the design of digital badges the developmental, collaborative, and non-judgemental nature of the successful schemes according to their implicit rationale. In line with these considerations, in close collaboration with the university working group and office on teaching innovation and academic development, we developed a flexible system of badging, which encompasses a user-based approach with a plurality of experiences leading to badge obtainment (**see Figure 2 and the webpage for further information**).

Peer observation

The holder of this badge has taken part in a class-based or online peer-observation programme recognised by University of Padova. Peer observation is designed to support the professional development of participating teachers and to foster the improvement of teaching by observation, analysis, reflection and discussion of teaching practice with at least one colleague. Peer observation can be carried out:

- locally and in the classroom, with class-based observation and face-to-face meetings with a colleague in a bid to promote support strategies and, where possible, to set up a Faculty Learning Community;
- online and internationally, by watching recordings and holding virtual feedback meetings in order to promote intercultural exchange and dialogue on teaching and learning strategies in a range of contexts, and thus contribute to the internationalisation of university teaching.

Figure 2. Webpage for the peer observation Open Badge released by the University of Padua

The badge recognizes both academics' participation and skills development, motivating teachers to engage in ways that fit their needs and making them autonomous and responsible agents of their own professional learning. Drawing on the insights we gained from implementing cross-institutional peer observation, the badge recognizes the participation in two different peer observation experiences, depending on and adapting to academics' needs and expectations: one is local and face-to-face, with colleagues from the same department or institution observing in-class teaching; the second is totally online, based on the use of video-recordings and video-conference technologies, with colleagues from different institutions at a national or

international level. Giving academics the possibility of choosing from different experiences has the advantage of addressing both educational and psychological needs, while potentially developing institutional and cross-institutional faculty learning communities. Both activities include the completion of a training course on peer observation, incorporating the theoretical principles and frameworks at its basis (e.g. peer review, feedback, reflective frameworks), ad-hoc tools for the observation and analysis of teaching (e.g. grids, checklists, prompts for reflective writing), and strategies for collaborative reflection and feedback – plus training on digital technologies in the case of online peer observation – in order to develop the skill set required for peer observation. The latter are: organizational, to design and implement peer observation activities autonomously; metacognitive, to critically reflect on teaching, revising the role of personal beliefs, assumptions and values; analytical, identifying and analysing teaching situations, challenges, opportunities and strategies; communicative, building new knowledge in a collaborative way and developing feedback competencies.

The badge is awarded to all those teachers who complete the training and the activity as both observers and observed teachers. We stress that the badge is presented and considered not as an achievement per se, but rather as an incentive to learn and experiment with peer observation, providing teachers with an artefact and learning gain for inquiring into and reflecting on teaching collaboratively, which can be further used for professional development.

Conclusions

In this case study we reflected on our experience of developing a peer observation of teaching scheme, trying to unveil how challenges pertaining academics' assumptions can represent a barrier to the buy-in, appreciation, and transformative potential of peer observation. We stress that multiple pre-conceptions about peer observation and feedback linked with quality assurance schemes or peer review mechanisms of research are often at stake, and influence how peer observation is conceived and experienced. Among these, a shared conception of peer observation and feedback as evaluative processes in contrast to their developmental potential represent a great challenge. This highlights the need to develop commonly understood discourses about teaching and learning, as well as about professional learning, to critically engage in reflective practice and conversation with fellow teachers. Every kind of academic development activity brings out different challenges and tensions that academic developers must be ready to acknowledge immediately and take action on coherently. Here we discussed some of the challenges and tensions, highlighting how we attempted to minimise the negative impact by considering the interrelation between individuals and their context. Academic participants should be encouraged to express, deconstruct and be aware about their assumptions, their ground, and the potential effects of these pre-conceptions in their participation in academic development. To change academics perception, an emphasis should be put on aligning peer observation with professional development and learning, stressing the formative rather than summative potential of feedback (e.g. Bingham & Ottewill, 2001), and addressing the differences between peer review in research and in teaching.

Beyond that, in order to acknowledge and appreciate peer observation and feedback as professional learning strategies, academics should reposition themselves as novices and educational objects, which may be perceived as a threat to professional identity and raise resistance, in line with the diffused culture on deficit thinking in current higher education. Peer observation could lead to instances of high vulnerability, which require fostering trust and collegiality between partners. In this matter, the selection of a peer observation partner is crucial and to maximise the developmental opportunity academics should be given the chance to choose partnerships fitting their psychological and professional needs.

Many authors (e.g. Knight & Trowler, 2000) stress the value of collegial reflection organized at a university or departmental level – recognized as the natural level university activity – to reduce isolation and allow mutual support. However, this consideration underestimates the complex politics of interpersonal relationships. As Iqbal (2014) puts it, the required levels of trust and collegiality that shape colleagues' feedback practices may not exist in some higher educational contexts, where hostile or negative working relationships are often present. To address subjective feelings of unease or anxiety related to peer

observation with close colleagues, we found that giving participants agency in the choice of their partners and relying on the (institutional or disciplinary) diversity of perspectives in the partnership, characterized by individuals with neutral working relationships, was effective and beneficial. It facilitated substantial openness and sharedness, providing a safer space where even critical feedback was perceived as non-judgemental, constructive, and well-received.

We highlight that a few factors pertaining to agency and ownership were crucial in determining the positive evaluation and effective outcomes of peer observation: having an active role in selecting the partner; making decisions regarding the process (e.g. what should be observed, on which receive feedback on); discussing in advance with the partner developmental objectives and expectations and focusing on them in the observation, feedback and reflection in order to construct a feasible action plan.

In this regard, the very peer-focused nature and horizontality of the experience should be promoted and ensured in the eyes of academic teachers. On one hand, the peer observation experience needs to be promoted, supported and officially recognized by the university in order to encourage and motivate teaching staff to engage in professional learning. The design of systems of institutional reward, the encouragement and support by departmental leaders and educational developers are crucial. On the other hand, in line with quality assurance mechanisms operating in higher education, this top-down operation may raise confidentiality concerns, suspicion about inspection and surveillance and lead to emotional distress or disengagement. Ensuring confidentiality and a safe and supportive space that allows teachers to open themselves up, share and discuss their concerns, doubts and insights into teaching and learning with fellow teachers is fundamental. To summarize this point, ownership, mutual respect, trust, confidentiality, and developmental partnership and non-evaluative collaboration are the most crucial factors to be addressed for an effective and non-detrimental experience.

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