

Supporting and mentoring teachers

Observation as a teacher development tool

Observation in mentoring

Observation can be one of the most useful means of successful mentoring. This can take place in great variety of ways; from sitting with the mentee for the lesson, to observing part of the lesson, or perhaps combining this with the mentee exploiting self-observation techniques. Further approaches make use of video recording and, where the mentor is not working in the same place as the mentee, for example if they are working at a branch in another city, sending or uploading the video recording for feedback. The key factor enabling successful observation in mentoring is to make sure this is completely detached from any observation for performance assessment, and to create trust, transparency and honesty.

Who is observation for?

Newly qualified teachers	Experienced teachers	Teacher educators
Teachers who are newly qualified will need to gain experience in developmental observations on their lesson planning and teaching and acting on feedback. This will enhance their own selfawareness and insight into their own teaching and their learners, as well as encouraging more ideas and development of materials and resources. The process of observing and delivering feedback will also develop the skills and professional practices of the mentor, and greater experience will reinforce this.	If teachers are already experienced, then engaging in developmental observation will build on their experience and provide further insight and awareness of both the learning area and the learners themselves. Such teachers may also want to prepare for further professional and career development. In terms of the CPD Framework for teachers they could be supported in moving from the stages of awareness and understanding, to engagement and finally integration.	The range of possible observation areas increases significantly at this level, for there are options to include observations of teaching students, training teachers, delivering feedback, and also preparation and planning sessions. Mentoring is also likely to include peer observations of other colleagues at similar stages of development.

Knowledge and skills required

- As a minimum you should have the professional practices and enabling skills to teach.
- Your skills in observation and feedback should be commensurate with your teaching or educator experience; including length of time, context and previous observation experience.
- Minimum professional standards as stipulated by the country you work in and the organisation you work for.
- Knowledge and skills of observation and feedback methods and approaches required to educate colleagues across a range of contexts, including the context you already work in.

- Familiarity with observation tools set out in the Teacher Educator Framework ‘monitoring teacher potential and performance’.

How you develop

There are two key areas that build and develop the professional practice of mentoring through observation: experience and reading and research.

Experience	Reading and research
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Build on experience in observing and being observed. 2. Develop and practise varied feedback techniques. 3. Explore and experience varied methods and approaches to observation, including face-to-face and remote models. 4. Enhance experience in the role of observation within a mentoring and developmental framework. 5. Develop experience of observation as a continued programme within mentoring and development, contrasting this with a single observation of one teacher for assessment purposes. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Research the role of observation and mentoring in your own organisation. 2. Find out as much as possible from your own colleagues about their own opinions and experiences of being observed. 3. Keep up-to-date with reading of periodicals which frequently discuss mentoring and observation issues. Examples are the ‘TESOL Quarterly’, ‘Applied Linguistics’, ‘ELT Journal’, ‘Applied Psycholinguistics’, ‘Second Language Research’, and ‘Language Learning’. 4. Explore further research through specialised texts such as ‘Classroom Observation Tasks for Teachers and Trainers’.

Task

Read the statements below. Which of the six views do you think are most appropriate in the developmental and mentoring contexts? What are the reasons for your choices?

Approaches to observation

The following statements reflect common but varied opinions on observation generally. These are not just confined to observation within a mentoring programme but are nevertheless relevant and useful to reflect on:

1. Observation helps to show where teachers need to improve. I point out their mistakes and tell them how to improve. I think we need to be critical – otherwise how will they improve?
2. I identify what they did well and discuss what could be improved. I offer practical suggestions, but I also encourage them to reflect and come up with their own ideas.
3. I use my greater experience and knowledge to help them to do better. I carry out follow-up observations where I expect to see improvements.
4. I deconstruct the workshop and go through it section by section looking at what they could do better. I do highlight what they did well, but it’s important to deal with what they did wrong.
5. I see observation as a way of supporting teachers’ continuing professional development. It should be non-judgmental.

6. I like to point out things I've learnt from them. I divide feedback into: what went well; what needs attention; what should be prioritised. Then I ask how they would like me to help them.

Commentary

Some of the language used in Approach 1 is rather critical, judgmental and authoritarian, i.e. 'mistakes' 'I think we need to be critical', 'what they do wrong' 'my greater experience and knowledge', 'I expect to see improvements'. Contrast this with the comments in Approach 5: 'it should be non-judgmental', 'I encourage them to reflect and come up with their own ideas', 'I like to point out things I have learnt from them.'

Think about the impact of the contrasting approaches. For example, in the first approach, is there a tendency to look for the negative rather than the positive? Do some teachers or educators expect the teacher being observed to be almost like copies of themselves? Negative feedback can not only have a negative impact on confidence, it can also suppress ideas and creativity.

An approach which encourages critical reflection on performance, whilst at the same time supporting and guiding them to research, explore and experiment with ideas, is more likely to enable them to develop and improve.

This approach does not mean that problems or issues are ignored. It is important that we are able to identify and understand where things did not go well. The observer can help by asking guiding questions, encouraging them to reflect, and helping them explore different ways of resolving these.

Suggested reading

The impact of observation on teachers classroom behaviour:

www.teachingenglish.org.uk/biblio/teacher-appraisal-impact-observationteachers-classroom-behaviour-0

Observations – why bother?

<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/observations-why-bother>

Mentor story: <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/blogs/ninamk/mentor-story>

Developing through CPD programmes:

www.teachingenglish.org.uk/blogs/sandymillin/sandy-millin-developingmyself-others