Maximising vocational teachers' learning through developmental observation

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This chapter aims to provide an account of case study research which explored the experiences of Further Education (FE) vocational teachers' observations as they completed in-service initial teacher training (ITT) programmes in England. The research emerged as a result of my own professional experiences as a teacher trainer and, in particular, my interest in the outcomes of teaching observations. My professional reflections over 25 years as both a college and university based teacher trainer led me to conclude that the process of observation and, particularly, the feedback opportunities it presented, provided one of the most challenging and engaging aspects of initial training for FE teachers. Yet despite the statutory requirement to observe FE teachers-in-training (2007-2013), research exploring FE ITT observations has been negligible to date. Case study research into the use and value of ITT observations for vocational teachers was therefore conducted not only to help rectify this situation, but also to ensure that observation practices are more visible in published research. The recommendations that emerged from the research were aimed at developing practice in relation to the initial training of vocational teachers in colleges and also at generating further understanding of the phenomena of observation itself.

The focus for this chapter is an aspect of vocational teachers' observations – the post observation feedback discussion. It will be argued that it is during the feedback discussion that the so-called developmental aspect of ITT observation takes place. This in itself is not new. Others writing about the ITT of FE teachers more broadly have shown that FE teachers-in-training generally

valued ITT observations and saw the feedback that followed observations as helpful in their professional development (Harkin et al, 2003; Orr and Simmons 2010). But rarely had the focus been specifically on vocational teachers' experiences of observation as they crossed boundaries from their respective vocational fields into teaching. Furthermore, there were few accounts of the observation experience itself.

The chapter is structured in three parts. First, a background to the research will be provided explaining why it focussed on vocational teachers' ITT observations and what was already known about ITT observations. Secondly, the research approach taken will be explained and the case study sample outlined. The third section presents the findings and offers a discussion of these in relation to understanding vocational teachers' development. The chapter will end with recommendations to maximize vocational teachers' learning through ITT observations.

Why Vocational teachers?

For the purpose of this discussion, vocational teachers are defined as those involved in teaching on courses where, following the conclusions of the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL) there is a '*Clear line of sight to work*' (LSIS, 2013:7). In other words, vocational teachers work with learners to develop the knowledge and skills required for entry into a specific occupational sector. Discussions within the literature on vocational education and training (VET) have established that alongside the development of knowledge and skills, a central aspect of learning on vocational courses is the development of an associated identity described, by some, as a process of becoming (Colley, 2003). Given that I have worked with FE

teachers-in-training for more than twenty years, I was aware of the complexity in the development of a teacher identity for vocational teachers - their respective 'process of becoming'. This is because vocational teachers have an established vocational expertise and enter teaching with an occupational identity already formed (see inter alia, Bathmaker and Avis, 2005; Orr and Simmons, 2010). This has led many to define vocational teachers as being 'dual professionals' (Robson, 1998). With this descriptor comes an acknowledgement of a complexity in not only the development of a teacher identity, rarely experienced by other FE teachers of History, Physics, Maths or English, for example, but also in the development of pedagogy.

Moodie and Wheelahan (2012) argue that this complexity exists because vocational teachers can be seen to be involved in the reformulation of vocational knowledge from work, where it has mainly a productive function, to a teaching/learning function. I have argued elsewhere (Lahiff, 2015), that it is this reformulation that is being observed in vocational teachers' teaching observations. For these professional and research-based reasons, the research focussed on vocational teachers' experiences of teaching observations and examined the use and value that these experiences afford.

Research on Teaching Observation

Irrespective of whether ITT for FE has been undertaken on a voluntary or statutory basis, observing teachers in their place of work has always featured in FE ITT programmes since their inception after the Second World War. Prior to the introduction of mandatory observations for FE ITT in 2007, research on FE observations had shown that FE teachers generally valued the

observations they experienced in ITT as it assisted their development in the early days of teaching. The research also identified the critical factors underpinning what were seen to be successful ITT teaching observations. These included the establishment of a relationship between the observer and observee and the opportunity to engage in discussion about the observed teaching. Significantly, research by Cockburn (2005) and, most recently, O'Leary (2012, 2013) established that FE teachers clearly differentiated between observations conducted for different purposes. Observations taking place in FE have therefore largely been modelled dualistically – with observations conducted for ITT viewed as part of a developmental discourse as opposed to part of a Quality Assurance (QA) discourse associated with Ofsted grading criteria for inspection. Matt O'Leary has, however, warned of the encroachment of a QA discourse into observations conducted as part of ITT in FE.

While ITT observations had therefore been defined as/understood to be developmental in purpose in contrast to QA observations, two additional issues were of interest to me. These were, firstly, the rather 'taken-for-granted' nature of the phenomenon of observation and secondly, the nature of the development envisaged. With respect to the former, I wanted to question how observation *per se* was conducted because this would enhance understanding of ITT observations. With respect to the latter, I wanted to capture the development in action in relation to vocational teachers. This chapter will focus on findings in relation to the second issue. However, a brief overview of the first issue is provided to help set the context for the research.

When the observation process is taken for granted it is assumed that observation 'just happens'. In other words that it is just a matter of watching what takes place. One of the implications of this is that observation is perceived as a passive process. In this kind of understanding of any observation process, such things as the relationship between the observer, the observed and the historical and cultural context in which the observation takes place are deemed less important than adopting the appropriate method of observation. Moreover, the process of observation becomes opaque. However, my research led to the conclusion that any act of observation is actually extraordinarily complex. Far from a passive (and neutral) activity led by an observer, as is often conceived, an examination of processes involved in observation *per se* reveals a more active role for the observer. The observer can be seen to be engaged in a highly selective process when observing - whether observing teaching or anything else. This is because in observing action we simply cannot take in everything we see, so implicitly and/or explicitly we use 'filters' to guide our observation. Wragg (1999), in a seminal text on conducting classroom observations in primary schools, drew attention to these conceptual issues when considering the phenomenon of observations of teaching. For Wragg, there is the real possibility that an observer may delude themselves about what is happening, partly because in observing others, we often "…observe what we want to see" (ibid:vii). Similarly, O'Leary's (2014) account of classroom observation as a method for studying teaching and learning demonstrates that, by itself, observation can only provide a 'partial view' (2014:68) of teaching and learning and highlights the importance of gathering information from multiple sources before any judgement of practice is made.

Although not the central aspect being discussed in this chapter, my argument is that it is crucial to conceptualise observation as an active, complex, constructed process, framed by context as opposed to a neutral, passive process which ignores context. This means that in researching observations it is important to consider such things as the past experiences observers bring to the observation process and to understand the 'filters' used when observing. Questions such as these necessarily raise important issues regarding how this complex process can be captured in research. The next section therefore provides an overview of the approach taken to the case study research.

Approach taken to Research

As has been clarified, observations conducted for FE ITT have traditionally been seen as part of a developmental discourse, with the opportunity for the parties involved to discuss the observed teaching and to consider improvements. These are key aspects of the developmental discourse. However, it has also been established that little attention has been paid in the literature to capturing the processes involved in observations conducted in vocational education. In developing the research strategy, ITT observations for vocational teachers were understood to be framed by a broadly developmental purpose; to occur in workplaces (FE colleges) as examples of situated practice and were conceptualised as a process i.e. as a sequence of events. It was also recognised that teaching observations conducted for ITT have a history – they are the product of cultural practices and historical events that have shaped them with rules and practices guiding practice. For example, with effect from 2007 not only the number of observations to be

conducted were regulated for the first time in FE ITT, but also the requirement that workplace mentors should be involved in completing observations.

The starting point for the adoption of a specific methodological framing for this research was the following quote from Miettinen (2000:63).

> "Observation necessarily takes place in a certain activity, context or thought community, using the concepts, instruments and conventions historically developed in that context. They steer the observations, and with them the observer interprets and generalises what is seen and regarded as problematic and important."

This then led to the socio cultural approach of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) framing the research. [1] Whilst it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a comprehensive overview of the approach, the essence of the approach is captured by the quotation provided. Specifically, that we should recognise that any type of human activity takes place in a context and that the activity has a cultural, social, historical 'memory'. The focus of inquiry is on the purpose of the activity as it will influence the way in which those involved in the activity approach it and use resources and artefacts designed for the purpose. The activity (in this case,

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[1] For an account of CHAT, Bakhurst's (2009) Reflections on Activity Theory, is helpful and The University of Warwick's Institute for Employment Research has a brief overview of CHAT at: https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/glacier/learning/theories/activitytheory/

teaching observation) is the prime unit of analysis (Engeström, 2001). In relation to ITT observations, adopting CHAT provided a way of modelling and then theorising the complex phenomenon of observation. Specifically, it offered a lens through which to view observation practices in colleges. Crucial to this modelling were the conceptual tools CHAT provided. This meant I could capture observations in action having accepted that they were framed by rules and regulations; took place in specific communities; had specific participants (vocational teachers) and observers (education tutors and vocational mentors), defined as subjects in CHAT; involved specific observation artefacts, such as observation proformas and feedback discussions, and the purpose of the observation was developmental. Diagram 1, below, is adapted from the modelling used in the research, with the activity represented by a central triangle, as is common in CHAT.

Figure 1: Modelling of ITT teaching observations
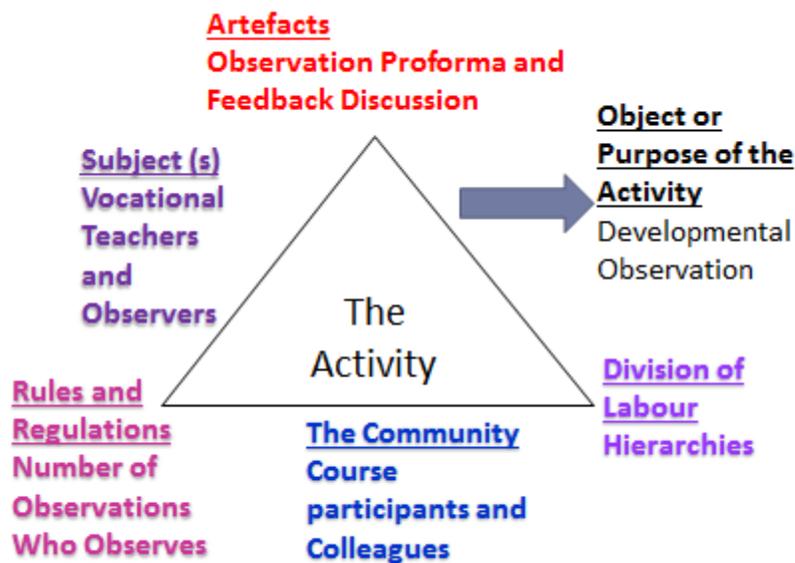
My intention was not to compare practices but, rather, to develop accounts of what took place in ITT observations and to identify the form(s) that development took. This meant being able to accept that whilst different people were involved in observations at different times and in different settings, they were all, in theory at least, working toward an object – the developing practice of the vocational teacher.

Methodology

Once an appropriate framing had been decided, gaining an understanding of the processes as well as the outcomes of ITT observations meant that in-depth qualitative case studies were most appropriate. My ethical stance towards collecting accounts of observation practices meant that I excluded any prior knowledge of or involvement with the various ITT consortiums I had worked with. This meant that the case study sample built from information about the research that I sent out to a number of ITT consortia which offered part-time, in-service awards in the South East of England. The sample was, therefore, convenience in type, but because I also wanted to include vocational teachers from different occupational backgrounds and achieve a gender balance, it also had purposive features. The case study sample therefore consisted of six vocational teachers and their two respective ITT observers (education tutors and vocational mentors). During the course of the research, I had to exclude data from one case study participant. This left five vocational areas: catering; health and social care; specialist make-up (hairdressing for performing arts); plastering and painting and decorating. The vocational teachers were either towards the end of the first year of their ITT or in the second year of the course. All of them had completed at least two ITT observations prior to taking part in the research.

Table 1 summarises the participants and pseudonyms used.

Vocational Area	Vocational Teacher	Education Tutor Vocational Mentor	College
Catering	Johnson	Denis Rachel	West College
Health and Social Care	Maria	Laura Delia	North College
Specialist Make-up (Hairdressing)	Alan	Shirley Miriam	East College
Plastering	Clive	Anna Vince	South College
Painting and decorating	Simona	Anna Julie	South College

Participants agreed that I could observe their respective practice, which included the ITT observation and the feedback discussion which followed. Field notes and sketches were made to record the observations of teaching and an audio recording of the feedback discussion was made. The research observations were followed by individual in-depth interviews with all participants in the study. The interviews provided information about the participants' previous vocational and/or educational backgrounds. Ensuring that participants' biographies were captured enabled me to place the vocational teachers and their observers culturally and historically – a crucial element in adopting a CHAT approach. Interviews also captured participants' accounts of the purpose of ITT observations and gave them the opportunity to discuss the practices that had been observed. Conducted over a period of 18 months, both methods provided rich, qualitative data from which the following discussion is just a selection.

Findings and discussion

Two aspects of the findings are reported in this chapter. Firstly, what was actually being developed during the observation process and secondly, how did the development take-place? When findings from the observations and the interviews conducted were analysed, I found that two interacting types of development were evident. I called these types of development *the development of pedagogic expertise* and the *development of pedagogic expertise for vocational practice* (Lahiff, 2015). These are explained in the next section.

In relation to the observations where education tutors and vocational teachers were concerned, the theories and concepts which informed respective ITT courses were seen to frame the vocational teachers' development. That is, education tutors approached the observations by focusing on the development of particular approaches to planning, managing and assessing learning. These can be characterised as more student-centred, active learning approaches to teaching and learning, including the use of group and paired work and clear strategies for differentiating learning and the use of assessment for learning. These approaches to learning have their roots in educational theories from cognitive and social constructivist approaches and commonly underpin ITT courses in England. Vocational teachers and their respective education tutor observers were therefore seen to be working towards the *development of pedagogic expertise* framed by these culturally valued approaches to teaching and learning.

The developmental purpose of observations conducted by vocational mentors is captured by the following quotation from Vince, a vocational mentor observer from the plastering case study:

> Vince : ...if you're going into an observation...if you're observing anyone, a student, a teacher or whoever, they've all got to be developmental, there's no point in observing someone [otherwise]...because it doesn't go anywhere.

Where observations involved vocational teachers and their respective vocational mentors, I also found the *development of pedagogic expertise* where parties involved approached the observation by considering accepted theories of learning as described above. However, this approach on its own was not sufficient to capture the vocational aspect of the learning where vocational mentors acted as observers. Instead, the analysis demonstrated that additional elements influenced the type of development envisaged in these cases. In the observations of practice I conducted and in the accounts of observation practice gleaned from interviews, respective vocational knowledge and the awareness of the purpose of vocational learning, underpinned practice. With one exception (the health and social care case study) the vocational was evident due to the emphasis given in the feedback discussion to such things as how vocational teachers took into account the development of vocational students' time-efficient, safe practice when planning and managing learning. The importance of the vocational context in the development of practice was central to the development of practice. For these reasons the *development of pedagogic expertise for vocational practice* was seen as a more appropriate descriptor. In the section that follows, some illustrative examples of both of these forms of development are provided.

How did the development take-place?

Whether the purpose of the observation was the development of *pedagogic expertise*, or *pedagogic expertise for vocational practice,* the feedback discussion provided the context for development. In all the case studies, vocational teachers relished the opportunity to both discuss the observed teaching and consider how they could put ideas generated into practice. This does not mean to say that ITT observations were anxiety-free for vocational teachers. Far from it; but the knowledge that they would talk about the observed session with the observer whose role it was to facilitate their development and with whom they had established a relationship helped ease the anxiety.

The nature of the relationship between the vocational teacher and the observer was, indeed, a key factor in learning from the experience of observation. In all cases, vocational teachers spoke in earnest about the importance of building a relationship with the observer. With an established relationship, came trust and the realisation that both participants in the observation were actively working towards the same goal: the vocational teacher's development.

In the examples that follow, the importance and nature of the relationship in these developmental observations are captured. For Maria, the health and social care teacher, trust would not develop if there was not honesty. As she commented: *"You really need to be honest; not in denial".* Similarly, Clive, the plastering teacher, spoke of honesty and how a positive relationship ensured that there were opportunities to fully engage in the feedback discussion with the observer. In

relation to his experience of feedback discussions with education tutor observers, he shed light on the nature of the discussion by suggesting:

> Clive: I can question it, there's no problem with that, you can sort of go "well what's all this about then" you know, there's no problem with that. So you can question it and it's honest in my opinion.

The account of the specialist make-up vocational teacher, Alan, endorsed the view that a positive, respectful relationship would bring greater benefits to development than otherwise. As he explained, familiarity would not breed contempt:

> Alan : [the observer] is not going to fluff around it because she likes you, do you know what I mean?...she's going to tell you how it is.

However, where the relationship has not been established as firmly as would be liked for developmental observations, one education tutor, Anna, spoke of the damaging effects - on not only the observation experience but the learning itself. She suggested that in these situations:

> … students still think it's an Ofsted inspection. They have to get everything right; they have got to show me how they can tell students off and deal with behaviour …There is a mismatch…

The relationship that had been established therefore provided the foundations for the developmental feedback discussion between observers and vocational teachers. In all cases, the

discussion took place face-to-face – either immediately after the observed session or within 10 days. The next section moves onto explore the nature of the discussion.

Overall, the research established that the feedback discussion acted as a verbal and developmental space where vocational teachers and observers use and develop the language of pedagogy (Lahiff, 2015). In other words, in the analysis of feedback discussions, vocational teachers and their respective observers were, to a greater or lesser extent, actively engaged in developing strategies for practice. An extract from the catering case study feedback discussion is provided, first, to illustrate the nature of engagement and the modelling of feedback practice.

The thirty minute feedback discussion between the vocational teacher, Johnson, and his education tutor, Denis, followed an observation of Johnson in a classroom where he had been teaching students on a short course on food safety. The feedback discussion addressed a complex issue of the frequency, use, and length of a number of anecdotal stories that emerged from Johnson's extensive catering experience which were shared with students throughout the lesson. Denis, who had extensive experience of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) prior to becoming an education tutor, thought that these lengthy anecdotes were illustrative of 'incidental language', during which students were seen to be 'just listening'. Nevertheless, to address this in the feedback, Denis first acknowledged the stories as a 'valuable resource' that Johnson could bring to the teaching of food safety in that they brought the topic to life. However, he also asked Johnson to consider ways in which these could be turned to more 'academic advantage in teaching'. He followed this with a number of examples of how the stories could be

used as part of a more learner-centred activity, rather than just relying on students' listening. Once a couple of examples were given, Johnson joined in and indicated that he had understood what was being proposed:

> Denis: So, you tell the story and then get them to fill the gaps … or make it a case study … [or a] problem-solving activity … …
>
> Johnson: And…. they could say what happens next!...
>
> Denis: Yes … Yes … Tweaking so it is less listening and more activity.

While it may have been easier to say 'cut these anecdotes down' or to undervalue the contribution of real-life anecdotes to the vocational learner, it is here that Johnson and Denis can be seen, instead, to be actively engaged in developing strategies for practice.

A similar engagement can be seen in the following extract from the plastering case study. In this extract, the observer, Anna, and vocational teacher, Clive, are discussing the use of peer assessment.

> Anna: I thought that peer assessment was quite well done […] it seemed to be quite natural in your session; it's not something out of the ordinary. [You asked a student]…"would you be satisfied as a customer with this?"
>
> Clive: To be honest with you, that's one of my [approaches]. They need to train themselves to spot errors or problems...And I often say to them "would you pay for it?", that is your [peer assessment]question, "would you pay for it?".

Clive was therefore able to explain to his education tutor observer that his strategy for peer assessment emerged from his vocational context: preparing plastering students for work. The developmental aspect grew out of this exchange in that the discussion then led to a sharing of strategies as to how Clive might move onto develop peer assessment to include the development of strategies to record individual student progression and achievement.

In many instances, it might have been easier for the observer to simply tell the vocational teacher what s/he could do, from their perspective, to enhance the learning of the students. Instead, in all of the case study post observation feedback discussions observed, there was a form of engagement to either identify the aspects of the session that appeared to work well/less well and/or to draw out the potential strategies for action in future teaching sessions. Furthermore, either consciously or otherwise, the discussion can be seen as modelling processes involved in giving feedback.

As described earlier, in the observations where the purpose was the development of *pedagogic expertise for vocational practice,* the engagement was framed, specifically, by the vocational. This included an awareness of the need for vocational students to develop time-efficient, safe vocational practice. This framing emphasises the importance of vocationally-specific mentor observers in the development of vocational teachers. Alan, the specialist make-up vocational teacher, clearly demonstrated his existing awareness of the need for his students to develop time-efficient practice in the following extract:

Alan : There's no point in letting [students] take 7 hours or 2 or 3 weeks to make something, because it's impractical, you know. It's like hair styles, when they're putting rollers in, [I'm saying]…"No girls you've got 7 minutes, literally 7 minutes to get a whole head of rollers in; you've got 10 minutes to do a blow dry"…

However, although Alan was aware of the need for time-efficient practice, his vocational mentor, Miriam, drew his attention to the need to encourage students to set up their workstations according to whether they were right or left handed in order to enhance speed of practice. She had observed that students were stretching across their workstations which not only limited the development of speed of practice but also compromised student's safe practice. This safe practice reminder extended to the application of health and safety regulations to the checks on the student uniform. As she said: ' *big earring, they all love them, but it is a health and safety risk!'*.

Similarly, in preparation for the post-observation feedback discussion Rachel, the catering vocational mentor, emphasised the importance of time-efficient practice in catering and why this aspect framed parts of her feedback discussion with Johnson:

Rachel: When you go into industry, we haven't got half an hour to go around and collect our ingredients, the chef would be cursing, he'd be swearing at you and he'd go "there's the door, goodbye!".

From Rachel's perspective the vocational teacher therefore needed to be attuned to the learning and teaching compromises necessary when students were at the start as opposed to the later stages of their courses. This meant that feedback discussions needed to reflect the specific challenges of planning teaching and learning in vocational contexts. In the case study example, strategies were shared with Johnson to help his students develop time-bound vocational practice:

> Rachel: you need a time clock, you need a time clock ticking away. "So you've got 15 minutes, here's the clock", this is how I teach them when I'm teaching it, when they just begin. I put it on the television [in the restaurant] and say "You've got 20 minutes to do this task, at the 20 minutes we stop".

The feedback discussion therefore offered opportunities not only to share strategies for the vocational context, but also to engage in finding solutions to real challenges as experienced by vocational teachers.

Conclusions

In considering the development of vocational teachers through the use of ITT observations, I have argued that, first and foremost, observation has to be conceptualised as an active, complex, constructed process, framed by context. It needs to be accepted that observation is not a neutral, value-free process. The purpose of the observation, I have argued, drives the experience. For observations conducted by education tutors, the purpose was seen to be the *development of pedagogic expertise,* and for observations conducted by vocational mentors, the additional

dimension of the development of *pedagogic expertise for vocational practice* was identified. From the case study research conducted, the post-observation feedback discussion was seen to offer a learning space where the development of vocational teachers' pedagogy is situated - framed by the relationships established by participants. This space is particularly important for vocational teachers as they cross boundaries from their vocational contexts and learn to become teachers. To some extent the feedback discussion is a classic example of learning as a social practice, where participants learn as part of social engagement with others (Felstead et al, 2009).

Following from the insight gleaned from the research, some implications for practice are clear:

1. Vocational teachers can and do learn from ITT observations where their purpose is developmental. Observers engaged in ITT observations need to ensure that they resist what might be seen as institutional/policy 'raids' into ITT observation practice.

2. There are no 'quick fixes' regarding the development of vocational teachers' practice. The case studies of vocational teachers on which this research was based were undergoing a two year part-time programme of study in which they were able to develop relationships with education tutors and vocationally-specific mentors. To maximize learning from ITT observation, vocational teachers need the time and the opportunity to develop their practice with others who mediate their learning.

3. ITT observers whether education tutors or vocational mentors are engaged in a skilled and knowledgeable process. Their expertise includes the ability to draw upon their respective professional and vocational knowledge to facilitate the development of vocational teachers.

4. Those of us who are involved in and committed to vocational teachers' development should celebrate these workplace learning practices by making them visible in research. It perhaps goes without saying that the development of vocational teachers lies at the heart of attempts to unlock vocational students' learning: we should not therefore undermine its importance or its complexity.

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