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 Critical reflections on formal teaching observations

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Article

<u>Critical Reflections of Formal Teaching Observations</u>

Critical reflection theory emerged in the field of education with Merizow (1990) and Brookfield (1995), as a process of enquiry and is essential to the theory of transformative learning, later adapted by other fields, including nursing (Mortari, 2015; Papathanasiou, et al 2023). Reflection itself is a process of analysing experiences, synthesising information, and evaluating events to enhance strategies and share best practices (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2019; Health and Care Professions Council, 2021; Do, *et al* 2022). Cultivated through the art of learning, reflection can be nurtured and encouraged to facilitate a deep inquiry into one's inner self (Mortari, 2015).

As a registered mental health nurse and lecturer at a University in the United Kingdom (UK), I use reflective tools to develop my teaching skills, for example, lesson evaluations and teaching observations. To illustrate this, I will use formal classroom observations as one approach to guided reflection. Classroom observations not only provide an essential role in the visibility of teaching and learning, but also allows for constructive critical feedback for improvement (Granstrom, *et al* 2023). Both in nursing and teaching, there is emphasis on the need for efficient, regular reflective practice, not to identify negative aspects of it, but to transform professional practice (Ofsted, 2018).

For the purpose of this paper, I will provide a summary of my formal teaching observations and critically reflect on the themes that emerged. The themes extracted from the formal teaching observations are *motivation, the teachers' voice, use of abbreviations and acronyms, and the use of exemplars.*

<u>Teaching observations</u>

A teaching observation allows the observer (peer) to extract information from the observed (the teacher) and assess the student learning and educational environment. The observations may be formal or informal. Formal teaching observations are normally scheduled in advance and information on the lesson plan, level/year of student is provided pre-lesson and feedback is provided to the observed post-lesson. It is expected that the observer will offer fair and constructive feedback through a fair appraisal system and feedback should consist of how to enhance good practice (to support staff development needs, address student engagement and classroom environment, and improve student educational outcomes) (Compton, 2016). Peer observation and evaluation should not be seen as a draconian practice, but an aid to enhance the teaching experience and promote self-reflection to improve practice.

Formal teaching observations

The teaching observations were based on *seven key domains* identified in the respective University Learning and Teaching Framework.

Table 1. Seven Key Domains.

> 1. *Support for active learning*
> 2. *Explicit instructions*
> 3. *Clear expectations*
> 4. *Accessible learning materials and delivery*
> 5. *Encouragement of interaction between staff and students*
> 6. *Encouragement of peer interaction*
> 7. *Support for different learning styles.*

The respective lesson was a workshop discussing the summative assessment, to support the students' knowledge and application and was part of a wider module *'Person-centred Practice in Nursing'.* Students allocated this module, were first year pre-registration BSc nursing students. The respective students had already been taught four lessons prior to this workshop, this included a thorough introduction of the module, and outline of the assessment. The summative assessment consisted of a scenario-based group-work assignment incorporating the nursing process and nursing theories. The observer was a senior lecturer in nursing and an experienced peer observer and was provided with information (lesson plan, level of students, summative assessment) prior to the observation. The lesson took place using a video conferencing platform, due to the blended learning approach post coronavirus-19 (COVID-19). Twenty-nine students (out of thirty-five) were in attendance. The lesson lasted ninety minutes, encompassing time for student questions.

The following is a critical reflection of four key themes that emerged following the completion of the observed lesson and were based on the seven domains. The four key themes were: *motivation, the teachers voice, the use of abbreviations and acronyms and the use of exemplars.* I have included the direct feedback from the observer for clarity.

Table 2. Motivation

> **Evidence Found:** *actively encouraged students to ask questions as the session went along. She gave clear instructions. Students were asked to think about their decision making and planning, to use learning outcomes to guide their learning. Lots of opportunities provided for students to check their understanding and to clarify aspects and to voice their opinions. She adopted a very inclusive approach – all students actively encouraged to participate, and she often referred to students being kind to each other and not feeling frustrated with fellow students in relation to their forthcoming groupwork.*
>
> **Strengths:** *Very clear communication. Creation of a safe place for discussion. Inclusive approach. Tailored teaching in response to individual questions.*
>
> **Areas for Improvement:** *none*

By actively encouraging students to enquire, I felt that I was motivating the students to support their own learning, through empowerment. The NMC Standards framework for midwifery and nursing education for Approved Education Institutions (AEIs) outline students must be empowered, resilient and reflective (NMC, 2023, p.11: 3.2). Likewise, the Nursing and Midwifery Board of Ireland (NMBI) Nurse Registration Programme Standards and for education bodies (EBs) requirements state nursing students must exhibit awareness of self and empowerment (2023, p.57). Spreitzer suggested empowerment is dependent on competence, impact, meaning and self-determination, where an individual has the capacity to act autonomously and is capable of self-reflection (Visiers-Jiménez, *et al* 2022). Therefore, I encourage my students to become empowered, through aspects of motivation and confidence, and encourage them to be proactive in their learning, and in doing so, they may gain a sense of power (Broom, 2015). However, it is important for me to understand that despite the invisible power struggle in the classroom between the teacher (giving instruction) and the student (taking instruction), teachers need to foster student engagement to encourage motivation, through verbal praise, and provide informative and useful feedback (Cents-Boonstra, *et al* 2021).

Theory tells us that motivation is a key ingredient in the success of a student, and Universities should support students in their successful endeavours by firstly teaching them how to plan and organise (Hulleman, *et al* 2016; Lisa, *et al* 2023). At the beginning of a module, I emphasise to students that they must use the learning outcomes to guide their learning, and state that in doing so they will achieve the module aims and should successfully pass their assessment, through careful planning. Zhang (2023) suggested effective teachers are those that provide a structured session, build rapport, and take an active role in the learning process, in turn keeping the student motivated. Whereas Rose (2011) suggests a lack of student

motivation can be a challenge for nurse educators and can impact retention and graduate success. This was evident in parts where some students were unhappy about the students they were grouped with. I found that poor group dynamics often lead to less motivated students and subsequent delays to the progress of their group work. But also, I found that some students would race ahead and do all the work themselves, despite the premise of group-work. In this instance, bickering did commence between one or two groups, due to some students perceiving a lack of contact from a particular student as being proactive. Although it was later found that a student had suffered a bereavement and was not in university.

Han and Yin (2016) suggest that there is a distinct correlation between teacher and student motivation and factors such as volition of teaching styles, materials and the working environment can impact motivation. For those students unhappy with their groupings, I provided them with some clarity. I asked them to envisage being successful in their first job interview for a band 5 ward nurse. They were nervous as their first day on shift arrived, and they were grouped with 7 other staff members. Each staff member was of different ages, gender, experiences, and motivations. That despite each staff member having individual strengths and weaknesses, that they all had to work together, to support their patients and remain professional, even if they felt there were some disadvantages to working with some staff members. Following a discussion of this, most students understood my example, and were happy to approach the group work in a more pragmatic way and allow for some flexibility. However, some students remained disgruntled. This was an eye-opener for me. Despite the fact first year degree students' marks do not go towards their classification, some students were highly motivated to achieve top grades, and it was innate in them to want to work with the very best students who were also motivated and high achievers. It would prove difficult to satisfy those students, despite my best efforts.

Interestingly, Illeris (2007) distinguished content (understanding, knowledge and skills), incentive (motivation, emotion and volition) and interaction (action, communication and co-operation) as the three dimensions of learning.

Figure 1. The dimensions of learning. Adapted from Illeris (2016; p.47, Fig. 3.2)
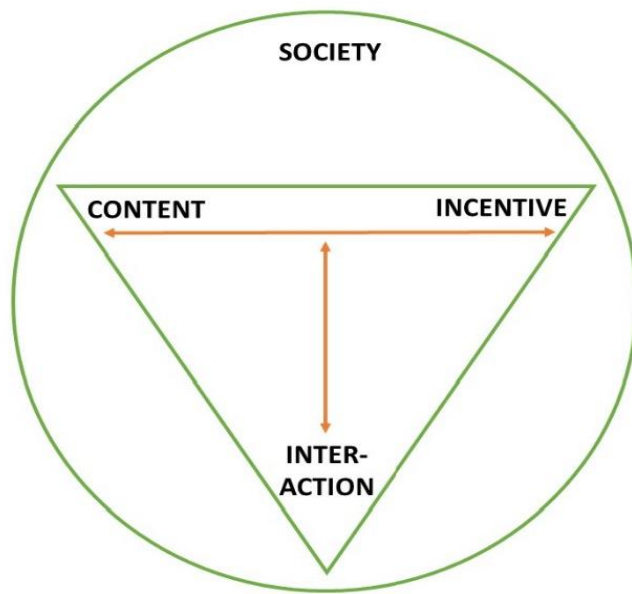
Scientific Figure on ResearchGate. Available from:
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/The-dimensions-of-learning-Adapted-from-Illeris-

Illeris proposed that learning involves two processes: the external interaction between the learner and the social, cultural or material environment and the internal psychological process (Illeris, 2018, p.8). For example, a teacher may elicit what they believe to be the perfect framework and content to support a student's learning but, may come up against what Illeris considers is emotional interplay that can affect commitment and thus overall motivation. And that interaction and acquisition of learning must have an energy about them. I could have perhaps allowed students to choose their own groups, but this may have created tensions within the groups, or had a negative impact on students' mental health well-being, if they felt ostracised and not part of the wider group. Moving forward, it would be in my interest as a teacher to understand the students, the dynamics and motivate the students to work together, as best I could, to avoid any future conflicts. However, it is unlikely that I will ever be able to achieve full student satisfaction when it comes to assigning group-work, due to human behaviours.

The lesson was presented online, following a University wide decision to incorporate a more blended approach following COVID-19. Online education in the post-COVID-19 era has seen broad changes to learning and education, welcomed by some students and teachers, but not embraced by all, due to, but not exhaustive of preferences, lack of motivation and digital poverty (Office for National Statistics, 2020; Littlejohn, *et al* 2021; Winter, *et al* 2021). The

Future of Learning Report 2022 investigated post-COVID learning and the continued expansion of education technology from an international perspective. Data found that older generations (32%) prefer more meaningful face-to-face learning environments, whereas the younger generations (33%) prefer online platforms to study, with 'learning at a pace that suits them' as a key driver (p.8). Professor Lawson from Flinders university stated: *"I sometimes talk about an 'Uber-versity' model..can a university operate like a 'Netflix of learning', where..people can get their learning experiences wherever they like"* (p.11). Furthermore, data found that what impels learning is: being passionate about a course (51%), or the goal of a job (32%), to make a difference to the world (24%) and benefit their local community (21%) (p.12) (Future Learn, 2022). This may resonate with nursing students, due to the nature of nursing as a vocation.

An engaged learning environment increases student motivation and encourages meaningful learning experiences. Yet there is a need for a partnership of learning that requires both student and teacher commitment. Personalised learning is a necessity and creating inclusive learning environments are essential. However, there is a distinct difference in motivating students in an online environment, compared to motivating students face-to-face, where self-regulation becomes an important facet (Bosch and Spinath, 2023). Following the pandemic and significant changes to education systems and learning delivery, learners have new requirements and universities must adapt to these. Likewise, students must remain motivated to learn despite limitations they may encounter.

Table 3. The teacher's voice

Evidence Found: *Very clear communication – good strong voice, and short sentences with a good mixture of simplistic and more complex language. Excellent use of the actual marking sheet and materials from the canvas site that were to be used for the assessment process. Linked to other learning that was relevant to the students. Key issues raised and pointed out then discussed in detail. Specifically discussed students' perceived lack of knowledge and she was able to show how this wasn't the reality and that they all had relevant experience.*

Strengths*: Excellent communicator. Used materials effectively with some advanced techniques – reflection and repetition used.*

Areas for Improvement*: none*

Voice projection is where the voice is used clearly and distinctly. The skill of voice projection is required in teaching (Parr, 2020). As a young version of ourselves, we may remember the teacher we disliked or were frightened of due to the tone and pitch of their voice, or the teacher we liked due to the calmness of their voice, and this may have impacted on our learning. As teachers our voices are important, and what we convey through spoken word, is essential in supporting the learning of our students. The observer identified that I possessed a strong voice and used short sentences to convey information. Knowledge of vocabulary that supports academic learning is multi-faceted. McKeown (2019) suggests through reading and learning environments, learners accumulate good quality vocabulary knowledge. However, some learners will not acquire rich language interactions due to absence of reading or literacy struggles, which may lead to cognitive overload and disparities in student learning. Therefore, vocabulary construction should be noted by teachers prior to delivering learning sessions.

Bao's (2020) case study of COVID-19 and online teaching is useful as it sheds insight on the difficulties in conveying the teachers' voice in a virtual classroom. The traditional instructional method of face-to-face teaching allowed for the teacher to interact with students; make use of body language and the environment, whereas online teaching loses the value of facial expressions and non-verbal cues (Schneider, *et al* 2022), and the voice of the teacher should be emphasised. Bao (2020) suggests teachers must adapt the tone, pitch and speed of their voice, to allow students to identify key learning points and digest those in a conducive way. Furthermore, there is a distinction to be made of synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Synchronous learning pertains to live instruction and teaching with an expected commitment from students, in attendance and participation. Whereas asynchronous learning allows students to view instructional materials in their own time, with the benefit of flexibility. Yet these differences in online sessions should not deter the student from being successful, however, the onus is on the student to know their limitations (Fabriz, *et al* 2021).

This resonated with my practice, the use of pitch, tone, inflection, volume and voice, and conscious delivery of its content in a clear and innovative yet structured way. Moreover, Adnan (2017) asserts professional development is central in adopting competencies for online teaching and identified a correlation between the preparedness of teachers and satisfaction of students. Ní Shé, et al (2020) in their report suggest there is a stark difference in roles and competencies between teaching the traditional face-to-face route and that of online teaching, and the need to adopt a strong online presence, through structured facilitation and student

support, as is key to successful transaction of teaching and learning. The teacher's voice is a key ingredient in the success of online learning and must be adapted according to the learning environment and student needs. However, I am aware that I sometimes change the direction of my thought processes and dialogue based on students' facial expressions. Such as a face of confusion, or boredom, I can change-up the lesson easily within synchronous learning, that is, if students are visible on camera. However, if I was delivering an asynchronous lesson, then I am more likely to be less engaging in my voice projection, due to not having an audience to interact with. Therefore, my pace alternates between the two, and this may prove difficult in asynchronous online learning for the student to follow.

Table 4. The use of abbreviations and acronyms

Evidence Found: This was a major strength for her. She has the ability to articulate clear and unambiguous instructions and guidance. Logical approach – used a useful guidance sheet which was shared with the group and worked through in order. Detailed explanations given – avoided jargon except for a few nursing abbreviations. Clear expectations and responsibilities of students in their groups and as individuals given. Clear use of language – 'I don't want you to' 'this is what you need to do' 'you can do'

Strengths: Good linking with the visual aid – helped the students to navigate through this document. Direct and clear instructions – demonstrating a sound knowledge base of the subject matter. You were able to keep a good command of the group and engage them throughout – this is a good skill to have.

Areas for Improvement: Maybe give explanation of abbreviation when used for the first time – very minor point.

The use of abbreviations and acronyms has long been a short-hand way for writing prescriptions and is prevalent in healthcare circles, yet some abbreviations have multiple meanings and can be misinterpreted (Tariq and Sharma, 2020). Bhandari and Paudi (2020) in their study of medical students found students had difficulty in interpreting abbreviations that had more than one meaning. Healthcare staff often abbreviate terms either vocally during handover and/or in written documentation, which can delay treatment for a patient or at worst lead to medication administration errors and thus fitness to practice issues (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018). To illustrate this; the abbreviation 'ED' dependent on the perspective/assumption may be referred to as 'Emergency Department', or 'Eating Disorders' or 'Erectile Dysfunction' yet often depends on the audience (the healthcare sector).

Abbreviations are common yet problematic in nursing, conversely, they are considered appropriate and acceptable in some circumstances; 'MDT' is a term widely used in healthcare professions to describe the 'Multi-disciplinary team'. It could be contested in teaching professions, that language acquisition be treated as a teaching competency and thus the use of abbreviations be treated with caution to avoid alienating students and those where English is not a first language (Zerkina, Kostina and Pitina, 2015). The observer picked up on my use of abbreviations in my teaching. When discussing the Nursing and Midwifery Council and the importance of Multi-disciplinary team working, I used NMC and MDT to illustrate my points. A student stopped the lesson to ask me what those abbreviations denoted, and I quickly remembered that I am teaching first year nursing students, who had yet to go into the clinical placement area. It was a sudden insight that has remained with me, that I must avoid abbreviating terms, to not confuse the learners.

Table 5. The use of exemplars

> **Evidence Found:** *She involved expert teachers and technicians from within the University to help with explaining the technical aspects of the assessment during the session. She also provided materials that were easy to read and clear. She made sure they were available for the students and where they could locate them. Examples were provided and discussed in detail. Evidence based sources were looked at.*
>
> **Strengths:** *She is able to provide thought-provoking and imaginative teaching supported by relevant materials*
>
> **Areas for Improvement:** *in future it might be useful to provide specific examples of the assessment – this wasn't possible in this instance as this was the first presentation (this was asked for by the students as well and responded to very well by the observed).*

Exemplars are used to illustrate samples of good and bad essays and improve student outcomes. I often use exemplars to support students understanding of assessments. Many students' welcome exemplars and report that they support their understanding and guide them in preparing for their assessment. Although exemplars are not always met with positive responses. Some students report finding them difficult to use, due to information overload, or the fear of not having a grasp of the assessment, whereas others have been known to overuse them and use specific content thus purporting to potential plagiarism. Hawe, et al (2021) suggests that when exemplars are integrated into teaching practice, they have the potential to enhance a student's ability to self-regulate performance. Likewise, Rashid-Doubell, *et al*

(2018) asserts that exemplars may support students understanding of complex rubrics and thus improve academic performance. I have noticed from my time as a teacher, that often students do not know what a rubric is and struggle with understanding how the learning outcomes are part of the assessment, but once this is explained to them, they welcome the instruction, as this guides them in attaining the learning outcomes, and passing the assessment.

Newlyn (2013) affirms that current educational practice of assessment standards supports the use of essay examples, to guide students in expectations of structure, content and knowledge. However, there is room for plagiarism if assertions are not made, whether the plagiarism was intended or not. Kenny (2007) suggests nursing students' striving for a work-life balance may feel under pressure, and resort to cheating and plagiarise text in assignments. Whereas some students may not be familiar with paraphrasing techniques, citing or referencing, which leads them to unintentionally plagiarise text. Such cases of student misconduct run the risk of unprofessional practice and may be subject to academic misconduct panels, or at worst, bring the nursing profession into disrepute, through an act of dishonesty (Welsh, 2017; NMC, 2019). However, we must consider individual factors when considering cases of potential misconduct, such as limited knowledge of the importance of academic integrity, poor academic writing skills, and inadequate knowledge of University policy on academic practice and behaviour (Morris, 2018). Therefore, I always discuss academic regulations at the commencement of each module I lead, or where I am a module facilitator and part of the marking team. Students are often informed of academic regulations and potential misconduct issues right at the commencement of their degree. But with all the other information they are provided with, some information will naturally be forgotten. Zwick, *et al* (2019) posits that if students are provided with examples and activities around direct and indirect plagiarism, this will bolster their confidence and learning, and reduce any likelihood of future acts of plagiarism.

In essence, most students' welcome exemplars as a tool to guide them in their assessment and for teachers' they possess educational value. The onus itself falls on the teacher to make explicit the guidelines in their use and the consequences of any actions that warrants at best, a firm word, or at worst, an academic misconduct hearing. It cannot be left for students to locate University policy denoting academic integrity, behaviours and practices, but for teachers to ensure a discussion of plagiarism and misconduct takes place at the beginning of

each module and is repeated at the time of assessment discussions. This should in turn reduce the number of plagiarism cases and academic misconduct hearings.

Teaching is an art and a science; fostering innovative practices and evidence-base to support and develop our students' knowledge and application, with the onus on the teacher to provide a high-quality learning experience. Formal teaching observations are vital in improving educational practice, and student learning, and constructive feedback of formal teaching observations is not to be viewed as a negative experience but to instead strengthen our teaching practices. Through means of reflection and evaluation of teaching practices, I acknowledge my strengths and weaknesses, that will shape my future teaching practice. I have valued my experience of being observed, as I have since felt more confident about my teaching ability. Yes, it was anxiety-provoking at the time of the observation, but the value it has brought to my work is testament to the importance of teaching observations. For example, I continue to avoid the use of acronyms and abbreviations in my teaching, and I think about creative ways to motivate students, using innovative and best practices. I not only encourage my colleagues to embrace formal teaching observations to improve their teaching practice but to view it as a vital tool to better serve our students.

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