Giving feedback on teacher performance: Challenges and Successes
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Giving feedback on teacher performance: It’s not about the feedback forms!

Purposes of this presentation

• To reflect on and gain insights into a key part of my job.
• To share what I have learned with others who may be interested.
• To learn from those who are here.

Overview

• Our situation
• Elements of the practicum
• Principles underlying the programme
• Choices regarding feedback
• Challenges we encountered
• Changes we introduced
• What has been successful?
• What conclusions have we drawn?
• Are we there yet?
• What next?

Our situation

• Entry-level qualification
  – Certificate in English Language Teaching (Cert ELT) NZQA Level 5
• 12 week programme
• Supervised teaching practicum
  – Two levels of students – ‘elementary’ and ‘intermediate’
  – Course book based, plus some ‘own’ lessons
  – Groups of 5-8 trainee teachers and one tutor/supervisor
  – Tutor and peer observation of all lessons, followed by feedback with both peers and tutor

Your situation

– What is your interest in being here today?
– How is your situation similar to ours?
– How is it different to ours?
Elements of the Practicum
- Each teacher does the following:
  ✓ Plan, prepare, teach a lesson.
  ✓ Reflect on how the lesson went.
  ✓ Give reflection on lesson to teaching practicum group (including tutor):
    ◦ What went well?
    ◦ What didn’t go as well as you had hoped?
    ◦ What could/would you do differently next time?
  ✓ Listen to peer feedback about the lesson
  ✓ Listen to tutor feedback about the lesson
  ✓ Ask questions and/or respond to feedback given by peers and tutor.

What do we mean by feedback?
- General meaning:
  - “…messages sent back to the speaker reacting to what is said. Feedback tells the speaker what effect they are having on the listener(s). (DeVito et al, 2000, p. 11)
- In the teacher training context:
  - “The discussion of teaching which takes place between the advisor and the teacher.” (Randall & Thornton, 2001, p. 1)

Central question
- What kind of feedback is most likely to result in:
  – increased teacher awareness of important aspects of teaching?
  – positive changes in teachers’ classroom and teaching behaviour?

The challenge for teacher trainers
To conduct the feedback discussion in a way that best provides support and advice for teachers, that will in turn promote positive changes in teacher behaviour.

Positive changes in teacher trainees' behaviour?
- During the feedback session:
  – Greater understanding of what happened during their lesson
- After the feedback session:
  – The ability to translate that understanding into plans for future teaching.
- During subsequent lessons:
  – Teaching behaviour which is observably more effective i.e. an observable improvement in the teacher’s ability to demonstrate key teaching skills

Principles underlying the Cert ELT programme
- Social constructivist approach:
  – Experiential learning
  – Reflective practice
  – Collaborative learning
Social constructivism

- Knowledge is not something 'out there', to be learnt.
- Knowledge is something that is socially constructed, through interaction and dialogue, usually between a learner and a more expert individual.
- The learner is guided to new knowledge through 'scaffolding', i.e. providing focused challenges and questions to allow the learner to internalise the new ideas.

(Vygotsky, 1978, in Randall and Thornton, 2001, p. 52)

The Experiential Learning Cycle

DO (TEACH)

PREPARE (Before the next lesson)

RECALL (During or after the feedback session)

CONCLUDE (During or after the feedback session)

REFLECT (During or after the feedback session)

(Scrivenor, 1994, p. 3)

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING in the Practicum

- Trainees plan and teach lessons based mainly on course book material, with some lessons based on 'own resources'.
- They participate in a feedback session with tutors and peers and reflect on their lesson and their teaching behaviour
- They plan and then teach further lessons, based on the feedback they have received and the reflection they have done.

The Reflective Practitioner

(Wallace, 1991, p. 15)
REFLECTIVE PRACTICE in the Practicum

- All lessons are observed by a tutor/supervisor and 5-7 peers. All observers write notes about the lesson.
- Three or four lessons are taught before the feedback discussion.
- Teachers have some time to reflect on the lesson they taught, before the feedback session.
- Reflection continues after the feedback session and contributes to subsequent lesson plans and self-evaluation reports (for 3 lessons).

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING in the Practicum

- Oral feedback given to teachers by both peers and tutor after a series of lessons.
- Issues from the lesson are discussed with the Teaching Practicum group, facilitated by the tutor.
- Written feedback from both peers and supervisor/tutor is given to teachers to read after the discussion.

The overall outcomes of the feedback discussions?

- Teachers who are capable of reflecting on their own performance and gaining insights about their own teaching performance.
- Changes in classroom teacher behaviour i.e. an observable improvement in the teacher’s ability to demonstrate key teaching skills.

Choices regarding feedback

- Timing of feedback
- Who gives feedback
- Type of feedback given
- Purpose
- Role of tutor/supervisor
- Nature of feedback
- Feedback agendas
Your experiences of the Teaching Practicum

- As a teacher-trainee:
  - What stands out for you about your experience of feedback discussion sessions?

- As a teacher-trainer/practicum supervisor:
  - What stands out for you about your experience of facilitating feedback discussion sessions?

Timing of feedback

- Possibilities
  - Immediate
  - Delayed
    - 15-30mins
    - 1-2 hours
    - 3-6 hours
    - 24 hours
    - 1 week...

  - What we do
    - Slightly delayed
      - 15mins – 1hr 30mins

Who gives feedback

- Possibilities
  - Tutor/supervisor only
  - Peers only
  - Tutor and peers

- What we do
  - Tutor/supervisor and peers

Type of feedback

- Possibilities
  - Oral
  - Written (using observation instruments)
  - Combination of oral and written

- What we do
  - Combination of oral and written
  - Oral followed by written

Purpose of feedback

- Possibilities
  - Assessment/evaluation of teaching
  - Teacher reflection, leading to development

- What we do
  - Teacher development
  - Teachers are assessed only on three lessons self-selected lessons, as part of their self-evaluation reports.

Role of the tutor/supervisor

- Possibilities
  - Authoritative/Facilitative approaches
    - Six Category Intervention Analysis (Heron, 1990, in Randall & Thornton, 2001)
The nature of feedback given

- Cathartic
- Prescriptive
- Informative
- Supportive
- Catalytic
- Confronting

Authoritative interventions

Prescriptive:
“‘You should discuss the situation with the class before you introduce them to the pictures.’”

Informative:
“‘The coursebook says that you should discuss the situation with the class before introducing them to the pictures.”

Confronting:
“I noticed that you showed the pictures to the students before you discussed the situation with them, when the coursebook suggests that teachers introduce the pictures after the discussion. Why did you do that?”

Facilitative interventions

Cathartic
“How did you feel when the students reacted so negatively to the pictures you had brought to show them about the topic?”

Catalytic
“I wonder if it might be worth trying to discuss the topic before showing the pictures to the students. What do you think?”

Supportive
“It was a very good idea to discuss the topic first before showing the pictures. It provided the students with an opportunity to give their opinions about the topic.”

Possible advisor approaches

Commanding Prescription
Benevolent direction
Consultative prescription
Negotiation
Facilitation of self-direction

Role of the tutor/supervisor and the nature of feedback given

What we do (we think)

- Use both authoritative and facilitative approaches
- Prefer the facilitative approach, using catalytic interventions towards the ‘teacher-directed’ end of the range.
- Try to use a lot of questioning, rather than directing.

Feedback agendas

- Possibilities
  - Technical
  - Personal & Cultural
  - Interpersonal
  - Emotional

- Our agendas
  - Primary focus is technical
  - Strong secondary focus on personal, cultural and interpersonal
  - Less focus on emotional agendas

(Heron, 1999, in Randall & Thornton, 2001, P. 121)
Summary of our choices regarding feedback variables

• Tutor and peers complete feedback forms while observing
• Slightly delayed timing of feedback
• Feedback given to teachers by both peers and tutor in a group discussion situation
• Oral feedback followed by written feedback
• Primary purpose of feedback is teacher development
• A range of interventions by tutors, both Authoritative and Facilitative
• Technical, personal and cultural agendas

What is ONE challenge you have experienced in a teaching practicum...

• ...as a teacher receiving feedback?
  OR
• ...as a tutor/supervisor giving feedback?

Challenges we have encountered so far in giving feedback

• The nature of peer feedback
• The scope of peer feedback
• Tutor/supervisor approach to encouraging changes in teacher behaviour
• The nature of the feedback given by tutors

The nature of peer feedback

• In the beginning...
  • Same feedback form as the tutor
  • Checklist of teaching skills
  • Two general areas for comments:
    ➢ Aspects of the lesson done well
    ➢ Areas in need of improvement

What was the challenge?

• Topic headings seemed to encourage judgmental comments
  ➔ Disappointed/upset teachers
  ➔ Sometimes little useful information for teachers

What changes did we make?

• Reminded teachers to focus on giving information about the lesson, and to avoid judgments.
• Changed the second topic heading: ➔ Questions about the lesson
What was the result?

→ The number of judgments decreased to very few.
→ The atmosphere of feedback sessions changed as teachers felt less criticized.
→ Most teachers were happy with the change. Some expressed the opinion that they should be able to say whatever they felt about the lesson.

A success? On the whole, YES

The scope of peer feedback

• In the beginning...
  – Observing teachers were asked to complete a comprehensive checklist as well as write comments and questions.

What was the challenge?

• Often teachers weren’t able to complete the checklist and write comments and questions
• Results:
  – often very general comments
  – often little useful information for the person teaching.

What change did we make?

• Revised the feedback forms for observing teachers:
  – Focus on only one of the skills on the checklist
  – Space on the feedback form for ‘Examples of teacher and learner language’ and ‘Questions about aspects of the lesson’

What was the result?

• More specific information provided for teachers
• Easier for both teachers and tutor to maintain focus on what happened in the lesson.
• Some teachers did not/do not write specific information – reason not known.

A success? On the whole, YES

Tutor approach to encouraging changes in teacher behaviour

• In the beginning...
  – Supervisors/tutors’ approach was
    • Non-directive
    • Non-authoritative/prescriptive
    • Facilitative
  – Tutors did not necessarily direct teachers to focus on a particular skill in the next lesson.
**What was the challenge?**

- Frequently, teachers would not include those teaching skills which had been noted by the tutor as a teaching aim in the next or a subsequent lesson.
- Tutors often felt they were not succeeding in helping teachers to develop key teaching skills.

**What changes did we make?**

- **Firstly...**
  - Tutors devised a form(!) on which teachers would write down a key teaching skill that they would aim to focus on in their next lesson.
- **Secondly...**
  - The tutor feedback form (!) was revised to include a space in which tutors would write “Suggested teaching aims for next time”.

**What was the result?**

- First change was unsustainable – an extra thing to do – it lapsed.
- Second change appears to have had the intended result for a number of teachers
- Some teachers do not do this – reason unknown.

*A success? On the whole, YES*

**The nature of the feedback given by tutors**

- **From the beginning...**
  - Tutors tried to be informative, supportive, and act as a catalyst for teacher self-reflection and direction
  - Tutors tried to use a lot of questions
    - Requires teachers to reflect in order to answer the questions
    - Also requires good questioning skills by tutors

**Types of degenerative interventions**

- **‘Pussy-footing’**:
  - The tutor focuses only on positive aspects of the lesson – to be supportive.
  - Is interpreted as being non-supportive and/or non-caring or ineffective.
  - Does not raise the teacher’s awareness of aspects of their teaching.
- **‘Clobbering’**:  
  - The tutor is confronting – to raise important issues
  - Is interpreted as aggressive and critical.
  - Often leads to defensiveness and justifying behaviour.

(Randall & Thornton, 2001, pp. 84-85)
Degenerative interventions: An example

• The tutor asks a question which she thinks is providing facilitative, catalytic intervention, but which is interpreted by the teacher as authoritative and confronting.

“Why not put them into pairs to do the last activity, instead of doing the activity as a whole class?”

What change did we introduce?

• This is an ongoing area of reflection for tutors.
• Are we still committed to the idea of using facilitative, catalytic interventions, requiring a lot of questioning?
  – Yes, but we are also leaning in the direction of being more directive.

Summary: Changes introduced

• Nature of peer feedback – tried to direct teachers towards more informative and less judgmental feedback.
• Scope of peer feedback – limited the scope of feedback asked for.
• Encouraging changes in teacher behaviour – provided written as well as oral suggestions for future teaching aims. Became more directive in this aspect of feedback.
• The nature of the feedback given by tutors – questions used by tutors in both oral and written feedback.

  ALL CHANGES LARGELY SUCCESSFUL

Are we there yet?

• No

• Still room for improvement in the observation instruments used by tutors and teachers.
• Main area to work on is the nature of feedback that tutors give to teachers.

What next?

• From the tutors/supervisors/advisors:
  – Further reflection on the type of feedback interventions that are likely to be most effective.
  – Further thought about “ways of talking to teachers” that create the right atmosphere for teachers to be receptive to feedback suggestions.
  – More preparation of teachers for the feedback discussion, involving more role plays and discussion of the terminology and language to be used.

What next?

From the teachers:

  – their thoughts on the feedback sessions and the variables relating to feedback.
  – the reasons why some teachers provide a lot of information to their peers, while others don’t.
  – the reasons why some teachers act on suggestions by tutors and others don’t.
  – teacher preferences for either facilitative or authoritative/directive feedback interventions by tutors.
What conclusions have I come to?

• “It’s not about the feedback forms.”
  – It’s about interactions and the quality of communication between: teacher-supervisor; teacher-teacher; teachers-supervisor.
  – It’s about ways of talking to teachers.
  – It’s about the relationships between teacher/s and tutors/supervisors.

• “If it’s to be it’s up to me.”
  – I need to reflect further on how I give feedback, particularly in the area of questioning. A question asked is not always heard as a question.

• “One size doesn’t fit all.”
  – Some teachers seem to prefer to be told what to do. Others seem to prefer to think about it for themselves.

Questions or comments?

• As a teacher:
  – What aspects of feedback helped you to effectively develop your teaching skills during the practicum?

• As a tutor/supervisor:
  – What aspects of feedback do you think most assist trainee teachers to develop their teaching skills during the practicum?