Learning from Reciprocal Peer Observation: A collaborative self-study
Kimberley Pressick-Kilborn and Kitty te Riele*

University of Technology, Sydney, Australia

Engaging in a self-study is a multi-faceted activity that involves not only autobiography and theory, but also students and colleagues. Learning from and with colleagues can take many forms. This article discusses the authors’ experience with reciprocal classroom observation in a teacher education context. Peer observation supported our learning about our own teaching by providing suggestions for change and mutual reassurance. In this study we make connections between learning from each other, ourselves, our students and theories of teaching and learning. Specifically, we address what we learned about pedagogy in relation to missed opportunities, teacher-directedness and articulating purpose; about curriculum, in relation to balance and standards; about our students, in relation to their backgrounds as well as social tensions; and about ourselves as teachers and learners in relation to rapport, role modeling and collegiality. We demonstrate how peer observation can be a valuable component of ongoing professional development for tertiary teachers.

Keywords: reciprocal peer observation; collaborative self-study; collegial feedback

The concepts of collaboration and self-study may initially seem contradictory, perhaps even incompatible. The approach of self-study evokes images of introspection by the lone teacher, involved in “monologic research” (Guilfoyle, Hamilton, Pinnegar, & Placier, 2004, p. 1140) about her or his own personal and professional practice and identity. Self-study thus seems a solitary rather than a collaborative pursuit. In contrast, Bodone, Guðjónsdóttir and Dalmau (2004, p. 771) propose that “there is a strong and intrinsic relationship between collaboration and self-study research,” a claim that was supported by our practice of collaborative self-study.

The benefits and the necessity of constructive and collaborative dialogue with colleagues for improving one’s teaching practices are recognized by scholars in the fields of self-study and of higher education research. Such collaboration can counter critiques of limited validity or self-justification in self-study projects (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). Critical reflection on our work as teachers is supported by obtaining information from a variety of sources, including autobiography, theoretical literature, our students and our colleagues (Brookfield, 1995). Recognizing that academics are accustomed to a high level of autonomy in their teaching, Brookfield (1995, p. 30) offers the following points:

Talking to colleagues about what we do unravels the shroud of silence in which our practice is wrapped. Participating in critical conversations with peers opens us up to their versions of
events we have experienced. Our colleagues serve as critical mirrors reflecting back to us images of our actions that often take us by surprise.

Such collegial conversations can take many forms, from informal chats over coffee to more formal opportunities for gaining and giving feedback. For example, Ramsden and Dodds (1989) suggest debriefing with a colleague after a class or course in order to gain their advice. Guidelines for giving such advice have focused on the manner of providing feedback, the environment and the relationship between feedback provider and recipient (Boud, 1995; Brinko, 1993; Martin & Double, 1998; Ramsden & Dodds, 1989). In considering the notion of productive reflection, Boud, Cressey and Docherty (2006) assert that collective reflection is important in the process of making sense of one’s own teaching.

Peer observation is perhaps the most challenging mode of collegial involvement in one another’s teaching. Palmer (1998, p. 143) advocates peer observation, arguing that there is only one way to really understand good teaching in its many guises: “We must observe each other teach, at least occasionally–and we must spend more time talking to each other about teaching.” This combination of collegiality and critical reflection can be a mutually supportive extension of self-study practices in teacher education (Bodone et al., 2004). Peer observation is a powerful way of focusing attention on the teaching process (Martin & Double, 1998) and enhancing the quality of teaching and learning (Fullerton, 1993). Brookfield (1995, p. 83) recognizes that the lens of collegial feedback more often involves discussion than direct observation: “For those of us with egos strong enough to stand it, colleagues’ observations of our practice can be one of the most helpful sources of critical insight to which we have access.”

The encouragement to engage in this practice is thus somewhat tentative and Brookfield recommends that peer observation “must be reciprocal” (1995, p. 85; see also Ramsden & Dodds, 1989). This reciprocity goes some way to avoiding the potential confusion, noted by Cosh (1998), over whether the purpose of peer observation is professional development or accountability. Reciprocity also acknowledges that “seeing you allows me to see myself differently and to explore the variables we both use” (Faneslow, 1990, as cited in Cosh, 1998, p. 173). Rawnsley (1993) points out that when participants have greater ownership of the observation process, it is more likely that the observation will meet its aims. In particular, the equal role played by the observed peer is a crucial difference between observation for professional development and observation for the purpose of evaluation or appraisal.

Our Collaborative Endeavour

This article reports our experiences of engaging in mutual, collaborative peer observation over a 2-year period (2004–2005). We each took up positions as lecturers in the Faculty of Education at the University of Technology, Sydney in 2004, both with previous experience teaching in higher education but these were our first appointments as full-time, tenure-track academics. Our immediate practical impetus for embarking on peer observation stemmed from a suggestion by our joint supervisor. While our supervisor expressed his willingness to conduct these peer observations with each of us, we believed that peer observation would be more beneficial between peers of equal status, as indicated by Brown and Colling (1993) and Brinko (1993). The ability to choose with whom to work benefits peer observation by avoiding the dangers of contrived collegiality in teacher collaboration (Hargreaves, 1991). Without any guarantees as to how our collaboration would unfold, we agreed to enter into a collegial peer observation experience to help us reflect on and improve our teaching. We drew on the concept of critical friendship for highlighting
genuine peer collaboration and feedback (Arthur & Kallick, 1993; Schuck & Russell, 2005) because we believed that such a friendship would allow for meaningful peer observation of one another’s teaching.

Reflective action, according to Dewey (1933), is a special form of problem solving that requires careful consideration of practice and open-mindedness to information from any source that may be helpful to solve the problem under consideration. In relation to the improvement of teaching in higher education, Brookfield (1995), Ramsden and Dodds (1989), Rawnsley (1993) and Wilkerson (1988) all emphasize the need for teachers to use a range of information from several different sources, in order to gain a richer understanding of their own teaching and ways to improve it. Triangulation of data from various sources is as valuable in reflective practice as it is in social research. Thus we join Schuck and Russell (2005) in arguing that peer observation is a valuable inclusion in the practices of researchers engaged in self-study of teacher education practices.

**Approach**

Our collaborative peer observation activities were aimed primarily at developing our teaching practice in order to support and improve our students’ learning. We wanted to encourage one another to be scholarly teachers (Andresen, 2000) who are open to questioning and who reflect critically on what we teach, how we teach and why we teach. As Shulman (2000, p.11) argues, “research that renders one’s own practice as the problem for investigation is at the heart of what we mean by professing or profession.” Our project thus contributes to the professionalism of our own work and to research in teacher education. A secondary purpose was to demonstrate an approach to ongoing professional learning that our students could use in their own practice. We modeled a critical, collegial friendship for our students by highlighting our commitment to developing our own teaching. Thus we were embarking on a process of interrogating teaching and learning—both our own and our students’—in our respective teacher education classrooms.

The methodology for our collaboration is derived from both self-study and peer observation traditions. Although there is no single blueprint for self-study research, LaBoskey (2004) suggests five common components of self-study research design. First, self-study research is distinguished by the fact that the researcher is both the person doing the research and the person who is being studied. LaBoskey (2004, p. 842) refers to this as being “self-initiated and focused.” Although the initial impetus for our study came from a suggestion from our supervisor, we agree that the way we set up our study was initiated by us and focused on our own teaching.

Second, self-study research is aimed at improving and enhancing our understanding of our practice through carefully and thoroughly understanding our settings (LaBoskey, 2004). As stated above, our own project was aimed at supporting improvement in our teaching. We gained new insights into our settings through the peer observation process and critical conversations about our practice.

Third, self-study has a collaborative or interactive nature because “teacher knowledge can best be understood, transformed, constructed, and articulated by the teacher self in collaboration with others” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 826). This collaboration can take many different forms (Bodone et al., 2004; LaBoskey, 2004) including directly between colleagues in same institutional context. In the typology proposed by Bodone et al. (p. 750) our project formed a collaborative self-study with the collaboration designed as a critical element of our approach from the start. We started with reciprocal peer observation and reflective practice as the foundation for this self-study project.
Fourth, self-study research uses multiple, primarily qualitative methods to generate data (LaBoskey, 2004). In our study, we used observation, collaborative journaling through email, and an open questionnaire as methods for generating data (see Table 1).

Self-study research defines validity “as trustworthiness, meaning that the field is advanced by the construction, testing, sharing and re-testing of exemplars of teaching practice” (LaBoskey, 2004, p. 851). By sharing our experiences with colleagues through seminars, papers and articles such as this one, we also aim to contribute to more general understandings of teacher education as well as to inform our own on-going collaborative self-study project.

Data Collection and Analysis

Drawing on the peer observation tradition, our methodology used a three-stage process involving pre-observation planning, the observation itself, and post-observation discussion (see Table 1). This process is widely recommended in discussions of peer observation in higher education (Martin & Double, 1998; Orsmond, 1997; Wilkerson, 1988). The pre-observation planning included providing information about the broader subject of which the observed lesson was a part, background about the content and purpose of the specific lesson, and issues about which the observed teacher particularly invited feedback.

We each observed one lesson each semester. All lessons were seminar situations of 25 to 40 students. At the start of each lesson, we introduced the observer to the students and explained that this was part of our own on-going professional development. Because the purpose was developmental rather than for appraisal, we both taught normal rather than model lessons. Unlike suggestions by Jones (1993), we did not use formal checklists, but we noted our observations in relation to issues raised and anything else that we found of interest. This is consistent with the emphasis on qualitative methods in self-study research (LaBoskey, 2004).

The post-observation discussion took place either immediately after the lesson or later the same day. The discussion involved not only collaborative exploration of the issues suggested by the observed teacher but also insights the observer had gained and other reflections by the observed teacher. We explored connections between the how and why of our own and the other’s teaching.

The lessons that we observed were subjects in teacher education programs. One lesson was observed in a one-year Graduate Diploma program for pre-service secondary school
teachers, and the remaining five lessons observed were in subjects in a 4-year Bachelor of Primary Education program. The subjects were all compulsory and included Philosophy of Education, Science and Technology Education, a third-year Professional Experience subject focused on student assessment and reporting, and a first-year Professional Experience subject designed to introduce students to a range of issues relating to teaching and learning in contemporary Australian schools. Observations took place during semesters 1 and 2 in 2004, and during semester 1 in 2005.

While we purposely left the role of the observer fairly open, we were surprised by the degree to which we participated in each other’s workshops. Although the observations were not designed to be team-teaching situations, neither of us was able to detach ourselves fully from the teaching and learning processes. On occasion, the teacher invited the observer to comment during class discussion, while at other times the students in small groups included the observer in their conversations as a co-learner. Because self-study is inherently interactive and embraces subjectivity, this development was a natural component of understanding, constructing and transforming our teacher knowledge in collaboration with others (LaBoskey, 2004).

Our data include observation notes and emails, which together formed a kind of collaborative journal and documented the discussion that contributed to the collaborative self-study process. The reflections and analytical comments in this study draw on the observation and discussion notes and emails that we wrote at the time of the peer observations. The notes and emails were complemented by student comments about the perceived purpose and effectiveness of our peer observation practice. This created a further level of generating data by engaging the students as a third party to our self-study practice. We asked for input from students at the end of semester 2 in 2004 after we had completed four observation cycles. We asked the students in the two subjects involved in that semester to voluntarily and anonymously complete a questionnaire asking about their perceptions of our peer observation process. In particular, students were asked to articulate the contributions that peer observation can make to how teachers and teacher educators understand teaching and learning. Findings presented here draw on the students’ responses to this questionnaire. We use the following coding for questionnaire responses: P for Bachelor of Primary Education and S for Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education, Phil for Philosophy and Prof for Professional Experience, and a number for the student’s questionnaire. Thus P-Prof-1 indicates Student 1 from the Professional Experience subject in the Bachelor of Primary Education.

We analyzed the data by coding the content of text in relation to four areas that were the focus of our collaborative self-study:

1. Pedagogy
2. Curriculum
3. Our students
4. Ourselves as teachers and learners

Sub-themes emerged within each of these areas (Table 2) and these were critically reviewed for what they revealed about our learning through the peer observation process.

**Insights into Pedagogy**

We now realize that we had little knowledge of each other’s pedagogical practices at the outset of the observation process. Although a key focus for our observations was classroom practices, we did not experience problems of getting caught up with stylistic differences (Ramsden & Dodds, 1989) or a breakdown in communication due to clashing
approaches (Trowler & Cooper, 2002). Our success is probably due to the pre-observation process we used and to our strong collegial relationship. We accepted as a ground rule “not to presume to know what is right for the other” (Palmer, 1998, p. 151) but to support each other in finding our own answers. As a result, we often recorded questions in our observation notes, with the aim of stimulating thought and discussion around a broader issue related to a specific event or aspect within the lesson. We turn now too our insights related to pedagogy; we believe these insights are useful for our professional development as teacher educators. It seems unlikely that our insights could have been articulated so clearly without peer observation.

Missed Opportunities

Our effectiveness in capitalizing on student responses and ideas emerged as an issue to explore during the observations. A teachable moment is “as wonderful as it is elusive.... All too often the moment slips away before we can seize it” (Garrison, 1997, p. 115). Our peer observation process encouraged us to keep looking for such moments as they arose through workshop interaction. Following a post-observation discussion, Kimberley wrote to Kitty:

I have found myself reflecting on my observation of your lesson in relation to my own teaching also. It made me wonder whether I encourage reporting back to the whole group enough and I’ve thought more about how I develop and relate students’ responses in providing feedback also (email correspondence, 5 April 2004).

This then became a point of observation for Kitty when she observed Kimberley’s class later that same week.

You were taking up the ideas from the students and running with them, which was positive and also added relevant information or reformulated their ideas more clearly. But sometimes you took over more – again an issue of time maybe? If you had more time, you could wait to see if the ideas you want to cover come from the students themselves? (observation notes, 8 April 2004).

Kitty’s comments reassure Kimberley yet also provide suggestions for developing this aspect of her teaching practice. Interestingly, in the following semester Kimberley’s attention continued to be drawn to this aspect of her teaching during the shared lesson. In an email sent to Kitty following the observation session, Kimberley wrote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About pedagogy</td>
<td>Missed opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher-directed/student-directed learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communicating purpose and intent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About curriculum</td>
<td>Balancing theory and practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balancing learning and teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Judging responses to content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About our students</td>
<td>Students from non-English speaking backgrounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Social tensions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>About ourselves as teachers and learners</td>
<td>Rapport with students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Models for students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collegial support.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Coding categories for data analysis.
The report samples again generated a great deal of discussion in today’s workshop, with a particularly provocative statement made by one student in relation to not reporting comparatively. This really engaged a wide range of students in a whole class discussion (email correspondence, 31 August 2004).

As Garrison (1997, p. 122) explains, “what sustains the teachable moment is [students’ and teachers’] creative exploration of imaginary possibilities together.”

Structuring workshop activities to focus students’ learning is a pedagogical issue raised by Kitty following an observation of Kimberley’s 3-hour Science and Technology class. The opportunity to immediately engage students in the main content of the workshop was missed when the lesson introduction became bogged down in discussion about an upcoming assessment task. Kimberley allowed extended discussion of the task in hopes of reducing their assessment-related anxiety. This teaching strategy led to a missed opportunity to capture and develop the students’ interest from the outset, so that when the main body of the workshop got underway, Kimberley had to refocus the students. By that time, students seemed less enthusiastic than when they entered the room. In the post-observation discussion, we explored the possibility of initially flagging that discussion of the assessment task would occur at the end of the workshop. This would have enabled the class to move straight into the planned workshop activities while students’ energy levels were high and attention could be focused more easily on the key lesson concepts. This raised a broader issue for us as we considered the time in a workshop when we should schedule what we expect to be the most engaging learning activity. A subsequent incidental conversation with another colleague focused on whether highly engaging tasks are best placed at the end of a class to contribute to maintaining students’ motivation and attention to their learning. We have concluded that in planning a workshop or seminar, we need to consider the purpose and content of the learning experiences we are designing for our students, as well as practical aspects such as the time of day and length of the session.

Our peer observation experience raised our awareness of the importance of teachable moments when students are captured by and assume ownership of their learning in the space that we have created in our classroom. While it is impossible to list features of teachable moments or predict when they might occur, we are now more attuned to recognizing them when they happen by actively listening to our students. This notion of listening extends to awareness of the mood of the class and the nuances of student behavior. Our discussion subsequently gave us confidence to act on this recognition and change our plan to more closely follow students’ interests and ideas. From our experience, this rarely was a neat process in terms of the flow of a workshop and did not always address our intended learning outcomes. The benefits were that many students became energized and engaged and demonstrated our belief that teachers and students together create the paths along which learning occurs.

**Concerns about Teacher-Directedness**

Even when we felt that we had capitalized on a teachable moment, students had varied responses to our teaching strategies. While many were enthused, others seemed uncomfortable or even anxious when we departed from the planned lesson structure that we had shared with them at the outset of the workshop. This tension was confirmed by some questionnaire responses, particularly in students’ comments about their expectations of us as their teachers. For example, one student, who expected the teacher to tell her what to think, wrote that “less time spent on class discussions and more time of you explaining your thoughts and views on the issue” (S-Phil-7) while another student, who shared our view of the
teacher’s role, wrote that it is to “help us to learn from one another better and understand different viewpoints and work with others” (S-Phil-22). Our own views align more closely with the second student because we believe that encouraging our students to become more reflective educators is an important part of our work as teacher educators. Yet the diversity of students’ expectations of teacher-directedness did become clear to us in their comments and we felt the need to acknowledge that some students perceived our role quite differently to what we saw it to be. Some students believed that they were actively responsible for their own learning and the teacher’s role was to provide opportunities for developing their ideas and to challenge their thinking, while others saw the teacher as the person with the expert knowledge that needed to be communicated to them. This inspired our discussion about how our students are constructing us as teachers and how, through more explicit articulation of our purpose and intent, we can actively contribute to this construction.

Students’ requests for greater teacher-directedness in our workshops motivated us to explore the point that “how teachers view their role and goals as a teacher determines to a large extent how they will structure their teaching” (Fenstermacher & Soltis, 1998, p. 4). Engaging in peer observation made it clear to us that we need to communicate explicitly to students our reasoning for designing activities and tasks in particular ways, based on our specific intentions for their learning and, more broadly, on our own educational philosophies. In teacher education this appears particularly relevant, as we are seeking to support our students in making sound pedagogical decisions in their work with children. Articulating why we have chosen a certain structure for a workshop or assessment task enables our students to gain insight into factors that influence our decision-making, including reasons for departing from the planned structure, so that the complexity of the teaching-learning process can be discussed openly.

Insights into the Curriculum
A second key focus for our observations was the curriculum. Although we taught quite different subjects, we experienced similar issues regarding balancing theory and practice and judging students’ reactions to the level at which content was introduced.

Balancing Theory and Practice
We both had concerns about how we were integrating theoretical and practical aspects of students’ learning in our classes. Although this was nominated as a point for observation focus, it also emerged incidentally during observations. For example, Kitty made the following observation of Kimberley teaching her third-year students about reporting children’s progress:

Students draw heavily on anecdotal evidence – this seems to carry more weight for some of them than issues/principles which are more abstract. Can you use this? E.g., getting/giving anecdotes to back up various issues/principles? How do you lift their reasoning? (observation notes, 30 August 2004).

Interestingly, in the following year Kitty highlighted this issue in relation to her own teaching of a first-year Philosophy of Education class.

How well am I managing to make the link between thinking about epistemology and thinking about curriculum and knowledge in schools? Last year I felt this part got a bit too bogged down in little anecdotal stories, but on the other hand I want to show the relevance and personal anecdotes from the students helps with that. I suppose I am wondering if the balance is about right (email correspondence, 6 April 2005).
We are not alone in feeling this tension. LaBoskey (2004, p. 835) agrees that while the telling of teacher stories is common and useful, “the simple telling is not enough…opportunities for teacher educators and their students to rewrite and retell new stories that imagine other possibilities need to be provided.” We continued to discuss the relevance of telling teacher stories, which indicates that our collaborative self-study heightened our awareness of balancing theory and practice.

During our discussions we challenged each other’s ideas about how to balance students’ learning of curriculum-related content and their learning about teaching that content to children. As LaBoskey (2004, p. 819) puts it, “since we are teaching about teaching, we serve as powerful role models for our students.” Before Kitty’s observation of her second-year Science and Technology Education workshop, Kimberley sent the following message:

One of the key aims of Science and Technology Education is to provide experiences that increase students’ confidence, attitudes and understanding while at the same time developing their approach to teaching science and technology in their own primary classrooms. One of the things I’m concerned about is how I am balancing these two aspects—their own content knowledge, on the one hand, and their development as teachers on the other…Are they increasingly willing to take risks during the workshop? Are they posing questions that will help to develop their understanding? (Are they aware of what they don’t know?) Are they making connections between what we are doing in class and what they could do with K-6 students? (Email correspondence, 5 April 2004).

The post-observation discussion indicated that some elements of this workshop helped the students to develop connections between their own learning and how to help children learn. Students first watched a video example of children learning about electricity using a similar pedagogical approach to that being taken in the workshop. The video helped them to appreciate the relevance of what and how they were learning about teaching in a primary classroom. Then students were asked to note effective teaching strategies they viewed in the video as well as questions about that teacher’s practice. Their notes and questions promoted subsequent class discussion that linked our workshop activities to their own future practice. Kitty noticed that Kimberley was actively making explicit links between what students were doing in the workshop, what students had done together previously, and what they might do in the future. Kitty commented: “Students often don’t make those connections themselves…You made lots of good connections between what you are doing and what they might do with their students…, e.g., explaining how you are catering for different levels of prior knowledge” (observation notes, 8 April 2004).

Judging Students’ Responses to Content

In two of the classes we observed, new content was introduced into workshops that had been revised from the previous year’s teaching. During pre-observation discussions, we focused on how this new material might potentially improve the quality of students’ learning. In the case of the Primary Professional Experience workshop, Kimberley sought Kitty’s feedback about whether a new framework of professional teaching standards was being introduced to first-year students in a way that made sense to them, particularly given that it was only the fifth week in their program. In the case of the Secondary Philosophy of Education workshop, Kitty wanted Kimberley’s perspective on whether the students were receiving effective support in making sense of potentially challenging readings.

In both cases, observations from a colleague enabled the teacher to focus on delivery and support for students’ meaning-making, while the observer circulated among the student groups to ascertain understanding by eavesdropping on conversations. Brookfield
(1995, p. 4) challenges the assumption that it is “common sense to visit small groups after you’ve set them a task” and counters that it may be perceived as “a way of checking up.” For that reason, it can be less intrusive for the visiting observer rather than the classroom teacher to join small groups. This meant that we could provide evidence for the observed teacher and discuss our impressions of student understanding in post-observation conversations. While the teacher focused on the content, the observer could concentrate attention on non-verbal communication between students, the types of questions they asked one another, and the ways they used concepts introduced by the teacher in their small-group discussions. As lone teachers in a classroom, it is difficult to simultaneously attend to so many aspects of students’ interactions. Later, alone in our classrooms without an observer, we were more attuned to the students’ actions and comments that had been raised in post-observation discussions.

Insights into Our Students

Our peer observations enabled us to sit among the students to gain insight into workshops from their perspective. As a result, we gained some understanding of the experiences of students from non-English speaking backgrounds and we shared some ideas for how we might deal with students who were adjusting to university.

Experiences of Students from non-English Speaking Backgrounds

Over the course of our observations in 2005, Kimberley brought a concern in relation to a small number of first-year international students who were in both of our classes. She had noticed that these students rarely contributed to whole-class or small-group discussions and was wondering whether her own workshop delivery was appropriately timed and structured for students from non-English speaking backgrounds. Kimberley was concerned that she was not connecting with these students and that, as a result, they did not feel confident in asking clarification questions, either of her or their peers. She was not confident of her own understanding of these students’ expectations of her as their teacher. Kimberley took the opportunity to sit discretely alongside these students when she observed Kitty’s Philosophy of Education workshop. Kimberley’s observations confirmed that these students were not taking notes. Instead, students from non-English speaking backgrounds seemed to focus all of their energies on following Kitty’s delivery of the workshop and the discussions, which meant that they were not able to actively contribute to the class. They appeared to be in survival mode. When it came time to form small groups for discussion, they did not actively seek peers to work with and instead spent this time reviewing the allocated reading. As a result of these observations, we spoke with the program director and other first-year lecturers about faculty-wide strategies to better support these international students. The issues that we raised appeared to extend beyond our own subject areas.

Dealing with Students Adjusting to University

We observed that there were social tensions that had an impact on students’ learning and the effectiveness of our teaching. In our first-year Primary Education classes, some students who had come straight from high school seemed to find the relative freedom of university and the excitement of a mixed-gender classroom a bit overwhelming. These students tended to focus on the social rather than the educational dimension of our seminars, not only affecting their own learning but also disrupting the learning of others. In contrast, in one
Graduate Diploma in Secondary Education class, some of the mature students were so used to transmission-based learning that cooperative learning, especially across different subject disciplines, became difficult. Our peer observation process provided opportunities for exploring strategies to deal with these situations. For example, we explored how and when we used small groups to complete workshop tasks. Importantly, however, this also allowed us to share our frustrations without needing solutions, but rather to provide what Brookfield (1995, p. 36) calls “emotional sustenance.”

Insights into Ourselves as Teachers and Learners

In addition to particular knowledge and skills, a teacher’s identity plays a major role in the teaching and learning process. Teaching is a relational practice, as Noddings (2003) so clearly argues. Unfortunately, in an eagerness to find practical solutions, too often “the human issues in teaching get ignored” (Palmer, 1998, p. 145). Our findings in this section deal with this personal dimension of teacher education.

Developing Rapport with Students

Although we see ourselves as facilitators of student learning rather than authoritarian experts, we recognize that we are not the students’ equals. The comments we make and the feedback we give about students’ ideas, questions, and practical work influence how they feel and how they engage with the class. Constructive use of this power of the teacher was evident in Kimberley’s Science and Technology Education workshop on electrical circuits, as this comment from Kitty indicates:

You gave lots of positive feedback, so the whole exercise became a wonderful uplifting experience. Even if they did not make a complicated product, they all seemed to feel much more confident about their knowledge/skills regarding circuits and also became more interested and motivated to follow up on this. (observation notes, 8 April 2004)

The way a teacher behaves, comments, and responds to students’ comments all contribute to establishing the culture of a classroom. An effective teacher can lift students from being passive-receptive to becoming actively involved in learning. Kimberley’s comments on Kitty’s class point to an environment that enables and encourages such active learning, “There is a positive class atmosphere evident in students’ interactions with one another and your interactions with them” (observation notes, 12 April 2005). As teacher educators, we regard this as an important aspect in modeling quality teaching to our students, whom we hope will create stimulating and encouraging learning environments for children if they have experienced such environments in their own Teacher Education workshops.

Our Role as Models for Our Students

An important element of our peer observation activities concerned how we model to our students that we are learning about our teaching in an ongoing way. The importance of such modeling in teacher education is highlighted by Schulte (2005) as well as Nicol (2006), who acknowledges the importance of making our practices, actions and reactions explicit to our students. LaBoskey (2004, pp. 830–831) also suggests that because teacher educators are powerful role models, “we are concerned with the integrity of our work, with ‘walking our talk’ by bringing together our beliefs and actions.” One student appreciated our efforts to “practice what we preach” (P-Prof-18) and another reported that he “thought it was a really great idea—and something I could take into consideration and put into
practice when I’m teaching” (P-Prof-11). Other students, however, wanted the post-
observation process to be more transparent: “Tell us more about the areas you’re working
on and those that went well” (P-Prof-10) requested one student, while another suggested
that “perhaps Kitty could talk/report to us about what kinds of observations she was
making and how” (P-Prof-14). We did tell students about changes that we made in repeat
workshops with other student groups when that was the case, and we also highlighted some
of the broader changes that we intended to make as a result of our post-observation
conversations.

I openly shared with the students in today’s class my revisions to today’s plan based on the
reflection and feedback from yesterday’s workshop. They seem to really like hearing this!
Modeling reflection-in-action, I guess – and also knowing that their lecturer is always
learning and far from perfect! (email correspondence, Kimberley to Kitty, 31 August 2004).

Nevertheless, we are left wondering whether it would be beneficial for us to “fishbowl” our
post-observation conversations for students and then involve them in feedback discussion.
In this way, we could be providing students with greater access to how we think like a
teacher and modeling that there is not one “right” answer or way to approach teaching and
learning. In the words of LaBoskey (2004, p. 828), we want our students to understand that
their and our “knowledge of teaching is never conclusive” and we accept that this requires
us to involve the students more in our reflective activities.

Potential benefits to our students have led us to reconsider the purpose of our
observations in relation to the primary and secondary purposes with which we began our
peer observations. We are somewhat reluctant to make the post-observation discussion
public, in that we have regarded this as a two-way, collegial discussion rather than one in
which student input is sought. We already receive formative and summative student
feedback through evaluation questionnaires and comments from students in and outside of
class, so our teaching is currently informed by student input. Could the involvement of
students be a beneficial way to enhance the peer observation process, in developing it
further and deepening the feedback? Although we believe that it would be beneficial to our
students’ learning about collaborative peer observation to enhance their own professional
development, we have yet to decide whether it would be constructive in the context of our
peer collaboration for self-study.

Other teacher education researchers engaged in self-study have provided insights into
how we might approach our teaching about teaching through exposing our own practice to
scrutiny (e.g., Loughran, Berry, & Tudball, 2005; Russell, 2007). Emphasis is placed on
establishing a trusting environment in which risk-taking is possible and our feelings and
expectations for our practice are exposed and critiqued. In the work of Loughran et al.
(2005), teacher educators model critique and invite students to gradually join in the
process in order to subsequently engage the students in peer critique during their school
practicum placements. While this process is clearly of value to the students’ learning about
becoming reflective practitioners engaged in collaborative critique, Loughran et al. (2005)
do not report how the involvement of students in critical observation and discussion might
contribute to their own self-study process as teacher educators.

Russell (2007) describes strategies in his own teacher education practice that have
fostered communication between his students and himself in relation to their learning
about teaching. In particular, he focuses on making his educational values explicit to
students and listening to students in ways that promote clarification of issues and
assumptions. Above all, however, Russell emphasizes the power of experience. The
implication that we draw from his approach is that engaging students in our own self-study
process through their direct experience of the post-observation discussion can have significant benefits to our students’ learning about peer observation for professional learning. Informed by such work in the field of self-study, we intend to explore and document different ways of engaging students in our peer observation process as we continue to develop our practice.

**Benefits of First-Hand Collegial Support**

Active and reciprocal involvement in each other’s teaching can provide prompts for articulation of reasoning and ongoing reflection. An example is a question Kitty asked: “I was wondering how you decided on grouping students for the first activity?” (30 August 2004). Having opened the door to supporting each other’s professional development, the knowledge we had of each other’s teaching as well as the sense of welcome made it easier and more useful to draw each other in for on-going reflection, separate from the classes observed.

One of the benefits of peer observation can be to provide emotional sustenance and help build our confidence and identity as teacher educators. The importance of this is emphasized by Palmer (1998, p. 149) who argues that “good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.” This is particularly the case where there is trust and the peer observation is embedded within a context of critical friendship (te Riele & Pressick-Kilborn, 2007). The relational practice of teaching that Noddings (2003) refers to thus extends outside the classroom to ourselves as colleagues and fellow learners.

**Conclusion**

Collaboration in self-study research can “provide opportunities for openness to new ideas, plus critical reflection and discernment in the knowledge creation process” (Bodone et al., 2004, p. 774). In particular, as Fullerton (1993, p. 77) explains, peer observation can assist academics to, “critically reflect upon their teaching through planned observation, discussion and analysis. This may result in staff trying out new ideas, reaffirming what is being done, or modifying existing techniques in order to help students better learn.” Our peer observation process served to provide new or modified ideas about our practices as teacher educators, as well as to reaffirm and reassure. Within the “bureaucratic, competitive and measurement-driven world of teacher education,” collaboration can be used “to create safe spaces where practitioners can support one another to make sense of a challenging world and rebuild energy and action” (Bodone et al., 2004, pp. 755–756). Our collaboration, built on respect and trust, providing us with support and motivation even though we did not always agree with each other.

Our collaborative peer observations have provided a catalyst for change by giving us fresh insights into our teaching practices. We emphasize that these insights have contributed to the professional learning of both the observer and the observed. For example, while it was during an observation of Kitty’s teaching that the issue of capitalizing on students’ responses was raised, Kimberley began to consider how she might be missing opportunities to promote learning in relation to unanticipated events or conversations in her own workshops. This subsequently heightened our awareness of “teachable moments” in both of our classrooms.

As Bodone et al. (2004, p. 772) explain, “despite the strong presence of collaboration in the practice of self-study, its consideration in the current discourse is largely tacit and implied.” Through sharing our own endeavor, we hope to contribute to giving collaboration
a more explicit place in the self-study discourse. In particular, we have argued that peer observation has the potential to enhance self-study, in order to better understand our own teaching practice. Boud and Kilty (1995, p. 119) refer to a “collaborative rather than adversarial role within a context of mutual inquiry.” Harnessing this sense of collegiality as a component of self-study is both beneficial for students and a source of energy and inspiration for teacher educators.

Acknowledgements

Our research was first presented as a paper at the 2006 American Educational Research Association meeting in San Francisco. We thank colleagues at AERA and within our own faculty for their collegiality and feedback on our peer observation experiences. We also thank our students, who continue to provide us with insights into our teaching.

References


