

## **Open Doors on Teaching: Peer Observation at Utrecht University**

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by [Carmen Damhuis](#), [Hetty Grunefeld](#), [Anna Gerbrandy](#) & [Christel Lutz](#)

We developed the Open Doors on Teaching program at Utrecht University to facilitate opportunities for peer consultation amongst the teaching faculty at our university. The program allows individual faculty to make use of an e-matching tool in order to find relevant peers in the UU's large teaching community. Beyond peer consultation and observation, we hope that the program will lead to new and inspiring conversations about teaching. Such exchanges might also lead to further collaborations, such as mutual guest lectures or the co-development of course content across departments.

This document places our own initiative in a larger context and justifies some of the choices we made for our Open Doors on Teaching program.

### *Peer observation*

Teacher development refers to a set of activities that enhance and expand the knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers in such a way that it will lead to changes in their thinking process and teaching behaviour, and to better student learning (De Rijdt, Stes, Van der Vleuten, & Dochy, 2013). Peer observation, a process in which academics observe each others teaching, is often used in academic contexts to stimulate teacher development. In the current program, we want to stimulate teachers to learn from observing each other. Peer observation has been used in different ways and for different purposes (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Bovill & Cairns, 2014, Thomson, Bell & Hendry, 2015). Here, we give an overview of what is known about peer observation in university settings to explain why we chose learning by watching as an informal way to encourage the exchange of teaching experiences.

### *Exchange of teaching experiences*

Many university teachers are accustomed to learn from others through informal conversations with colleagues within their department, other teachers they meet when taking courses on pedagogy, pedagogical experts, students, and with friends and family (Pyörälä, Hirsto, Toom, Myry, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2015). Teachers use these informal conversations to manage, reform and transform their teaching, as well as to vent and seek reassurance (Thomson, 2015). Most academics have a limited number of colleagues with who they have informal conversations about teaching; 83% of 106 teachers at Sweden universities indicated that they had only 10 or fewer significant conversational partners (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2009). These conversations are

characterised as private, trusting and intellectually stimulating, but also as anecdotal, practical and far removed from a larger debate about good teaching (Pyörälä et al., 2015). Starting from the basic need to learn from each other, some universities start use programs of peer observation to encourage valuable exchanges.

### *Learning by watching*

In the current program, we want to allow teachers to learn by watching one another teach. Learning by watching is relatively new in peer observation programs (Tenenbergh, 2016; Thomson et al., 2015). Peer observation programs are usually aimed at providing the one who is observed with feedback from the one who does the observing. Based on experiences with peer observation at universities, Thomson et al. (2015) note that the watching itself is a meaningful by-product of peer observation programs. Twenty staff members were asked about their experience with peer observation. These teachers described the ‘just watching’ of a colleague who is teaching as useful for their development. They mentioned that they had learned at least one new teaching strategy and tried something new in their own teaching. One of the teachers in the Bovill and Cairns’ study (2014) noted that observing others is useful because it allows for a direct comparison to your own teaching, and thereby inspires you to think in new ways about teaching. In an interview one teacher, who observed a teacher teaching the same course but at another university, mentioned that she was able to related her own teaching experience directly to this other way of teaching and as a result found new solutions (Tenenbergh, 2016). Thomson et al. (2015) interpreted this to mean that learning by watching can be effective because (1) teachers can choose their own focus and (2) it takes place within the workplace context itself.

### *Voluntary character*

We want to underline that the Open Doors program is a voluntary opportunity in which the focus is on learning from each other. Lomas and Kinchin (2006) caution us that annual peer observation within an obligatory program can be experienced as a risk for the academic freedom and autonomy of the professional. Furthermore, when there is an evaluative goal, observation is likely to be experienced as non-representative because of its short duration, and the observers can be experienced as non-objective (Lomas & Kinchin, 2006). Our Open Doors on Teaching program ensures that the initiative is with the teacher who sets his or her own learning goals in seeking a colleague to watch.

### *Possible follow-ups to Open Door matches*

The Open Doors on Teaching program might be lead to other types of peer observations: those participants seeking a more traditional peer observation may seek ‘critical friends’ with the intention to seek feedback on their teaching (Kinchin, 2005). This type of peer observation

stimulates shared critical reflection on existing classroom experience and can lead to a transformation of both the goal and the practice of teaching (Bell, 2001). Whereas for ‘learning by watching’, trust, shared responsibility and development-oriented goals are important, these aspects are even more important in peer observation that include this type of critical feedback (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2015). This is why such matches are not the primary goal (nor are they ever the first activity) of an Open Door on Teaching match between faculty members.

Another possible follow-up can be lesson study, as a form of research in the academic workplace (O’Leary, 2014). This approach assumes that teachers can learn from each other by providing assistance to each other and by sharing good practices. The steps in this process are the following (Lieberman, 2009): in small workgroups teachers evaluate and discuss specific aspects of their curriculum and student involvement, a group of teachers jointly discuss an important theme, improve a lesson plan, observe one of the group members in performance, discuss the observation, reflect on it, and formulate what has been learned about the process of teaching and learning. It is a non-judgmental, analytical approach, focusing on data collection to reflect on a particular aspect of the curriculum. The goal is to reflect upon the learning process of students and how this can be improved (O’Leary, 2014). Lesson study is mainly used in primary and secondary education and is relatively new in higher education, but the process is also applicable in teaching in higher education.

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