

Jerneja Jager, PhD, Mateja Režek, MA

### **Observation with Reflective Discussion in a Higher Education Context**

There is a growing need for increased investment in research within the higher education (HE) sector and in the training of HE staff (Vršnik Perše, 2021). This is particularly significant due to the university's dual mission of research and teaching, which is also reflected in the dual role of HE teachers (Mezgec, 2020). Consequently, HE teachers often face a dilemma regarding where to focus more: on pedagogical or research activities in their professional development (Glasby, 2015). Within the European context, it is well known that the evaluation of research indicators is still significantly more emphasised at the systemic level than the professional development in the field of pedagogical engagement (Graham, 2015; Vršnik Perše, 2021).

Ivanuš Grmek and Bezjak (2021, p. 38) point out, based on the literature review and research in the Slovenian context (e.g. Marentič Požarnik, 1998a, 1998b; Marentič Požarnik, 2001; Marentič Požarnik & Lavrič, 2011; Cvetek, 2015; Marentič Požarnik et al., 2019; Marentič Požarnik, 2020; Ivanuš Grmek et al., 2020), that "reflection, awareness and improvement of pedagogical competences and professional development of HE teachers are particularly important for high-quality and effective teaching." Košir (2021, p. 55) emphasises that, due to the need to improve pedagogical competences, it is important that HE teachers are "systematically encouraged to improve them." She underscores that these competencies need to be systematically developed through ongoing reflection on one's pedagogical practice with the aim of improving one's own teaching.

We are thus addressing the need to establish conditions that enable HE teachers to become reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983). However, engaging in reflection is challenging when done in isolation. Therefore, a reflective teacher requires support to 'confront' their teaching with their own experiences and theoretical knowledge, whereby the reflection process becomes a means of re-conceptualizing pedagogical practice (Chappell, 2007).

One way to assist teachers in becoming reflective practitioners is through engagement in peer observation processes accompanied by reflective discussion. Some authors (Ackerman et al., 2009; Martin & Double, 1998; Yon et al., 2002) highlight that peer observation of teaching (POT) is increasingly utilised in HE for the purpose of the professional development of HE teachers.

Gosling (2005) outlines three POT models: evaluative, developmental and collaborative. However, Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2007) emphasise that POT becomes a tool for professional development, rather than a mechanism for performance evaluation, only when understood as a developmental and/or collaborative model.

Similarly to Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2007), Chappell (2007) conceptualises collegial observation of practice. He underscores the importance of observing HE teaching and the subsequent reflective discussion, aimed at facilitating the professional development of HE teachers and assessing the significance and suitability of teaching approaches.

POT is typically structured as a three-part process: a pre-observation meeting, where the observer and the observed agree on the area of observation; the observation itself; and a reflective discussion, during which the observer and the observed analyse the observed session from both perspectives (Carroll & O'Loughlin 2014; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond 2007).

The learning that occurs within the framework of POT is most often attributed to the observed, as a result of the observer's comments and the subsequent reflection by the observed (Bell, 2002; Cosh, 1999; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2007). In this regard, Chappell (2007) notes that the usefulness of reflective discussions after observation strongly depends on the individual's (observer's) personality, openness to feedback and, to a large extent, commitment to participating in the reflection process. This is also confirmed by Hogston (1995), who states that the process of reflective discussion will support the professional development of those involved if they possess, on the one hand, the skills that enable

constructive criticism of practice and, on the other hand, the skills and personality traits that enable them to accept the value of such assessments.

In the research, we aimed to define observation with reflective discussion as a method supporting the professional development of HE teachers. Specifically, we were interested in understanding how observation with reflective discussion contributes to the professional development of HE teachers (Research question 1; RQ1) and which factors influence observation with reflective discussion in supporting the professional development of HE teachers (RQ2).

In the research, we used the qualitative method of empirical pedagogical research. We conducted a case study of observing the pedagogical practice of two HE teachers. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews, conducted with each HE teacher 3-5 months after observation with reflective discussion. The tools used for observation were the *Observation and Reflective Discussion Guides* (Jager & Režek, 2023) and the *Instrument for Observing Active Learning and Developing Global Competencies in Higher Education* (Jager et al., 2023). The individual semi-structured interviews aimed to gather responses to the research questions. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and analysed using the qualitative content analysis method.

As noted by Bell (2002), Cosh (1999), Gosling (2005), and Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2007), our research also revealed that learning about one's own practice within POT is most commonly attributed to the observed, as a result of the observer's feedback and the subsequent reflection by the observed. It is important, however, that learning is followed by a concrete implementation of changes in practice.

We also found that observation with reflective discussion serves as a stimulus for self-evaluation for HE teachers. Moreover, it was confirmed that pedagogical competencies are not innate personality traits but rather the result of reflective practice, to which HE teachers should be systematically encouraged (Košir, 2021).

Furthermore, we found that observation with reflective discussion supports reflecting on one's own practice. It is important to emphasise that this is the case only if the process is implemented as a developmental and/or collaborative POT model (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2007), as is also understood in the process of observation with reflective discussion presented in this article.

Observation with reflective discussion also encourages professional discussions among colleagues involved in this process, which confirms Chappell's (2007) finding that observations are not intended to evaluate HE teachers, but rather to identify strengths, explore potential improvements and consider alternative approaches.

Regarding the factors influencing observation with reflective discussion in supporting the professional development of HE teachers, we found that both the observer's skills in facilitating constructive reflective discussion and the skills and personal qualities of the observed are significant in the process.

In relation to the skills and personal qualities of the observed, as noted by Chappell (2007) and Hogston (1995), we find that the willingness to accept feedback influences the recognition of the importance of feedback received from the observer for the professional development of the observed individual.

Two factors that influence observation with reflective discussion in supporting the professional development of HE teachers are the observer's familiarity with the content area of the observed work and intercollegiate trust. In this case as well, the importance of implementing POT as a developmental and/or collaborative model is confirmed if it is to become a tool for the professional development of HE teachers (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2007).



One of the highlighted factors – cultivating intercollegiate trust and critical friendship – is important because the reflective teacher requires support to 'confront' their teaching with their own experiences and theoretical knowledge (Chappell, 2007).

Due to the various challenges faced by HE teachers today (Mezgec, 2020; Vršnik Perše, 2021), there is an increasing need for professional development in the field of pedagogical competences. It is essential to ensure an academic culture that fosters such activities, as research shows that the involvement of HE teachers in professional development that enhances pedagogical competencies contributes to the improvement of student learning (Coronel et al., 2003; Kennedy, 2016; Winch et al., 2015).

After reviewing the existing literature and the findings of the research, we propose, similarly to Košir (2021), a systemic regulation of professional development for HE teachers in enhancing pedagogical competencies. However, we emphasise that POT cannot serve as a developmental process for improving teaching practice if it is limited to observing one lecture once a year, as is often the case in practice (Knight & Trowler, 2001). It is important to consider that POT is just one of professional development activities, especially if we are to follow the idea of synergy among experiences from various professional development activities (Rutz et al., 2012).

*This document was developed with the financial support of the Norwegian Financial Mechanism (<https://www.norwaygrants.si/>). The authors of the article are solely responsible for the content of this document, and it in no way reflects the views of the Education – Strengthening of Human Resources program holder.*