

Testing a model for classroom observation in higher education

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Abstract

In this article, the ongoing development and implementation of a model for collegial exchange is presented. The aim is to modify an existing model for classroom observation and to test and evaluate the design in a pilot study, in order to encourage university teachers to learn from each other. In addition, the model is intertwined with further developing the role of the newly established network of recognized university teachers at a middle-sized Swedish university. In this model, the recognized university teachers are given explicit roles as facilitators, and it has a flexible design in order to suit as many teachers as possible—both newly educated and experienced. Insights from the teachers who actively participated in the pilot study highlight the positive impact of collegial observations. The participants found these observations to be not only inspiring but also valuable for their professional growth. In addition, they emphasized the significance of supporting a trustful relationship and shared intention with fellow teachers during collegial observation. Another conclusion from the pilot study is that it's important not to rush when implementing this kind of model for long-lasting collegial exchange, but to let it develop gradually.

Keywords: collegial observation model; recognized university teachers; pilot study; teaching and learning in higher education

Received 30 August 2023; revised version received 2 April 2024; accepted 22 May 2024. Corresponding author: Åsa Carlsund, Umeå University, Sweden (asa.carlsund@umu.se).

Introduction

In recent years, many university teachers in Sweden have enrolled in courses focused on teaching and learning in higher education or applied for nomination as *recognized university teachers* (a model for teacher development with two levels: first recognized teacher, then excellent teacher). One reason for this increasing interest in educational development is that since 1993, Sweden's Higher Education Ordinance (SFS 1993:100) states that a university teacher should show not only scientific but also pedagogical skills in order to obtain a post with conditional tenure or tenure. In addition, in Sweden and several other countries, merit models aim to

propel teachers' advancement within higher education pedagogy, focusing on the development of pedagogical skills (Chalmers, 2011; Elken & Stensaker, 2018). This is done by providing substantial opportunities for academic promotion, with assessment criteria that primarily highlight pedagogical skills. Thus, collegial learning—as part of the development of an individual's teaching and scholarship of teaching and learning—is increasingly emphasized. The growth of pedagogical merit models has also drawn attention to the requirements and needs for sustainable, long-term educational development. In order to achieve this goal, a teacher's pedagogical competence is involved, as well as the initiation of developmental efforts based on the concrete challenges they face in their daily work. For instance, there seems to be an increasing international interest in the collegial exchange of experiences related to teaching, both at the individual and group levels.

One way of creating prerequisites for collegial exchange is to use models specifically developed for collegial classroom observations. The use of models serves as collegial support for new teachers, as well as an opportunity for experienced teachers to enhance their own pedagogical skills by acting as mentors for their junior colleagues. In addition, many experienced teachers can benefit a great deal from the type of critical feedback facilitated by observational models, especially if it's been a while since their teaching has been observed. Collegial observations can also be valuable when writing a teaching portfolio or applying for the status of recognized teacher.

When using observation models, teachers can take on different roles, either by being granted the opportunity to get feedback from an experienced colleague or, alternatively, to provide feedback to a colleague. Previous research supports collegial observation activities, demonstrating their usefulness for both the observed teacher and the colleague acting as a critical friend (Dahlgren et al., 2006; Handal, 1999; Hendry et al., 2014; Wennerberg et al., 2019).

The process of collegial learning should commence by addressing the specific needs of students and teachers within the local context. Additionally, it should be continuously followed, developed, and evaluated (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Meissel et al., 2016). At our university, several departments have expressed their need for collaboration, systemization, and clarity regarding collegial pedagogical exchange (Asklund et al., 2022). As a result, we have modified the model presented below, in order to facilitate such a process.

The authors, a recognized university teacher in nursing and an educational developer, collaborated on the modification of the observation model developed by Wennerberg et al. (2019). We tested our modification in a small pilot study focused on collegial classroom observation.

In our modified version of the model, an important aspect is including recognized university teachers, who served as facilitating leaders in the initial and concluding group plenary sessions. Our intent was to use these leaders as a resource

for the participants throughout the entire process. While the model we modified was intended for use in courses over one semester, our modified model is flexible and easily adaptable to shorter or longer durations. In addition, our modified model can include any number of participants ranging from two colleagues to an entire teaching staff.

In the following sections, this contribution aims to describe and evaluate the modified model of collegial classroom observations and illustrate the reflections of the participating teachers before, during and after the pilot study. Additionally, we discuss how the model could be further adjusted and incorporated as a common practice in our university.

Description of our setting

In Sweden, nursing education has undergone a transformation from a historically practical orientation to an increasingly academic focus over the past few decades. This transition meant that nursing education changed from an apprenticeship model into a university-level educational program. The result is now a dual degree structure for undergraduate nursing students in Sweden, culminating in both a bachelor's degree and a professional degree. Our university, located in the north of Sweden, has two different campuses. The nursing program is available at both locations and teachers are employed at both campuses.

In line with the national development in Sweden, there has been an increasing interest in taking courses in teaching and learning in higher education during recent years. Five years ago, our university established a tiered model for becoming a recognized teacher, which resulted in more than 50 teachers earning the status of recognized teachers and seven earning the higher status of *excellent teachers*. These teachers are members of our university's network for recognized teachers, which has funding specifically for creating educational development activities.

The pilot study in focus is one way of creating opportunities for these highly skilled teachers to disseminate their knowledge among colleagues and thereby contribute even more to a culture where educational challenges and ideas are discussed on a wider basis. In that sense, this purposeful development is closely connected to the idea of academic teachership (Bolander Laksov & Scheja, 2020). Academic teachership emphasizes that educational development is not only important on the individual level but also enhances collegiality across the institution.

Description of the model used in our pilot study

As already stated, the model used in the pilot study is a slightly modified version of the program for collegial observations by Wennerberg et al. (2019). It is described in a guide used by teachers observing each other in the classroom. In order to help the user, each step has its own template where the aim and line of action are described in detail (Appendix 1).

The first step begins with a preparatory discussion where the observing teachers (in a pair or a group) meet with a pedagogically-qualified teacher to plan and prepare the planned observation. A recognized university teacher leads this discussion.

In the second step, each pair/group decides on what issues or topics should be in focus in the observation, as well as when the observation and feedback session should take place. They also prepare the observation and note-taking template. The teacher who will be observed provides the observer with brief information about the teaching situation that will be observed. At this point, they also decide what aspect(s) of the teaching should be the focus of the observation. There are five different focus areas to choose from:

1. **Communication** focuses on the teacher's attitude, engagement, interest, use of language, terms, and concepts.
2. **Content** focuses on the relevance of the teaching content and how it's linked to learning outcomes, examination forms, etc.
3. **The students' learning situation** focuses on the students' contribution and activity: How are they involved, and to what extent are they given space to actively participate?
4. **Individual wishes** focuses on an aspect that the teacher has specifically asked for, such as structure, aim, etc.
5. **Unbiased response** first focuses on the overall impression and continues to aspects of interest in the particular situation.

The third step includes the observation sessions, where the colleague(s) each attend at least one (or part of a) teaching situation. During the session, each observer takes notes about the chosen focus area(s) (Appendix 2a). After the teaching session, the teacher being observed also makes notes regarding the focus area and adds other points worth considering (Appendix 2b).

The fourth step consists of oral feedback. The colleagues involved meet and reflect on the teaching session. The teacher being observed describes what felt good and what could be developed further. Thereafter, the observer gives his or her overall picture, pinpointing positive aspects and constructive suggestions for further

development. The oral feedback ends with a joint reflection about what new insights and ideas the observation resulted in.

In the fifth and final step, the colleagues and the recognized university teacher meet to evaluate the process. The recognized university teacher leads this discussion in which they follow a specific manual developed for this occasion. Issues that could be raised at this stage include, for instance, how the observations and feedback turned out and if there were any problems or difficulties to take into consideration.

In our pilot study, a sixth step was added in order to evaluate the actual observation model as a tool for further developing the model. Each participant was asked questions about the process and what they learned from participation, which could be applied in the future. We also asked if there were challenges during the process. The result of this evaluation will be reflected on below.

Results from our pilot study

In line with previous research, we used a targeted instrument for collegial observations, visualized it in a document and tested it in a small pilot study (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Meissel et al., 2016). During the pilot study, both the participants and the researchers (who could be described as silent observers) took notes, which were discussed in our final meeting (the sixth step), which took place five months after the pilot study. In that meeting, our concluding discussion was recorded, with written consent from the participants, and subsequently transcribed verbatim. In the next section, we present a summary of our concluding discussion and characterize some general reflections from our participants.

Our pilot summary

In our pilot study, four teachers in nursing (divided into two pairs) participated. Their backgrounds differed, since one in each pair was quite new in the role of being a university teacher, whereas the other was more experienced. This meant that they took part in the study from different perspectives. Also, it meant that we took extra care emphasizing that the observations should be used as a tool for mutual development and not for simply correcting anything or anyone. This proved to be important. The teachers said they had basic knowledge about each other as colleagues before the pilot study, but that they have now—after the intervention—become better acquainted with each other, which they feel is helpful when working together on different tasks. Following the intervention, their relationship has evolved in that they have gained a deeper understanding of each other, which they characterize as a positive and inspirational experience. They have also started discussing collegial observations with other teachers. They underlined that their

discussions have led to a lot of follow-up effects which, in turn, might give other teachers inspiration.

The participating teachers chose to observe each other with a focus on communication. They expressed that our instruction material provided helpful guidance and highlighted the aspects of nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice. According to one participant, 'You act in a way that you usually don't think about... we both had body language that I earlier never thought about.' Regarding the participants' body language in the pilot study, they established a connection with the students by nodding their heads, making eye contact, and using their hands to gesture and emphasize important information. They mostly appeared to be comfortable using their body language to convey information and engage with the students. They joked and laughed while interacting with their teacher colleague and the students.

Overall, the participants appeared to be knowledgeable and experienced. Some of them, however, struggled with maintaining energy throughout the entire session. In addition, they appeared to be focused on the students and used humor to engage and make the students comfortable.

In summary, the teachers showed interest and engagement in the students, using their voice as well as their body language to demonstrate and visualize important activities for the students. The teachers provided positive feedback, corrected small mistakes, encouraged the students, and seemed to be calm, inviting, and pleasant in their dialogue with the students.

Regarding the instruments we used (see appendices), the participants found them understandable and were satisfied with the way they could be used as a guide. Although they did not fill in the instrument entirely, they were still helped by having a clear direction toward the focus area. In line with the results of Kohut et al. (2007), participants indicated that overall, using the model was helpful and constructive.

Based on all six steps of our pilot, we conclude that we may need to include more specific and supporting directions to avoid overly broad observations regarding communication. For example, how tone of voice is used and how it influences interactions with students. By using more specific keywords and concise definitions, the observations might become more nuanced and detailed.

The teachers who chose to participate were, to our knowledge, individuals who were already positive about this type of collaboration. In addition, they expressed how their participation benefited them in ways that they had not expected. Prior to our pilot study, our participant teachers thought it would take a lot of time and energy from other tasks, but they revealed that it didn't take as much time as they had expected. 'It's helpful for one's own pedagogical progress and future work,' one of the participants stated. Another participant expressed that it was rewarding to give and receive feedback and that it was good to focus on what could be further developed rather than getting stuck on merely what is good or bad.

The purpose of modifying an existing model was to create a natural environment for teachers to learn from each other, where it becomes more self-evident to discuss one's own teaching issues with others. Fortunately, the participating teachers found the collegial observations to be inspiring and useful. However, they expressed that there are many different parts that need to fit together to get the most out of the engagement. Our results show that teachers value a trustworthy relationship, a shared vision, and an equivalent intention with the person with whom they accomplished the collegial observation. Future studies could build upon these concrete findings in order to get a deeper understanding about the components of trust, collaboration, and intentionality among teachers in higher education.

Ideas for future development

By now, we have fulfilled our aim in the sense that we have modified, tested, and evaluated a model for collegial observations. In light of the evaluation process, minor revisions to the model will be made. In addition, we hope this model can be continually used by colleagues all over our university, as a tool for individual and collegial educational development. What comes next, we hope, could be a way of implementing this model on a larger scale across our university, and hopefully even in other universities. To achieve this, it's crucial to work strategically on a long-term basis. To that end, we find it useful to continue evaluating the model and the pilot study, since several parts of a more detailed evaluation process entail long-term commitments (Stefani & Baume, 2016). We draw on D. Kirkpatrick's model for evaluation processes (1994), where he talks about several different steps of evaluation, a couple of which are useful at the stage where we are at the moment. One step now concerns how the participants put into practice their new knowledge, and another step aims to analyze to what extent the project has contributed to development on an organizational level. These steps cannot be studied until one or two years have passed.

Above all, we find it important that the model is implemented in a way that makes it independent of particular individuals. In order to do that, we will start by involving the network of recognized university teachers. Since the network has the means to develop different kinds of activities for the following two and a half years, we can use these resources to provide time to network members who have shown an interest in acting as mentors/supervisors for teachers who want to make observations in each other's classrooms. In this way, we will be able to create a long-term structure for mentorship, as well as give the recognized university teachers an opportunity to develop their pedagogical skills, something that is an

important part of the local model for becoming a recognized teacher at our university.

By establishing a continuous dialogue with key figures at our university, such as heads of department, we also aim to try the modified model on a larger scale. In order to do so, however, we strongly believe that we have to find ways of getting support from one department at a time and grow bigger, incrementally, on a long-term basis. For this, we need to identify arenas for communication, such as department meetings.

As already mentioned, we are striving toward making the observation model as independent as possible of specific people, in order to be sustainable. Therefore, our plan is to work on implementing it on several organizational levels. In addition to involving recognized university teachers and presenting the model to key figures—such as deans, heads of department and directors of study—we also see the need to adapt it to the needs and wishes of different departments and groups of teachers. This is in contrast to Hattie and Timperley (2007), who argued that the experiences should mainly be used locally within each unit or institution.

From a strategic perspective, gradual implementation in different parts of the university is something to strive toward, since it gives plenty of occasions for trying out, evaluating, and developing the model in different stages. After the pilot study, a first step would be to let larger groups of teachers (for example, a subject faculty) work with joint observations for a longer period of time. That would give us an opportunity to strengthen the development of a collegial culture where an ongoing dialogue about educational development issues would take place. In that way, we would also make visible how the observational model could contribute to educational development, not only individually but also across the institution. This is also important from a strategic perspective, in order to provide the prerequisites for continuing educational development at the university as a whole.

This observation model could possibly give rise to certain soft outcomes, or side effects, from developmental work that might be significant (Bamber & Stefani, 2015). For instance, a heightened awareness about academic teachership and a larger collegial community. In the short term, such side effects could arise in the form of the heightened consciousness described by Bolander Laksov and Scheja (2020) or from a more open dialogue about educational issues in the teacher faculties. Of course, this is also valuable for the individual teacher and—in the long-term—for students. From a broader perspective, we argue that these won't merely be future side effects, but rather actual goals that can be reached if we manage to firmly establish the model with the parties concerned, and thus give the possibility to work strategically on continuous development.

In summary, this model could potentially fit in with a globally relevant context. However, the model must be further developed, more grounded in a robust theory, and further empirically tested when it comes to its effectiveness across

various disciplines and university types. This approach aims to address the widespread need for teacher training tools, recognizing that many institutions, globally, lack access to such resources. The model is flexible in order to suit as many teachers as possible, and the participating teachers found the collegial observations inspiring and useful, as evidenced in our pilot study.

Please note: If you are interested in commenting on our work, developing, or collaborating please don't hesitate to contact Åsa Carlsund, Umeå University, at asa.carlsund@umu.se or Helen Asklund, Mid Sweden University, at helen.asklund@miun.se.

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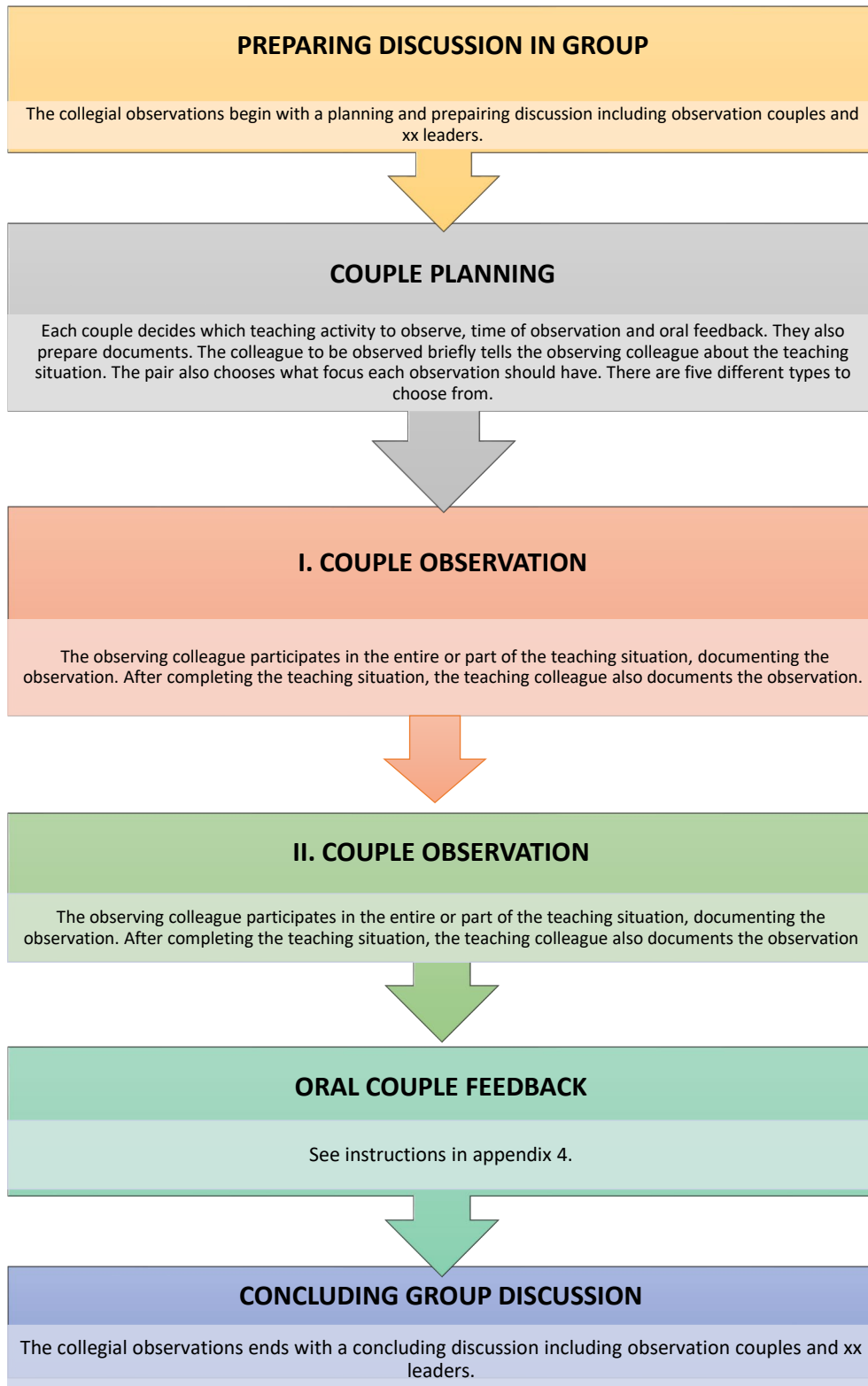
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Appendix 1. Template for collegial observations



Appendix 2a. Template for the observing teacher

Date:

Focus of the observation:

Observations:

Here you can take notes while observing, for instance about the setup, the dialogue between teacher and students and other items of importance in connection to the focus area you have chosen.

Feedback to the teacher based on the aim of the observation:

Here you can write down what you want to tell your colleague when giving each other oral feedback. Note that the feedback should also be given to your colleague in written form.

Reflections on the observation process as a whole.

Here is where you summarize your overall picture of the observation process.

Appendix 2b. Template for the observed teacher

Date:

Focus of the observation:

Individual notes:

Write the notes related to the observation here, such as content, student activity and your own contribution.

Received feedback:

Reflect on the feedback you have received from the observing colleague here.

Reflections on the observation process as a whole:

Summarize your overall impression of the observation here.