

High Impact Observation

A master class by Peter McGregor, e-Qualitas

Part 1: Introduction

My name is Peter McGregor and I am one of the directors of the Equalitas. We carry out reviews of schools and work with teachers to improve teaching and learning.

Many of the people working for us are either Ofsted inspectors or ISI inspectors. The baseline of all we do is teaching and learning. We've never moved away from that since 1993 when the OFSTED handbook first came out.

We believe strongly in observing lessons, judging them, and helping teachers improve so that children's learning improves. That's what we're about. That's what we do.

Part 2: The starting point

The starting point for us is always the school itself. We think that individual in-service training should be tailored to each school and you need to have specific pieces of evidence to plan that INSET.

The first piece of evidence is the last inspection. This might be an Independent School Inspectorate report or an OFSTED report. That tells you an awful lot about what is going on in the school.

The second point is the school, college or academy self-evaluation form and self-development plan.

What we do is look at that information and look for strengths and weaknesses in teaching in order that it is a focus of what we're doing. When we speak to staff we are making them remember what was actually in the reports documents they have, because half the time they forget what's in there.

So we find that very useful as a starting point. So, with an INSET start from where the school is, not where you want it to be.

Part 3: What is good learning?

The next stage as far as I'm concerned is looking at what good learning is.

Everyone waffles on about what good learning is. I think the learning theorists have got a lot of really good information you can make use of.

The learning theorists we try and focus on - there obviously thousands, and I'm no researcher, I'm no academic, but what we do is look at people like Vygotsky and their zone of proximal development which suggests that children should be near each other in ability when they are discussing things.

We could look at Pavlov and Skinner. We are not looking for salivating dogs, but we are looking for conditioning where we are seeing teachers getting children to follow routines to improve behaviour. Piaget on conceptual leaps inside Science and Maths which are mind based subjects.

You often find children need to go through conceptual leaps, and if you teach children at the wrong academic level they have not got a chance.

So learning theorists like that we found invaluable. We discussed those with the audience of teachers, senior leaders, pupils - whoever it is we are working with, and we hope at the end of that they have a good basis for the next stage.

Part 4: Criteria for lesson observation

Once we've understood about learning the next step from that is to discuss the possible criteria we use in lesson observation.

No this is as long is a piece of string. We say that the National Colleges teacher standards are key. But what you have got is in the Independent school inspection and OFSTED criteria for judging teaching, so you can just go through those documents and find key phrases.

So what's a starting point? Teacher knowledge? Teachers must know their subject and the observer should know the subject they're teaching.

If both know the subject well you know you have a good starting point.

Expectations; what does that mean? It means that children are working hard for set time on known tasks. It doesn't mean some nebulous phrase.

Just like differentiation, what does that mean?

That means meeting their needs - meeting their needs carefully. So you might have free school meals children, very high attainers, low attainers, special needs, English as an Additional Language children etc. If you focus on the needs you can guarantee that there will be more progress.

So we look at the criteria, and there are many more that are listed there which can lead you to look for things when you're in the lesson that you're going to observe.

I should've said at the beginning that the whole basis of our teaching and learning are your films which is why I am sitting here. It is important to say that because I could not have done any of the insets, and I have done an awful lot in the last 10 years, 15 years, perhaps 20 years and every single one I have ever done after the first few films I had which were on video...

Now we have used around 30 of your films. We use them in our INSET and we couldn't do the INSET without the films. You *must* have a film to go back to to re-

fer to generate the ideas from, to identify the strengths and weaknesses. Otherwise we just waffle.

Part 5: Making arrangements to carry out the observation

People don't realise where you sit in a lesson has a major impact on the evidence that you can find. You shouldn't sit at the back facing the teacher. This will just distract the teacher.

Sit at the side near the back perhaps in the middle at the side so you can see the teacher and the children's faces. If you don't see the children's faces you have no idea if they are on task or not.

And then many of the questions we can follow through on; how long should you be in a lesson for? Is it an hour, is it half, is it whole?

Well there is a simple answer to that. I may not give it to you now, but it is very clear there is an answer.

There are the questions...when should you arrive? Should your lesson be unannounced?

Usually for performance management observations you tell people when you're going to observe them. Then you see a set up lesson. Will that be typical of the teaching and learning that goes on normally? Or will it be set up? The only way you can find that out is to carry out unannounced lesson observations..

So there is a whole list of points and elements you need to consider before you go into the room. Will I stay till the end? Have I discussed it with the teacher? And what's going to be the outcome of it? These are key points. And again, it has to be on the film that you've discussed and move on from.

Part 6: Writing observation notes

What are the forms you are going to write on?

So you remember where you're going to sit and you remember your learning theories and have got the criteria right...what's next?

What do I write? I could sit in the lesson and nod off quietly until the cows come home, it would be a very easy way of earning money!

The truth is lesson observation is intense... it is horrendous in many ways. It wears you to a frazzle. Because you must write down what you see and it must be judged. We have a phrase; *JEI*, which I pinched from the ASTs many years ago.

That means you have to judge, you have to have the evidence, and you have to show the impact. And you have to write that down. If you go to four lessons in a day you're never going to remember the details of the first one when you're on the fourth one. So fill in a form. You need an accurate form where you fill-in the story of the lesson. Tell the story as it goes on, referencing the subject. I can't stress enough, it's much better to be observing lessons where you understand the words.

If I sit in a French lesson and say *Je suis Pierre*, and that is the limit of my French, it is not going to help. So having a specialist observe is very important.

Fill in the forms and write the story of the lesson, at the end of it identifying the strengths and weaknesses with clear judgements. Not an overall lesson judgement - that is a waste of time. Have a judgement on achievement, attitudes, behaviour, teaching, and what we think is important, *teaching potential*.

Something can go wrong...we have all taught badly at some times. But you can see in the skills of the teacher and say; *that backfired but you could be superb normally*. That lesson potential is important for the headteachers and the teachers themselves.

Part 7: Giving useful feedback

So now we've seen the lesson - what's the next thing we will have to do? Well obviously we have to feed back. There is absolutely no point in observing a lesson if you do not feed back. You've got to give the strengths and weaknesses to get people to improve. So what we need to do is find a way of feeding back. But again, there are a dozen questions you have to answer before you do your feedback.

How do you sit? Is it 90°, 120° or 180°? Should you be across the table? There is research that has gone into this that identifies the best ways. You need to get that right. Teachers time is valuable. You mustn't waste their time when feeding back - and do it with humour if you can manage it, even if it's awful! But you must *do it well*. There are a lot of techniques out there as I said, but sitting at 120° is a key point. You need to do it.

When do give feedback never give your personal examples. Don't say; "*If you had done it the same way I usually teach forces it would have been a lot better!*". Or "*Try and do it this in the future...*". That just turns everybody off.

What you need to do is get those children to learn using that teachers techniques which you tweak to make it slightly better, or a lot better as needed.

That feedback may take 5 minutes or 20. Where is it going to take place? In the corridor? In the lavatory, when it is the only place you've got that is quiet?

NO! It should be a prepared room where you can sit quietly, have a glass of water (or whatever you prefer to drink that is appropriate), then have a good discussion about the lesson.

That teacher must talk to you as well if you talk to them. At the end of it don't give an overall judgement of the lesson.

Judge clearly so they know if it is outstanding or excellent, it's good or very good - that's grade 2. Grade 1 is Excellent and Outstanding, 2 is Good and Very Good, grade 3 is in OFSTED terms is Requires Improvement which used to be Satisfactory. That is very important to come to terms with. Satisfactory of old is Requires

Improvement today. And the Independent Schools Inspectorate often refers to as Sound.

The fourth one is Poor and Satisfactory or Inadequate, the bottom of the pile. If you don't give the teacher that grade, not as a number but as a word, they have no idea how to rank the strengths and weaknesses they are given.

If I sit back and discuss my five strengths and five weaknesses, does that make me Good? Does that make me Outstanding? Does that make me Requires Improvement?

(If the lesson were Good) I must explain that to the teacher so they can see that they have minor weaknesses. E.g. - It was a really good lesson, but those five minor weaknesses will take you from Good or Very Good to Outstanding. Think about that.

So please be quite specific. If you find someone is getting very upset, don't back away. You've got to finish the job, that's what you have been employed to do. As a senior leader of the school, or as a consultant, as an inspector etc, whatever you might be, ***you need to give a judgement***. You must make it very clear. And then say we think you could make significant improvement if you did this, that, or the other.

Unless you have feedback... There is no point in watching your films...which are worth their weight in gold I must stress. I'm not advertising them - I'm just saying without them we could not do it.

But one thing you must do if you're doing an INSET session is to model practice.

So if you're actually getting people to do the feedback you put them together in pairs where one feeds back to the other on the lesson seen.

But before they do that a muggins like me - a consultant or senior staff member - should model how to do that for colleagues to see.

Going through the strengths and weaknesses. Giving clear judgements and explaining why if you arguing or not, whatever the case may be. When you do that

modelling exercise you can decide if you want to be the obnoxious teacher who pulls you to pieces or passive one who says *ohhhh... I really don't care!*

My job is to get you on side to recognise the need to grow, and modelling by the consultant or senior leader is vital for that.

Part 8: Using filmed observations

It is very important to use two films, preferably one that is really good and one that is weak. If it's in the same subject that you wanted it to be in that is worth its weight in gold. However, it does not matter if they're slightly off piste. If I wanted to look at a chemistry lesson and there was only a geography one, there would be a lot of overlap. So do try look at the subject that is most like yours.

When you have got through the process of looking at the two films it is very important to compare and contrast so you can see why something is strong and why something is weak and relate that to learning. Each time say *these techniques lead to better learning here than in the other case because...*

That brings it home to the teacher what they can do to improve their own performance.

After you have been through this process with staff give them five minutes reflection time. *They need it...* Teachers never had any reflection time.

If they get that reflection time you say that during that five minutes of total silence, fill-in on a piece of paper with your three best strengths and your three worst weaknesses.

And then tell them no one sees that... It is completely private.. make it individual.

Having done that make them go away and build on the strengths and remove and remedy the weaknesses.

Part 9: Who are the training sessions for?

If you're running a training session like this you can do it for many different groups. You could run it for governors to get an overview. You can run it for senior leaders. You can run it for teachers or heads of department.

You can even run it for a group of prefects as I have done a couple of times where the prefects in the school are involved in lesson observation. Like the governors, you don't need to talk about the grades, just the strengths and the weaknesses.

Part 10: Using questionnaires for analysis

It is sometimes helpful to use a questionnaire you can use, a sort of psychological analysis of self. There are various ones of these available where people fill it in in order to assess their own style.

Some people are aggressive, some people are passive, some people are too negative (perhaps me!). Some people are too positive...perhaps some other people I might know.

And when you fill out one of the self-analysis questionnaires you can say something like "*alright, I need to be more assertive*" or, "*I need to back away more often*". This exercise can help you a lot in teaching and learning, and also in your career.

Part 11: Conclusion

Well I think what I've been through what we do at EQ. The 25 consultants we have working that way. We focus on teaching and learning and I'll finish by saying we focus where ever we can with subject experts looking at the teaching and learning. ***What really matters if you are going to get development.***

Find out more about Peter and the team at e-Qualitas by visiting www.e-qualitas.org.uk or calling 01892 513881.