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## **City of Bath College**

### **A revised approach to observation of teaching and learning impacts on success in the classroom**

#### **Summary**

Determined to improve teaching and learning to an excellent standard, staff at City of Bath College took a radical look at the observation of teaching and learning to ensure it became an impactful tool on classroom practice rather than just quality assurance. Supported by an LSIS Improvement and Development Service adviser, a completely new system focussing on course review and improvement of teaching and learning on underperforming programmes was developed and introduced with a clear policy and staff guide.

#### **About City of Bath College**

City of Bath College is a general further education college, located in the centre of Bath. It primarily serves the city and the surrounding rural area of Bath and North East Somerset but also attracts students from Bristol and rural Wiltshire and Somerset. The college offers a diverse range of vocational and HE courses and apprenticeships. Refurbishment in 2011 provided new HE facilities, an imposing entrance and student support centre, design workshops and new student study centre.

#### **The challenge**

'Providing outstanding learning, teaching and training in state of the art facilities'. This is part of the mission statement of City of Bath College. To achieve this, the college needed to focus on substantial improvement in teaching and learning, much of which had been satisfactory for too long. Recognising this, and following an inspection in 2010 where a key recommendation was to meet individual learner needs by providing appropriate interest and challenge to stimulate ambition, management and staff have undertaken a lot of effective development work on improving practice in the classroom.

However, a further recommendation in the 2010 inspection related to improving the observation process. The college approached LSIS Improvement and Development Service (IDS) to provide adviser support to review processes for the observation of teaching and learning (OTL). But senior managers wanted more than a review. They wanted their observation system to be a tool for improvement rather than just quality assurance. They wanted to move away from a system which gave individuals annual grades so that they either breathed a sigh of relief until next time or lived with a poor grade. They wanted the observation to actually impact in the classroom.

### **The activity**

An IDS adviser was allocated to work with the college from April 2011. The first stage of activity was to assess the quality of the actual observations. The adviser reviewed the previous round of observations carried out by the team of observers to ascertain the quality and consistency of observation. This served to affirm that effective observation with consistent judgements was taking place and allowed observers to tweak their practice by benefiting from one to one feedback from the adviser.

The next stage was to determine how OTL could make an impact rather than tick a box for assuring quality. Managers, working with the IDS adviser decided to make courses, rather than individual staff members, the focus of observation. The approach could be liberating, giving staff team responsibility for lessons and course performance rather than individual responsibility for one observed lesson. In addition, each year the theme of the observations is set according to college priorities, so, currently, it is active involvement by learners.

This is how the revised system works: A course's performance is judged by agreed criteria, for example, meeting college priorities, success rates, learner feedback. Those not performing well enough are earmarked for observation. High performing courses are not observed. Staff know at the beginning of each term which courses will be observed in the coming term, but not when. All teachers on the course team are observed regardless of previous grades. A small team of observers prepare for their observations by looking at a wider range of information than the lesson itself. They will have access to a group profile before observing and can check on attendance patterns for lessons and any learner feedback. The course team approach allows any cross themes to be quickly identified, for example, lack of starter activities, and effective use of IT across the course or attendance patterns. Individual feedback on a lesson is still given to the teacher along with the grade.

Following observation of the whole course, a formal meeting is arranged, attended by the course team, the department head and chaired by the Quality Improvement Co-ordinator. The discussion of findings results in action points for the whole team. For example, on a particular course, a well taught IT lesson was observed in a 4pm slot. The lesson grade suffered as few students attended; mistakenly thinking that IT was not particularly relevant to them. The course team was able to act by realising that they were all responsible for ensuring that their students appreciated the importance of IT to their subject and by adjusting the timetable so this lesson fell at a different time.

It was important to gain buy in from staff to the new way of conducting OTL. A guide was produced that explains the process and sources of professional support such as coaching, staff development and peer sharing. Training also took place on the new process.

### **The outcomes**

A clear staff guide to the OTL process has been produced backed up by an OTL policy. All staff know what to expect from the revised OTL system. Training is in place for observers and for staff on how the observation system works.

### **The impact**

There is a much better understanding of the link between what happens in the classroom and the performance of a particular course. The college can identify common areas for improvement that need to be made on a course and incorporate these into course development plans. Managers report that the absence of a regular annual observation reduces stress for many staff and generally staff are happier at being observed as part of a course focus.

### **The lessons learned**

Managers say that the system shows that observation can be fully integrated into quality improvement.

By starting with the course and not the individual, and observing a whole team, you really can draw conclusions about the quality of provision.

The action plan arising from the course observation is of the utmost importance and should produce actions for the team and for individuals.

The observation policy should shift every year to accommodate college priorities, for example next year, City of Bath College will theme assessment for learning.

Lastly, include what is right for the college in observation, not necessarily the points that Ofsted would look for.

### **Useful links**

- City of Bath College Website - [www.citybathcoll.ac.uk](http://www.citybathcoll.ac.uk)

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