# "It's like a thousand stars are shining on you, [or] it's like you've died"

# FE Teachers' Lived Experience of Graded Observations

## Introduction

"Because I'm happy, Clap along if you feel like a room without a roof…" (Pharrell Williams, 2013)

"Do you really want to hurt me? Do you really want to make me cry?" (Culture Club, 1982)

The impact an observation grade has on a teacher can be profound – from elation to devastation. No teacher, it appears, comes away from a graded observation unmoved. However, there is a culture change percolating through education at the moment with regard to graded teacher observations. Professor Robert Coe (2014), David Didau (2016) and Professor Matt O'Leary (2013), amongst other prominent figures in education, have argued for some years now, that graded observations are ineffective in identifying 'good' teachers (in this case, the term, 'good' refers to the influence a teacher may have on student outcomes). There is now widespread recognition that there are fundamental concerns with graded observations, particularly with their reliability and validity.

To be seen as reliable, an observation outcome needs corroboration from another observer. To be seen as valid, the outcome needs to correspond with the student outcomes. Neither of these have been found to be consistent enough to warrant the continuation of graded observations (Wiliam, 2020).

This paper, based on case studies of six long standing teachers in a general FE college, will outline the effect these graded observations have had on teachers and the impact they had on teaching practise and classroom interactions.

## Literature Review

For several years now, teachers and academics have been building momentum with their criticism of graded observations (Coe, 2013, O'Leary, 2014, Petty, 2015). In 2014, Ofsted withdrew grading of observations in FE. Criticism of this move was raised by some (Hatton, 2014), but on the whole, most teachers in FE and throughout education welcomed the move (Coe, 2013) and were anxious for these changes to filter through to internal college quality assurance processes.

High stakes teacher observations have caused many teachers stress, anxiety, worry and depression. Their pernicious usage, particularly by non-teaching managers, helped to fuel the fear of observation (Coe, 2013). Since the publication of the UCU research in 2013 carried out by Professor Rob Coe, there were calls for "evidence-based conversations and [the building of] trust within the sector" (www.ucu.org.uk/lessonobservation#report).

When a process, such as graded observations, becomes so ingrained into the structure of our education system, it is difficult to root out. Arguments for its usage highlight the importance of recognising 'good' teachers (Hatton, 2014), however it becomes a practice that encourages teachers to "jump through hoops" (p. 8, Weston and Clay, 2018) simply completing a tick-box exercise. It has been argued that in response to graded observations teachers will either over-plan unnecessarily, or

become highly anxious about the process, [or both] (www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/lesson-observations-to-grade-or-not-to-grade).

For most teachers, the process of graded observations was one in which there was a single observation each year and the grade was awarded to the teacher (O'Leary, 2013). One of the biggest criticisms of the graded observation process is that a single, one hour snap shot of a teacher's performance was not sufficient to give a real feel for what the teacher did on a day to day basis (Wiliam 2020). The idea of using this as quality assurance is flawed as often the feedback targets, set by the observer, were vague and rarely followed up as an action after the observation (Bartlett, 2015). Also, "when we use grades to give feedback on teacher observations, this is a distractor" (p.104, Chiles, 2021). Teachers, like students, focus on the grade and tend not to hear any constructive feedback, if it was forthcoming.

The focus on assessing the effectiveness of *teachers* as opposed to *teaching* leads to a demoralising and destructive labelling of teachers, encouraged by the need to "identify which teachers are good and which are bad" (p. 292, Didau, 2015). Teachers have commonly been found to identify themselves in terms of the grade they were given in an observation, i.e. Grade 1 teacher (Donaghue, 2018).

As John Tomsett points out, "I have never worked with a teacher who hasn't wanted to do a good job" (p.125, Tomsett and Uttley, 2020). Teachers want their students to do well, however, graded observations encourage teachers to focus on performance instead of learning (Didau, 2015). This system of performance for grades encourages competition within the teaching team and allows for value judgements to be made of particular teachers, rather than encouraging open discussions about pedagogy and teaching rationales.

Changes to observation policies in educational settings, with the removal of grades, have left many questioning how we can evidence quality (Hatton 2014). There will, undoubtedly, be some time where the trauma from high stakes grading dissipates, however, with the advent of good quality peer observations, teachers may start to find value in the observation process (O'Leary, 2014).

When an institution begins to prioritise the quality of teaching, rather than the observation of teaching, a change in culture will start to take hold (Tomsett and Uttley, 2020). Building an environment for teachers that is high challenge, high trust, where collaborative working and responsibility are prioritised, *then* we are likely to see a real change in the quality of teaching (Atwal, 2019).

There have been many suggestions as to how the observation process can be changed to help develop quality teaching in different educational settings (Atwal 2019, Coe 2014, Kumari Wood and Haddon 2021, O'Leary 2013). Recognition of the need for peer observation, coaching and a move away from the focus being on the teacher, towards "the impact of the teaching on the curriculum" (p.175, Kumari Wood and Haddon, 2021) have led to significant changes in many colleges.

In most cases, the emphasis of new observation policies, has been drawn to the individual needs of teachers, to develop their self-identified areas for improvement in conjunction with a peer (City of Bristol College Observation Policy 2020, Guernsey College Observation Policy 2017). Teachers have found peer observations to be less threatening, more engaging and ultimately deemed to be of higher value in terms of personal development, than graded observations (O'Leary 2014, Wiliam 2020). "Teacher observations should be a mechanism in which teachers can both support other teachers to improve, as well as learning from the teacher you are observing" (p.104, Chiles, 2021).

Because this is not a hierarchical process, where the observations are done *to* the teacher, but are done in collaboration *with* the teacher, they appear to be valued more highly.

If the developmental observation process is implemented well, with clear guidance and expectations, open and honest discussions through peer learning will evolve (Atwal, 2019). This way of working appears to be appealing to the majority of teachers who have found the last decade of increasing pressure through graded observations, to be a high stress process (O'Leary 2014).

**Methods, Intervention and Ethics**

My initial research comprised of emailing eighteen members of staff who had each worked in the college for more than five years. I requested volunteers to fill in a questionnaire and take part in a semi-structured interview.

Six members of staff responded and completed the questionnaire and interviews. The questionnaire was basic in design, the aim of which was to elicit general feelings towards the graded observations that they had been subject to.

Of the six questionnaires completed, one participant indicated that she felt neither positively or negatively towards the graded observations. Five participants stated they felt negatively about the graded observations.

In the subsequent interviews, the initial question was open to allow for qualitative responses that would help to inform the 'lived experience' aspect of the research. It was made clear that the interviews would be anonymous and no judgement would be made of any comments.

It was difficult at times to mask interviewer bias in these semi-structured interviews, as the interview sometimes moved towards a more conversational approach, however all efforts were made to ensure that the comments were a true reflection of staff feelings and there was no explicit influence on their comments.

In carrying out this research the BERA guidelines (2018) were followed. The research was carried out with a commitment to ensure openness and honesty throughout. Participants all gave informed consent for their contributions to be used. They were assured of anonymity and the right to withdraw from the research.

The data and findings of this research will be told primarily through the voices of six long-standing FE teachers. The aim is to hear their voice and to recognise the impact graded observations have had on teachers and their views as to how the process can be improved.

**Data Analysis**

In the interview responses to the initial question, 'Do you think there is a value to having observations?' every respondent was positive about the value of teacher observations generally.

Reasons for keeping a teacher observation process were wide ranging; preventing complacency in teaching, identifying CPD opportunities for teachers, improve student outcomes, learning from others and getting feedback on how to improve the quality of teaching. There are clearly many good reasons for observations to take place, that are recognised by teachers themselves, but the graded observations were deemed to be ineffective for several reasons.

Many of the participants also drew on the fact that high stakes observations created anxiety, stress and worry, as highlighted by Coe, 2013. One participant commented, "The 5-day window is so stressful because you never know when they're going to come and twice mine have been on a Friday afternoon when I'm exhausted after a week of being on tenterhooks" (Participant 6)

This participant went on to discuss how this high stakes approach has left her feeling negatively about the process despite her personal 'success' in the observation. "By the end of every observation week, I'm ill. I might have done well in the observation, but I still feel terrible by the end of the week." (Participant 6)

Poor or inconsistent feedback from observers after grading, was commented on by all interviewees. This has a demoralising effect on teachers who want to challenge or discuss their lessons in a way that will help them to develop. "The observer didn't really give me any specific feedback so the TLAC came to observe a lesson and she was really good. She told me exactly what I could do differently and helped me think about what I could do to improve." (Participant 3)

One participant told of her experience of inconsistent feedback, "… in my lesson the observer said that I had used great questioning techniques and she wanted me to share my practice with others, but then marked me down because one of my students hadn't contributed as much as others. This just doesn't make sense." (Participant 1) This experience led the participant to devalue the process itself.

However, the opposite affect has also been noted, in that one participant had had a comment made to her after asking a colleague what they were going to improve in their teaching, "I don't know what to focus on because I got grade 1 in my last two observations". (Participant 4) The focus here, again, was on the grade and not any developmental points that may have been raised.

One participant told of a colleague whose observer had criticised a part of the lesson from their perspective, without recourse. "It was a poor experience for that teacher and left them feeling criticised and hurt when they had a clear idea as to what they were doing and why. They appealed, but nothing was changed. It's not usually changed at appeal anyway." (Participant 2)

This was reiterated in a comment from another participant, "I had an observation on the first session of a new course I was teaching and I had a rationale for the lesson. The observer couldn't see what that was. There was clearly a mismatch of context and purpose and what the observer was looking for in a lesson." (Participant 4) Weston and Clay (2018) discuss the idea that teachers feel that they have to 'jump through hoops' in graded observations and that came through in the teachers' reflections.

The frustration of observers not understanding or discussing the context came out in every interview. "With graded observations, I think it's good when you get good grades, but when you don't, it feels like it doesn't reflect the work and the thought you've put in to the lesson". (Participant 5)

Comparisons were made to observations that are carried out in teacher training and the impact of those were identified positively. "I had PGCE observations that went badly, but it didn't feel bad, it felt honest. I wasn't trying to perform. I would try things out and then discuss what wasn't going well. It wasn't just a matter of just getting through it" (Participant 6)

This openness allowed for the teacher to try new things and get valuable feedback in terms of a rich pedagogical discussion. This desire for high quality pedagogical discussions was common throughout the interviews.

The idea of grades being a distractor (Chiles, 2021) was also identified in interview. When teachers feel disenfranchised they respond negatively. In one case, the participant had tried to discuss what had been happening in the lesson, but didn't feel like he was being heard, "So when they say [irrelevant] stuff like that, you just shut down and think, "Yeah, whatever, just give me the grade"". (Participant 5)

But more seriously than being a distractor, the grade can be seen as destructive, "When you don't get a good grade it's horrible. I hate showing weakness, but it makes me cry and I always think I'm going to lose my job. I have been embarrassed by how I've reacted to my grades in the past." (Participant 3)

This statement clearly demonstrates the depth of feeling and concern that some teachers had with graded observations.

Trust in teachers has been low for many years and educational settings have demonstrated this thorough various processes including marking policies as well as observation policies.

This was also identified by some of the participants. "There needs to be more confidence in teachers and what they do" (Participant 3)

Each respondent expressed a need for the observations to be more authentic in their approach. There was recognition that observations can be hugely beneficial to teachers, particularly if they are reciprocated as identified by O'Leary (2013). To observe each other as teachers allows for rich pedagogical discussions in which teachers can reflect deeply on their practice.

> "If the college can get people to invest their time in [a new observation process], it can't just be a tick box exercise. If it becomes that, then it stops having any meaning. It doesn't add to the richness or quality of the teaching and learning. It has to be a reflective process – for self-reflection. Otherwise it won't help teachers at all." (Participant 1)

**Findings**

As was identified earlier, the key focus of this research is on teachers' perception of graded observations. The interviews confirmed the stance, generally taken in the literature, that graded observations are seen as a high-stakes process and there is significant stress and anxiety caused by them (Atwal 2019, Coe 2013, O'Leary 2014). Throughout my interviews, feelings of stress and anxiety were voiced clearly by teachers, particularly around the timing, the perceived expectations and consequences of grading.

The idea of a 'snapshot' observation once a year, as discussed in Bartlett 2015, on which a grade was hung was also a concern for the participants. Feedback that was not followed up and poor or inconsistent feedback were also raised as key issues with graded observations. All of the participants had had negative experiences with observers giving conflicting or poor quality feedback. All the participants agreed that feedback was never followed up or acted upon in any way outside of the graded observation.

Participants did, however, consider positive ways for observations to be carried out. They made suggestions for a more collaborative and supportive process which would rely on using peer

observations and coaching to help develop teachers. Some of the participants argued that the observation process needs to be cyclical within a year to allow for revisiting of observation feedback, however it was recognised that to allow for this, teachers need to be given adequate time in their timetable.

**Recommendations**

Recommendations for improvement of the observation system came from each of the participants. These recommendations are supported by many texts (Atwal 2019, Coe 2014, O'Leary 2013).

The first recommendation was to eliminate the grades from the observations process. This would allow teachers the opportunity to focus on their teaching rather than performing for the observer. As the current Observation Policy within the college had already achieved this, many went on to discuss how this new ungraded observation policy could work.

One participant mentioned the need for clarity in the development of any new process, particularly if it is a peer-observation process. "We also need to be clear about *why* we're doing it so it's not just a tick box exercise." (Participant 2) Implicit in this is the effective communication of the process as well as an understanding of the theory behind it. This is essential with any change management if it is to engage the optimum number of staff. The process needs very careful consideration and implementation.

All participants made the point that observations should be done by other teachers, as opposed to managers. This reciprocity of observation allows for a more open and honest discussion between observer and observee. The idea of a more authentic and valuable observation process that aids teacher development, underpinned much of what the participants said.

Specifically for my college, the following comment indicated the desire to discuss pedagogy and share good practice using the systems we already have in place. "The development of the new observation policy depends on the culture and the ethos of the college. The TCT [Team Collaboration Time] should be protected, in part at least, for pedagogical discussions, not just discussions on data." (Participant 4)

Allowing teachers enough time to carry out the observations effectively as well as being able to access training was raised by four participants, "If we were to have different [teachers] observing they would need time to do the observations and they would need to be trained on what to expect in a lesson". (Participant 5)

Guidance for teachers would need to ensure there was a clear structure within a framework that allowed for the nuances of teaching. This structure needs to allow, or even encourage, teachers to experiment and try new things in the classroom without feeling intimidated or concerned. The pedagogical discussions that come from an interested peer can enhance the most expert of teachers. Two participants discussed the difference between developmental observations on higher level courses and graded observations.

"On [higher level teaching courses] the student observations are developmental and it's a reflective process where we are watching practice. We're never grading. We're always asking, 'what was your purpose?' 'Did it achieve the purpose?' Students need thinking time – we all need thinking time." (Participant 1)

This approach was echoed as being far more productive in terms of outcomes for the teacher and in helping to support teachers to develop practice (see previous comments from Participant 6). A recommendation that came from that point was:

"Ideally, I'd like to plan with a person who is going to observe me. I'd want to plan strategies and ideas that I could put into my planning and voice any concerns early on before the observation. Then the observation has insight." (Participant 6)

This collaborative approach between observer and observee was echoed in all the interviews. The role of the observer to elicit the thinking behind the teaching is key in aiding the development of the teacher.

In summary, this research has found that teachers in this FE college reflect the views of many who have been arguing against graded observations for years (Coe 1013, O'Leary 2014, Wiliam 2020). The value of a graded observation is undermined by the grade itself, but also the process that these observations were carried out under was deeply flawed.

Teachers recognise the importance of observations, but they welcome the elimination of grades. They have many valuable and valid insights as to how the observation process could be improved. It appears that for years, until recently, the voice of teachers has been suppressed to allow a destructive, high stakes process to continue. Slowly, with a change in culture, where teachers' voices are heard loud and clear, they have the answers to this problem, we just have to hear it.

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