



How to Deliver Great Lesson Observations that Teachers Actually Like



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With contributions from Aston University Engineering Academy, Nishkam High School and Dixons Academies Trust

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Lesson observations have long been a staple of teacher CPD, but although observations are supposed to help teachers improve their practice, teachers generally dislike them.

According to the National Education Union,

“Excessive classroom observation is one of the biggest sources of stress and does not of itself lead to better practice.”

While it’s important to see a teacher in action to assess how well they are engaging with the students and helping them learn, lesson observations need to become a more positive experience for teachers.



What is wrong with lesson observations?

Lesson observations put teachers under pressure, take up valuable time for the observer and often fall victim to the Hawthorne Effect where having an observer in the room influences the way people behave.

As a result, lesson observations are too often judgemental, inauthentic and unsupportive.

“Some schools have a culture where observations are still associated with a punitive managerial approach to performance management. Teachers ask themselves, ‘am I being judged, should I admit what I’m doing could be better if my promotion depends on it.’

“There’s also the issue that if an observer is in the classroom with a clipboard making notes, are they observing the class in its natural state?”

Dr Sam Sims, Lecturer at the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities at the UCL Institute of Education.

How to make lesson observations work better

There are some strategies schools can use to avoid the flaws in lesson observations, and turn them into a supportive and collaborative opportunity for teachers to develop their practice.

1. Observe without affecting the class

Some schools are adopting an open-door policy to make having an observer in the classroom less of an unusual occurrence.

“A formal observation of a whole lesson when the teacher knows someone is coming does not always provide an authentic insight into teaching and learning. Our open-door policy gives teachers a more relevant snapshot of what is going on in the classroom. When two visitors dropped into my Year 11 class, I wasn’t surprised and neither were the students.”

Natasha Raheem, Assistant Vice Principal, Dixons Centre for Growth, Dixons Academies Trust.

While the open door approach helps to normalise the presence of other adults in the classroom, it requires careful planning and timing to work for everyone involved, which can be hard to achieve in time-stretched schools.





Consider using technology

To address the issue of time-consuming lesson visits, some schools are using camera technology in the classroom. Technology which allows schools to capture video footage of lessons can help to avoid the unintended impact of having an outside observer in the room. This provides the option for remote lesson observations which reduces the impact on the teacher and the class.

“The technology itself is unobtrusive. The cameras are discreet and fitted into the ceiling tiles. Teachers and students know they’re there but as they are so discreet, staff and students soon forget about them and behave normally.

“Some staff take the opportunity to have their lesson observations or learning visits done remotely, rather than the observer coming in and changing the mood of the room, as in the Hawthorne Effect. The teacher captures 20 minutes of a specific lesson to share with the observer, and they watch it side by side later in the day.

“It’s an effective way for teachers to reflect on aspects of the lesson alongside the observer and ask, ‘how do I know learning took place?’”

David Chapman, Head of School, Aston University Engineering Academy (AUEA).

How to make lesson observations work better

Let teachers and students be themselves

It's important to make an observed lesson as natural as possible, so students are not distracted or inhibited, and teachers don't feel the need to put on a performance.

“Having someone observing in the classroom changes the dynamic in the room. Even an expert teacher can set a discussion task and none of the students will talk because someone else is watching. The cameras take that factor away.”

Emma Wilks, Co-Principal, Nishkam High School.

2. Put more control in the hands of the teachers

Teachers should feel that lesson observations are being done with them rather than to them. Lesson video clips help teachers self-reflect by providing a common language which they can use to discuss strengths and areas for improvement.

Rather than being handed a piece of best practice to emulate, teachers become skilled at identifying what good looks like so they can apply it to their own teaching.

“When teachers have the opportunity to reflect on their practice, it gives them ownership of their development.”

David Chapman, Head of School, AUEA.



Encourage collaboration

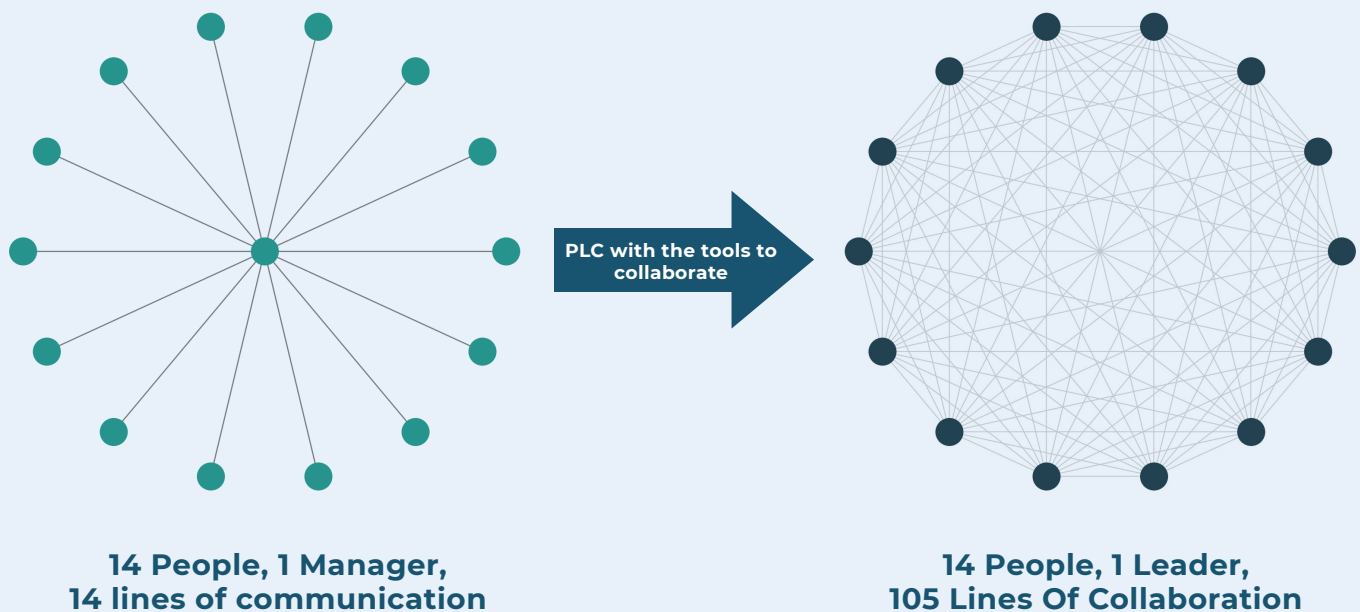
Teachers can also decide to share clips with colleagues and observers to identify key learning points. Seeing colleagues reflecting on their practice takes the fear out of being self-critical, and teachers get better at diagnosing what is working well and what could work better. Some schools refer to 'sharing best practice' while others refer to WAGOLs (What a good one looks like).

"Teaching staff sit with lead practitioners, watch the lesson footage and discuss together what they can do to make improvements. It's a way of helping teachers self-reflect with the guidance of other staff."

Emma Wilks, Co-Principal,
Nishkam High School.

One of the key benefits of sharing video footage is the opportunity for collaborative reflection. If fourteen teachers agree to share clips of how they apply classroom routines, and reflect on the outcomes in the company of colleagues, they not only get insight from the observer, but from fourteen other professionals as well.

This transforms a lesson observation where only one individual learns, into a professional learning community (PLC) where everyone benefits.



3. Focus on learning as well as teaching

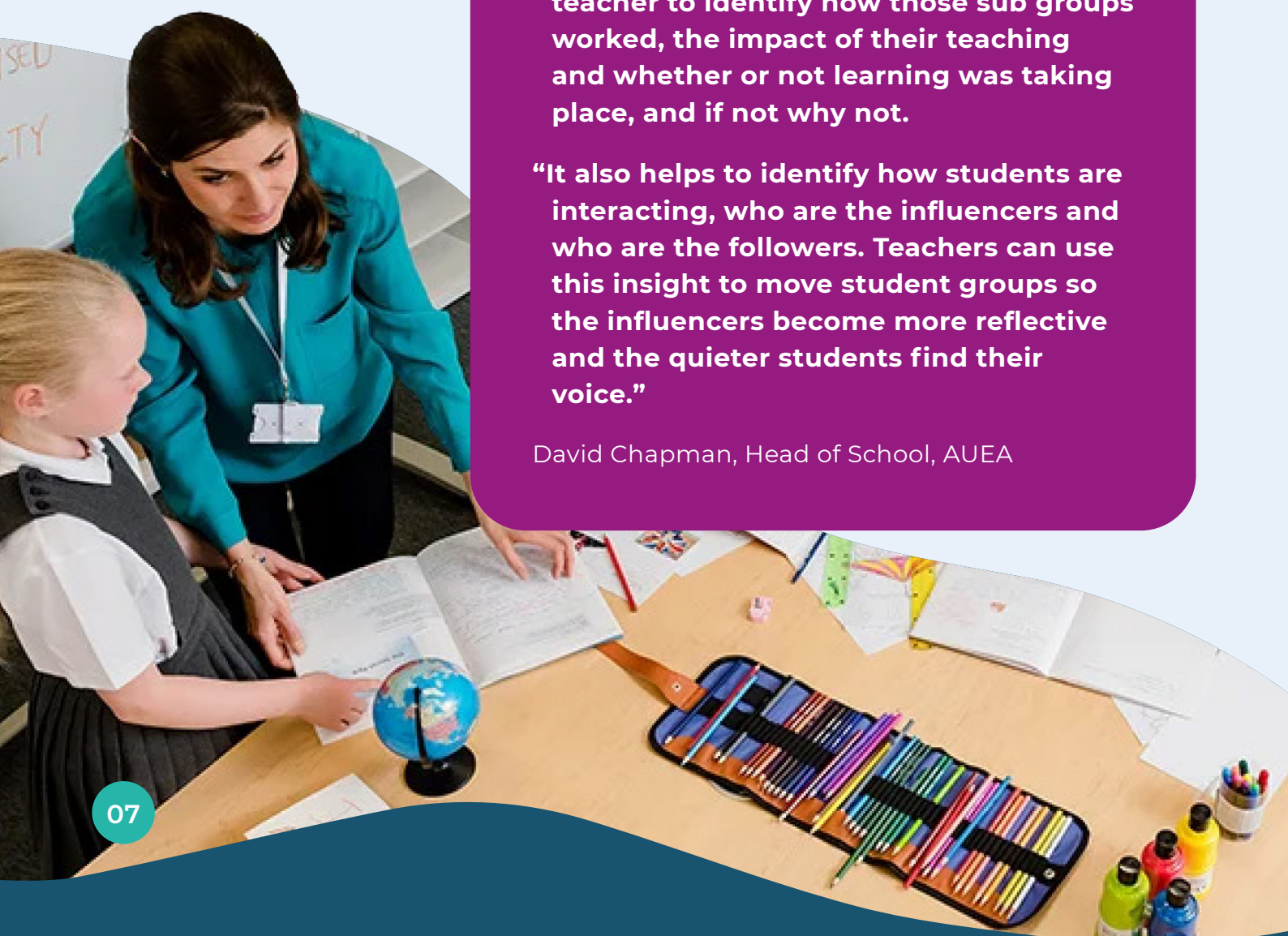
Another disadvantage of the lesson observation is the tendency for an observer to concentrate more heavily on what the teacher is doing rather than how the students are responding. Video observations make it much easier to see how everyone in a class of 25 to 30 is interacting and learning.

“We need to see how we are impacting on students’ learning, whereas a lesson observation focuses on how teachers teach.

“Because we use the cameras for improving learning, we are able to have up to four views of the room allowing for more focussed observation of sub groups of students. This allows the teacher to identify how those sub groups worked, the impact of their teaching and whether or not learning was taking place, and if not why not.

“It also helps to identify how students are interacting, who are the influencers and who are the followers. Teachers can use this insight to move student groups so the influencers become more reflective and the quieter students find their voice.”

David Chapman, Head of School, AUEA



4. Provide supportive feedback

Feeding back on a lesson observation can be a minefield. Not everyone has been trained to be an observer or to give meaningful feedback, and this can lead to situations where comments may be misinterpreted or feel overly critical.

To make feedback sessions more valuable and supportive, some schools are encouraging a conversational approach where teacher and observer can work together to identify positives and areas for improvement.

“Feedback isn’t useful if it only focuses on what is wrong, it needs to help teachers with how to get better.”

Natasha Raheem, Assistant Vice Principal, Dixons Centre for Growth, Dixons Academies Trust



Create coaching conversations

The Education Endowment Foundation Effective Professional Guidance report suggests that the most positive feedback comes from coaching following an observation.

“We provide feedback through instructional coaching because it encourages teachers to reflect and engage in relevant practice. It’s a particularly powerful way to support early career teachers (ECTs) because they can see a colleague modelling a technique and then practise it themselves before going live in front of a class.”

Natasha Raheem, Assistant Vice Principal, Dixons Centre for Growth, Dixons Academies Trust.

How to make lesson observations work better



Base feedback on evidence

It's a good idea to base coaching conversations on a sound piece of evidence from more than one lesson, so teacher and collaborators have a shared understanding of what it looks like over time, not from a simple snapshot.

“If it’s just the observer giving feedback, it can be intimidating. But if the coach and coachee are analysing something together, it can be more effective. Video is a nice way of doing this. If we’re both looking at a video it provides a dispassionate, evidence-based, analytical approach rather than me simply telling you what I noticed.”

Dr Sam Sims, Lecturer at the Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities at the UCL Institute of Education.



Introduce a journal club

Lesson observation feedback can help to improve practice throughout a school or trust.

An article in the Chartered College of Teaching Impact magazine features a trust's experience of introducing a journal club. The journal club format, which is often used in academia, can make for a more supportive and collaborative way to provide feedback.

In a journal club, a teacher chooses video footage of an aspect of their lesson which went well, and shares it with colleagues in a meeting. Each colleague trials that approach in their own lessons, and reviews how effective it is. The teachers hold another meeting to discuss the impact and talk about how the approach could be refined and used on a wider basis in the school.

This way, teachers get a hands-on experience of something which has worked well in a lesson.

“It’s too easy to skate over the aspects of a lesson that went well. We need to be asking why something worked so we can build that into future lessons.”

David Chapman, Head of School, AUEA.

Lesson observations that teachers like

It's time to upgrade the lesson observation so it delivers better outcomes for teachers, students and school leaders. If teachers can reflect on their own practice, learn from colleagues and share their expertise in a stress-free setting, teachers will finally look forward to lesson observations.



Give teachers the opportunity to identify their own strengths and improvement areas.



Consider technology to hold remote observations with the observer out of the room.



Explore ways to focus on students' learning behaviour and class dynamics.



Put teachers in control of identifying and sharing aspects of their practice.



Turn observation feedback sessions into focussed coaching conversations.



Use sound evidence as a basis for feedback discussions.



Try a journal club format to feed back on the effectiveness of approaches.

ONVU Learning

ONVU Learning has been designed with collaboration at its heart.

With the use of a discreet ceiling-mounted 360-degree camera without any set up on the day, your teachers can capture their entire classroom experience. Teachers remain in control of their own recordings at all times, and can securely share video clips if they choose to.

If you would like to find out how ONVU Learning can help you manage lesson observations, please get in touch here:

<https://www.onvulearning.com/contact>





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