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Practical advice for schools considering implementing video-enhanced observation

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What are the questions we should ask?

I have been involved in a recent research project, led by Newcastle University, that focused on trainee teachers and teacher educators across five European countries (<https://veoeuropa.com>), came up with four key points for school and university leaders who are thinking of adopting video in the classroom:

- Video-enhanced observation should be discussed at a strategic level and explicitly incorporated into relevant school policies;
- A video-enhanced observation framework should be developed with clear guidelines for staff observing, being observed, and for feedback;
- A dedicated platform should underpin the secure handling of video material within the school;
- Only school-approved devices should be used to collect video data, and not teachers' personal devices.

The researchers designed the project to understand how video-enhanced observation could be used in initial teacher education, given that lesson observation can be seen as a signature pedagogy when working with trainee teachers (Shulman, 2005).

In looking at the process of lesson observation, several key questions drove the research:

What if lesson observations were no longer isolated 'snapshot' activities carried out behind closed doors?

What if feedback was no longer 'given' to a trainee, but developed 'with' a trainee, acknowledging good practice and agreeing developmental priorities based on video evidence and shared reflection?

How might the use of video-enhanced observation provide a new window onto this 'signature pedagogy' of the teaching profession?

A powerful learning episode

The following example is taken from a lesson observation feedback session carried out by a school-based mentor in the UK: a secondary-school assistant principal with overall responsibility for monitoring PGCE trainee teachers in the school. Of the many interesting insights into the use of video-enhanced observation for teacher education in the project, this one stood out as a powerful learning episode for the mentor and the trainees.

Having received training on the use of the video observation app, the mentor carried out some initial video-enhanced lesson observations with her new group of trainees on their second teaching placement. She did this by undertaking her usual approach to lesson observation, but with the additional feature of recording the lesson using an iPad. Still quite new to the process, she tagged moments of interest with a 'quick tag', identifying features of the lesson she could return to for discussion with the trainee.

At the bi-weekly group meeting, the mentor had negotiated with one of the trainees to feed back to him on his lesson in front of the group of trainees, so that he would receive his feedback and they would benefit from observing the process, as well as gaining insight into their new mentor's approach.

A session vignette

The trainees were seated in a classroom facing the whiteboard, with the mentor and trainee seated at the front. The mentor had uploaded the lesson video to the online portal provided by the observation software, allowing the video to be viewed on the whiteboard. Starting with the students' entry into the classroom, the mentor commended the trainee on the way that he welcomed his students individually (in this case, a drama studio) and directed them to their places. The mentor stopped the video at a moment of interest and questioned the trainee about seating arrangements. Having discussed it with him, she turned to the group of trainees and used the episode discussion and dialogue as a teaching point for them to consider in their own practice. The mentor went through several more episodes in a similar way, engaging in dialogue with the trainee and then with the group. The mentor and trainee ended the feedback session by jointly agreeing some points for him to develop in his next sequence of lessons.

Professional vision

One of the benefits of using video with trainee teachers is the potential for the development of their professional vision: 'their ability to observe what is happening in a classroom and to make sense of it from a professional perspective' (Blomberg et al 2011, p. 1131). Inevitably, there is a learning curve in terms of software and skills and also in terms of developing the sophistication of frameworks used by the trainees. The example in extract A is that of the case study trainee exhibiting typical observee self-consciousness. In extract B, he has progressed to thinking about his practice and identifying improvements using a normative frame (Calandra and Rich, 2014).

Extract A

Mentor: You're modelling the task really well.
Trainee: Am I that tall?
Mentor: Well, I don't know if you're that tall or they're that short but I think he's got really good movement around the room, would you agree?

Extract B

Mentor: What do you think you could do to improve ... what do you reckon?
Trainee: My questioning could be a bit more planned. At the minute I'm still trying to gauge how much they know about the topics so I can plan the question but now I have a better idea for next time. I'll ask more detailed questions to get more detailed answers, really.
Mentor: Yes, and if possible, when you're questioning use children's names.

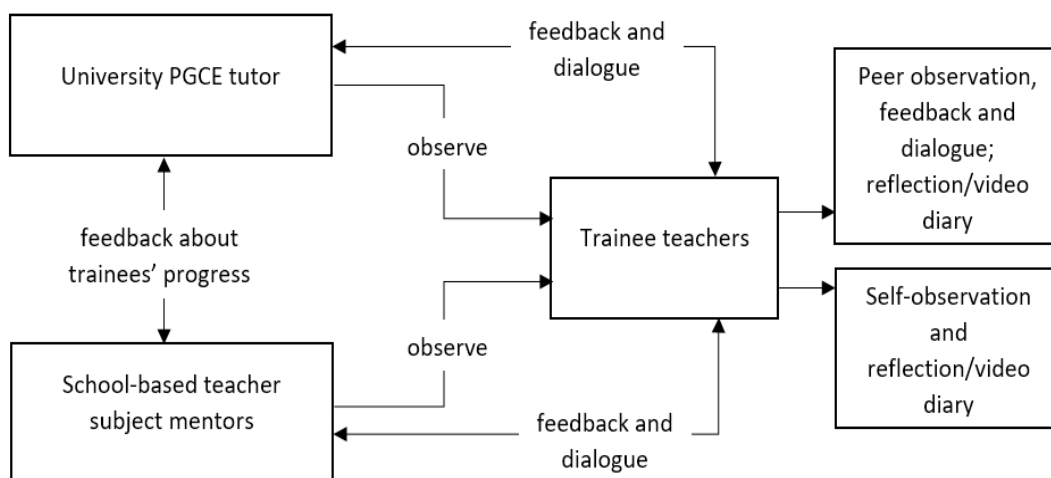


Figure 1: Video-enhanced observation incorporated into PGCE teaching practice

In EdTech terms, this classroom exchange could be interpreted as an example of a previously inconceivable task according to Puentedura's (2010) "Substitution Augmentation Modification Redefinition" (SAMR) model. Using video in the lesson observation process arguably redefines the way that this crucial developmental task is carried out. The software used for the project allowed for key moments of the lesson to be 'tagged': time-stamped with an on-screen annotation from a range of pre-selected criteria, something which could not have been done before the advent of such technology.

Conclusions

From our studies we have developed a model of the ways in which video-enhanced observation can be incorporated into PGCE teaching practice (Figure1).

We found overall that lesson observation and feedback are key to the way that we train new entrants to the profession: our 'signature pedagogy'. We found that, in the hands of experienced mentors, feedback sessions became more dialogic, more of a two-way process and ultimately more useful as a developmental activity when enhanced by the use of video.

There is pedagogic potential here that educators may want to pursue. Moving forward depends, however, on due consideration of the practicalities of adopting a video-enhanced approach to lesson observation.

References

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