Using our 'EFFeCT Criteria' for the analysis of evidence to support and challenge practice and outcomes

Context

Peer-to-Peer Observation of Teaching (referred to in the literature as 'POT').

To address the current growing global criticism and increasing levels of 'control' and governance over education at all levels, stemming from governments, business, consumers and society, with their emphasis on knowing 'what works', this investigation concentrates one sector of education and a particular set of players. To meet these varying interests then one 'solution' demanded is 'improving' teachers. In Europe and beyond numerous approaches, strategies, desirable indicators and practices have been promulgated, some underpinned by research others illuminated by practical experience. The degree of control teachers and those researching education have over these undertakings varies from context to context.

Working with lecturers through the medium of 'Peer Observation of Teaching' (POT) in Limerick, we propose to consider factors that could influence the development of teaching skills, contribute to international educational research and confront the issues/challenges of leadership/governance.

In doing so we will seek to confirm or refute the EFFeCT Criteria in Table 2

Data for this will be drawn from a current Mary Immaculate (MIC) cohort MIC(1a) including an alternative approach taken in 2009/10 MIC(1b), (where an independent second observer was added to the team) , and draw on part of an Irish regional initiative to enhance the quality of teaching and learning across third- and fourth-level institutions in which MI took part MIC(2), each type of course and institution have their own context and expertise to offer. Reference will also be made to a project conducted in the University of Limerick (L1), to which MIC is academically affiliated. This looks at areas other than Teacher Education and exclusively first–time POT duos.

MIC provides initial teacher education programmes, programmes for professional development of serving teachers up to doctoral level (Level 10 on the QQI) , as well as a wide range of Liberal Arts programmes again up to and including doctoral programmes. University of Limerick offers degree and post-graduate courses across a gamut of subject areas. L1 example does not include teacher-education lectures. Peer-to-peer observation is one of a number of institutional strategies towards innovation. In both colleges, lecturers take part in POT on a voluntary basis and in self-chosen aspects of their teaching. In all examples, 'peer observation and review' involving no formal assessment was adopted (McMahon *et al.* 2007). The results of the Peer Observation process are confidential to the participants, and are not used for staff evaluation or promotions. POT provides an opportunity for confidential and mutual reflection, building trust, respect, and promoting learning and future change. Active in MIC since 2007, it involves staff being observed in one or more of their normal teaching sessions. A pre-observation discussion meeting takes place where protocol and observation focus are agreed. Students are pre-briefed about the purpose and post-observation feedback occurs. This protocol is repeated

with the second member.

Participants can choose their own 'peer' or elect to have one chosen by the Centre for Teaching & Learning (CTL) where the commitment to professional development across the whole of the institution is fostered through a range of development and evaluation services.

The scheme is entirely voluntary. There are a number of regional training events each year to develop an institutional and inter-institutional Peer Observation network. Training is regarded as an essential part of effective POT (Kohut, Burnap, and Yon, 2007).

Methodological Framework
Research (Apple, 2013: Bourdieu, 1984, 1986: Habernas, 1984, Giroux, 2011, 2003) shows that teachers tend to go along with the dominant cultural knowledge. Identifying what sustains this while getting teachers to draw on 'good practice' adapt and absorb it for themselves are vital. Along with (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001: Britzman, 1991: Freire, 1975), we believe teachers investigating areas relevant to their practice, are more likely to challenge and change. 'Practitioner Research' Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2007) where the teacher is knower and agent rather than technician, receiver and transmitter of other's knowledge is part of Peer Observation becoming 'teaching as praxis' (Freire, 1975). While a current dominant form is of a 'technicist' nature (e.g. Freire, 1975 'banking education') favouring measurable benefits, of a quantitative nature, with 'findings' given to others to implement in their own context then this 'managerial professionalism' (Day & Sachs, 2004: 6) accentuates the stranglehold of neo-liberal policies. By ignoring context, priorities, values, social justice, sustainability, negotiation and relationship building (Osborne 2010: 10, 423-424), 'Democratic

professionalism' (Day & Sachs 2004: 7) is missing, curtailing involvement by teachers in decision-making. This 'dialogue about learning and teaching is shaped by educational policy and global capitalism more broadly' (Abbas & Maclean 2004) and research as Bourdieu (1990, p.188) suggested becomes 'instruments of manipulation and legitimation'.

Achieving the ultimate level of learning for every learner is a prime objective for education. For of those in charge of national education programmes the emphasis is on the quality of the teaching force, this 'quality enhancement' (QE) is paramount to achieving this. While what constitutes 'quality' and how to achieve it remains contested, the aim of PoT is to enhance the richness and 'quality' of teaching student teachers within a higher education institute. Through the establishment of a confidential, trusting and formative setting, experiences can be reflected on, to stimulate discussion facilitating insight on improvements in teaching and thence student learning. In POT the importance of how students' experience teaching in teaching institutions is flagged up (cf. Gosling, 2006).

Methods used were primarily qualitative given the smallness of the numbers involved. Some quantitative analysis was made in the Shannon project and examples of the results for the MIC contribution are included. Tailored Surveys, questionnaires, observation notes and interview recordings/transcripts, including the consortium guidance notes based on Gosling's (2006), were coded (themed) by researchers individually, discussed and any differences in interpretation explored, in an attempt to maximize the validity and reliability of these qualitative finding. In MIC (1b) NVivo (version 9; QSR, Victoria, Australia) a qualitative software package was used.

They are presented here in the areas highlighted by the

EFFeCT Criteria and Analysis Guidelines to be considered in conjunction with storyboards. These map out any overlapping features, positive and negative, and clarify the situation about 'good practice' in the pursuit of collaborative learning, with some reference to the effect of centralised policy and control.
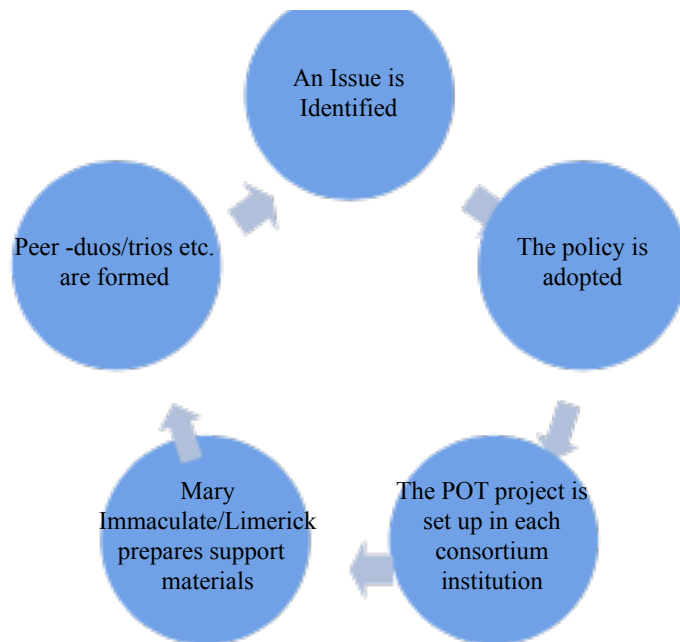
Practice

Fig. A Simplified set up covering MIC(1a&b) MIC(2) & L(1)

Common to all examples in the conduct of POT were:

A *pre-observation* meeting, Gosling (2006) describes this meeting between the observer and the observee as being '…essential to the success of the PoT process'.
In this session the focus and conduct of the period was debated and agreed on, with an emphasis on the wishes and percieved needs of the observee.
Subsequently an outline of the lecture including intentions and teaching context was shared, and used by the observer when making notes.

The *Observation*
In MIC(1a), following the agreed rubric and using any agreed/negotiated materials, the Observer discreetly took notes while observing from an appropriately unobtrusive place taking into account the set-up of the classroom and the type of lesson taking place. This process was repeated by the second peer. This was also the set-up adopted by MIC(1a) and MIC (2). Between 2007-2010 60 participants in Mary Immaculate College engaged in POT.
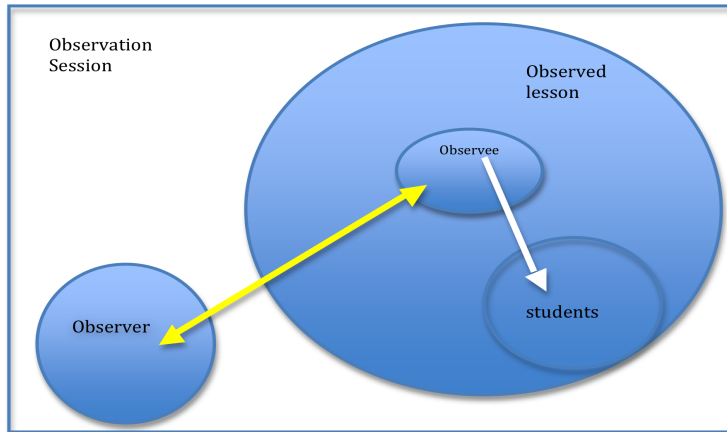
Fig.B MI(1a)

A tri-partite arrangement was adopted in MIC(1b) with a second independent observer present, offering an 'Objective view'. One difference was that both members of the peer-duo were part of the research team and took the part of observer and observee (PP) in turn. They observed MIC(1b) as part of the student body. 4 pairs took part.

FigC.
MIC(b)

Five separate self-selected peer observation dyads (participant pairs) were drawn from a range of disciplines to allow comparison between subject areas. The set up was similar to that on MIC(1b) except for the presence of the external observer. Post observation interviews by the researchers were also used as a means of an in-depth exploration of their experiences, attitudes and behaviours, giving 'a richer more holistic dialogue about the observed teaching session rather than a superficial checklist evaluation' (Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p.449).

In all cases the students attending were aware of the purpose and conduct of the session prior to it taking place.

Post-Observation Meeting

MIC(1) & MIC(2)) and L1 researchers (all participant, discussed feedback)

Before the meeting the Observee gave their reflection on the lecture to the Observer for comment, this together with notes taken formed the basis of the feedback. Several distinct areas for consideration arose during these meetings.

The post-observation meeting was held shortly after the Observation in most cases, a strategy given importance by Gosling (2006). This timing, together with the knowledge that the process was confidential, had an impact on attitudes towards POT. The event took several forms supported by the guidelines and agenda agreed between the dyads or triads. From the resulting findings either noted by the researchers where they were present at the meetings, through subsequent interviews or by the analysis of responses to surveys, questionnaires, shared reports or a mixture of these, this function of the project raised most pointers to the identification of 'good practice' facilitators and restrictions (all identifiers on respondents been removed).

Relationships

Not surprisingly the quality of the relationship between the dyad had significance, as noted by Gosling (2006); confidence is crucial for feedback to be seen as constructive but non-judgmental. Self-choice of peers was a positive factor. The provision of an alternative through the CTL was valued. Their care and skill in 'matching' peers, likened to a 'marriage bureau' was deemed a factor. A very close relationship was seen as good by some and problematic by others. This appeared to be a feature across all 4 set-ups. The confidential aspect of feedback also enhanced the relationship building as evidenced in the quotes below taken from the papers:

Following Surgenor (2011)
'… a successful and beneficial PoT process involves two fundamental issues. POT partners should view each other as genuine peers, with real mutuality and respect, regardless of institutional status' (Surgenor, 2011).

(confidentiality will help to *)… 'promote self-knowledge and personal development'* (Shortland, 2004, p. 227).

We had self-selected each other …, I had the comfort of knowing that I didn't mind
what she said, whether it was good or negative because I had taken it on board that
she only meant it in a good way (L1 Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 449).

Learning

Can potentially take place: -

- For the students involved, providing a practical example of how learning and development can be gained through involving another's view and reflection on one's own activities, discussing these and being open to new interpretations. This is a valuable lesson for intending teachers and a means of establishing this as a 'normal' practice within professional and personal development.
- For the peer-duo/trio: (and independent observer/researcher)

  o Knowledge and discussion and adaptation during training for POT
  o During the pre-meeting
  o During the observation

- Post observation feedback
- In retrospect

Self-reflection on their teaching in the session, often critical, was a feature in the data. Although an element of concern over subject knowledge was detectable, their emphasis was on the process of teaching.

In an inter-institutional review of the work of the Centre for Teaching and Learning at UL and MIC, it recorded that the PoT process was found to be particularly valuable for the self-assessment and improvement of teaching skills. In line with Martin and Double's (1998) acknowledgment that insights into personal practice are gained both from the act of observing as well as from being observed, an extremely large percentage of respondents (89%; n =25/28 to whom the question was applicable) felt PoT feedback was useful while most of these respondents were also able to offer effective feedback to others (92%; n =23/25 to whom the question was applicable) (*Inter-institutional Teaching and Learning Initiatives, Evaluation of Impact*, 2012, p.54).

Respondents felt that they had learned a lot from the process of POT and some agreed that they had changed their teaching approach as a result of PoT participation (63%; n =19/30, *Inter-institutional Teaching and Learning Initiatives, Evaluation of Impact,* 2012, p.54).

Participants stated that as they began to look at the lecture from the students' perspective, this changed their approach to teaching. A large proportion of respondents (88%; n =28/32 to whom the question was applicable) found their PoT experience a positive one; '*peer observation provides an informed evaluation of teaching by a fellow professional, and, PoT was a great help to me'* (Inter-institutional Teaching and Learning Initiatives, Evaluation of Impact, 2012, p.54).

It was evident from the observers that they too emphasized the student engagement and participation levels:

'Teacher facilitates, double checks, further explanations (all very active lots of chatter and participation) … teacher, focusing on group questioning then, how are you … follows groups and gives further explanation/asks questions while students are engaged in the task' (MIC (1b) peer-observer cited from Kenny et al, 2014, p. 223)

For those newer academics with little experience of teaching, the process involved in preparing for a POT session in itself was found to be supportive as it gave participants *'reassurance and help to develop my teaching'* (L1, Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 451).

For some time management was an issue:

… I felt pressurised for time and resources to facilitate … I was rushing way too much! Did I just want to go home like all the students and peers before me? It was 5:45 pm! (MIC 1b participant reflection cited from Kenny et al, 2014, p. 225)

The manner and content of the feedback was also crucial, observees welcomed a systematic use of evidence in the evaluation where the observer was *'backing everything up with examples'* during feedback (L 1 Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 451). This meant that the conversation was a focused and constructive critique of the class, and not a casual conversation with a peer.

And stressing the degree of trust and truthfulness that can be built

is what she saw and that she is not molly coddling it and I presume that she would be
the same with me and that's why we do it ... we know each other very, very well so
we are able to talk openly about the various things and not get defensive and that was
really the key thing (L1 Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 450).

Conversely finding danger in too comfortable a relationship because 'deep' criticism or hard issues might be avoided in feedback to protect the relationship between the peers.

A positive 'overall feel' of the experience including atmosphere and student experience was felt to be important

The physical space coupled with the very focused and effective teaching strategies all
led to a very pleasant and more importantly educative experience. The overall
atmosphere of enjoyment and engagement that was strongly apparent throughout this
session testifies to this (MIC(1b) participant observer cited by Kenny et al, 2014, p.223).

Found also by (Hammersely-Fletcher& Orsmond, 2004, 2005) where detailed documentation process involving in a structured programme supported by pre-training is seen as instrumental to the success of POT.

Where duos were from different disciplines the insight of the observer from outside their normal sphere *'a different discipline'* (L1) was felt to be beneficial, as was having the opportunity to explore their teaching with experienced and/or pedagogical experts *'someone more experienced in teaching'* (L1 Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 450).

However, for some this caused apprehension. In observing lectures/practical sessions in areas where the observer had no previous experience was a cause for apprehension. While the interdisciplinary aspect was welcomed by observers, and allowed them to focus on the teaching skills and not the content per se, it was a concern for some staff:

'I was a little apprehensive going into the session considering it was physical education but very soon realised that essentially fun and participation were the overriding types of experience in the session' (MI(1b) peer-participant cited by Kenny et al, 2014, p. 224).

For the observee it was also a challenging experience and one participant noted:

I couldn't believe it! I felt as if the entire session would collapse! My heartbeat ticked
like it had not, since ... I began my lecturing ... I was stressed before it even began!
(MIC1b cited by Kenny et al, 2014, p. 224)

'the biggest step was getting over the fear of being peer reviewed' (L1 Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 452).

However, for others there was a certain comfort in being observed and found the conversations about their practice a source of inspiration:

Having my peers present was for me quite comforting as I find this group difficult to
teach. Due to this, I was interested to hear their comments and suggestions on how
best to deal with this issue and gain an outside perspective. (MIC1b participant cited by Kenny et al, 2014, p. 224).

'...because I think people tend to lecture in isolation ... you don't get much of a chance to go out and discuss' (L1 Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 451*).*

Depth

POT was demonstrated to have resulted in deep and personal learning for the participants. This is illustrated through their comments prior, during and subsequent to the experience.

Their future practice

Where a researcher or 'neutral' third person is present during session through observation

When student comment is also sought by their reports on individual experiences.

Factors contribution include:

- Cohesive nature – built up through having: -
- the choice of partner b) the pre-observation meeting discussing what, where, when and how.
- The sharing of teaching experiences, challenges and needs, showing trust and courage to expose uncertainty and respect in the ability of the colleague to in turn respect these confidences.

- The confidentiality of all that happens during observations and feedback within the duo.
- Discussion in the post-observation session/report that illustrates self-questioning of the lesson above and beyond the subject content on the part of the person being observed
- The adoption of ideas seen through being an observer and arising in the post-observation session

- Reference to further reading/enquiry taking place by either or both of the peer-duo
- A realization on the part of any of the participants that a close rapport with the duo may be a negative as well as a positive aspect ('politeness theory ', Brown & Levinson, 1987)
- A complete absence of any of these would indicate that resulting learning was absent or superficial

Embedding the Learning/Deep Learning?

Similar to the points raised under 'Relationships' and 'Learning', giving some evidence of embedding taking place, is this example

In hindsight I should have given them more information during the explanation of this
task, promoted them a little more and directed them to certain considerations when
preparing the group activity (MI 1b cited by Kenny et al, 2014, p. 226).

Or

From a teaching perspective, I feel the students would have benefited from the use of
paired or group discussion earlier on in the session …
the students seem to be uncomfortable with sharing their thoughts and ideas, which may be due to their youth and comfort with a more traditional didactic way of teaching and learning often promoted in secondary school (MI 1b cited by Kenny et al, 2014, p. 226).

And from the perspective of PO design this comment could lead to facilitating deeper learning

I was tired and I engaged enough to make a sketch but

the group I was with were
tired, unfocused ... (MI(1b) peer-participant cited by
Kenny et al, 2014, p. 223)

suggesting awareness of the student experience of
teaching and learning may be a vital component.

Although a contrast about the efficacy of POT and other
forms of student feedback is instructive

... You know the student evaluation form that the students
fill in, it is, you know, it is
very much about satisfaction ... it gives you some things
but they [the students] tell
you gripes like the desks are too small ... which is
absolutely no use to your teaching
so it is better to get something that is more specific on
the methods that you use ...
(L1 Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 451)

and gives us a pointer about want 'deep learning' needs
to take place in many institutions' evaluation schemes.

Other contributions highlighted the value participants put
on taking part in PO retrospectively, becoming advocates
of the process

(through)'... word of mouth and raising awareness
among colleagues' (L1 Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p.
452)

'being invited to take part in PO was a surprise...now I
would encourage anyone to try it...' (MI 1a)

I think the most beneficial part of it is to do with opening
up to a more public audience, your competence in that
area – not that you would be intentionally secretive
about it but... that is very developmental, that you try to
let down any barriers.

(L1, cited by Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014, p. 452).

Institutional or Faculty resistance to change was a recognisable factor in the project. It also underscores the relevance of POT as a conduit for collaborative learning and wider impact in the academic community. Within a higher education environment where there is an institutional emphasis on research and publications, the quality of teaching and the time invested in creating active learning classrooms may not always be appreciated:

Like there are two main divisions. There's what I call the younger crowd, like myself
and then there is the old school and I think there is a very notable difference between
the two groups in terms of being open to stuff and willing to change and implement
change… (L1Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014, pp 452, 453).

Participation
By giving the participants the opportunity to choose: -
- their 'peer' partner this demonstrates the 'control' is firmly based with the individual teacher educator
- The focus of the observation is also in the remit of each individual, this shows respect for their self-conceived 'needs' and allows the exercise to be wholly relevant to their actual and specific teaching and/or professional and personal development
- The peer duo themselves agree on the protocol and format of the observation period, allowing them to build mutual respect for each others wishes, challenges and concerns governed only by the principles of Goslings model.
- The peers decide upon their own model of feedback, guided only by the pre-arranged

criteria that form part of the pre-observation session.

By deciding on the time, place and content of the teaching to be observed, gives the participant the opportunity of explaining the purpose of the observation to the students and the role of the observer who too can reinforce the nature of the exercise as being for development and thence contributing towards their development also. This also underlines this is not a 'measurement' or 'inspection' of their lecturer to allot praise or blame, its self-initiated and not 'top down'. Providing a practical example of how learning and development can be gained through involving another's view and reflection on one's own activities, discussing these and being open to new interpretations.

This is a valuable lesson for intending teachers and a means of establishing this as a 'normal' practice within professional and personal development as also cited by D'Andrea & Gosling, (2005).

The training for POT covered the essential and possibly controversial areas of the understanding of the founding principles of POT, the process available, the use of the supporting materials and advice on strategies for the post-observation feedback. So involving all participants and allowing changes and adaptation to suit the individuals and contexts. In MI(1b) it was felt

'… the external observer contributed to the trustworthiness of the study in terms of recording the incidents and events in the class that the peers used to bolster their observations and experiences as they related them' (Kenny et al 2014, p. 227).

Equity

Raises questions on from whose view point and the definition of 'Equity'. Possibilities may be: -

  • Adoption of Gosling's 'Peer Review' method

where no formal evaluation is made for the purposes of 'measuring' or as a marker for promotion or retention.

- Participants have choice of focus tied to their own perceived 'needs' as opposed to a policy directive form either within or outside the institution.
- Peers are equal; there is no 'leader' or 'subordinate'.
- The level of free and frank discussion subsequent to the observations taking place – this is of course subjective and being self-reported is open to speculation.

The presence of a third 'neutral' person and/or also taking the students' view could alleviate this but is still subjective.

Where observer and/ or peer-participants can agree or disagree with the reflections of the observee and amongst each other.

Facilitators

There are many facilitating factors that support POT, including the following:

Current trends in educational approaches, teaching and learning initiatives internal, local and national

National Policy that funds and supports the initiative

Being part of a larger project to create a local (regional) network

Pre-knowledge of one's peers

Being entirely voluntary

The non-judgmental nature of the process

A desire for professional and personal development

Lack of satisfaction with the status quo

The opportunity to see a different approach to/results of:

- Presentation of materials

- Classroom layouts
- Register of communication techniques both verbal and non-verbal
- Pacing
- Taking into account the different learning styles of individual students
- Coping with diversity
- Handling disruption
- Awareness of the ability to 'read' the learning situation e.g. when it becomes apparent that the students' relevant pre-knowledge/experience of the salient learning points is not there and bridging this 'gap'
- Dealing with unexpected diversions from the learning plan
- An opportunity to adopt and adapt teaching styles new or untried previously
- Encourage experimentation
- Focus on teaching and learning rather than content knowledge
- Supportive documentation allowing the observation of the teaching session rather than their colleague
- Evidence-based feedback
- Observing from a variety of roles (e.g.) observer/participant observer/independent observer/researcher may 'offer some significant insights into what was valued by the participants in teaching and also what is important for students in their learning' (MI(1b) & (Byrne, Brown, & Challen, 2010; D'Andrea & Gosling, 2005; Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004; Siddiqui et al, 2007; Swinglehurst et al, 2008).

A sustained peer-review partnership in contrast to a 'one-off' experience appears to offer enhanced deep reflection

and learning leading to professional development.
(Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond 2005) and Wubbels
and Korthagen (1990).

Established partnerships may foster a shared safe
environment, alleviate apprehension thus allowing
critical reflection in developing teaching.

Best practice of POT is therefore dependent on the
'quality of the processes in place and on the practices of
those conducting observation and being observed'
(Hammersely-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005, p. 213) where
peer observation is part of a wider quality agenda.
(Carroll & O'Loughlin, 2014).

Barriers

There are a number of potential barriers at each stage of
the process and affect all the participants in POT: these
include the following:

Inadequate pre-knowledge of one's peers
Lack of confidence in:
- Oneself
- The confidentiality of the process
- One's peer
- The neutrality of institution
- Fear of a hidden agenda/purpose by the
  authorities

Time allotted to each step in the process
Time consuming nature of the project

Pressure to fulfill the demands of a 'set' curriculum
Apprehension over teaching before one's peers
Entrenched attitudes and beliefs

The nature of the 'Peer' relationship that could lead to:
- The reinforcement of restricted norms of practice that could inhibit any progression in self-development
- Peers from the same discipline area could lead to a concentration on the subject knowledge rather than the preparation, delivery, learning objectives addressing the diverse needs of the students, register and communication techniques adopted.
- The tendency to find something within the gamut of pointers of 'good' practice – tick those boxes and therefore conclude that no change is needed.
- The individuals' capacity for self-delusion.

The subjective nature of most of the gathering techniques.

Faculty resistance to change (Knight, 2002)
The perception it is an intrusion into the learning/classroom challenging autonomy (Blackwell & McLean, 1996).

The culture of institutions and sensitivity needed to achieve successful POT (Carroll, 2014).

Where only the views of an observer and the observee are recorded, this may not accurately display the student experience.

Features outside the control of the lecturer, like the timetabling or the tiredness of the students.

Appendices:

Appendix A   Shannon Consortium Guidance

POT

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