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# An Evaluation of the On-site Peer Observation Process to Enhance the Quality of Teaching and Learning of the Student Teachers of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Course

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# An Evaluation of the On-site Peer Observation Process to Enhance the Quality of Teaching and Learning of the Student Teachers of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Course

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## **Abstract**

*The study aimed at examining the views of the student-teachers and supervisors on the On-site Peer Observation (OPO) component of the Postgraduate Diploma in Education Programme (PgD in Ed) offered by the Department of Education Studies of Hong Kong Baptist University. A total of 122 students participated in the study by completing a self-administered questionnaire. Interviews were conducted with 30 of these participating students and with ten instructors selected at random. Results indicated the OPO had played an important role in enhancing student-teachers' reflection on their teaching and studies. Based on the results, three main recommendations were made to further enhance student learning.*

## **Key words**

Peer observation, initial teacher development, student teachers

## **Introduction**

In pre-service and in-service teacher education, peer observation is widely practiced and accepted as a valuable contribution to evaluating teachers' performance and enhancing teachers' professional development (e.g., Cosh, 1999; Einwaechter, Jr., 1992; Elghannam, 1997; Munson, 1998; Richardson, 2000; Rauch &

Whittaker, 1999). Since the launching of the in-service PgD in Ed Programme at Hong Kong Baptist University in 1993, on-site peer observation (OPO) has been an integral component of the Programme. To fulfill the requirements of this component, each student is required to conduct two OPO sessions in the first year of his or her studies. These sessions take place in

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the classroom of the student's own school. Based on the criteria stipulated in the Assessment Form, the student observes and evaluates fellow-teachers on different aspects of teaching (e.g., planning and preparation, implementation and classroom interaction and management, etc.). Furthermore, each student is required to submit an observation report to his or her instructor, a subject specialist, who will comment on the report. At the end of the semester, students are required to attend a seminar facilitated by their subject specialist to share the experiences gained from the OPO sessions. While the *Supervised Teaching Practice*, another component of the Programme, has been examined with respect to its impact on student-teachers' learning, no in-depth systematic evaluation of this OPO component of the Programme has been conducted so far.

### Aims and Objectives

The project aims at examining the impact of OPO by exploring student-teachers' views on different aspects involved in the process on one hand, and soliciting the views of subject specialists involved in monitoring student learning in this process on the other. The study not only will help to establish a baseline for evaluation of OPO, but also will contribute to further enhancing student-teachers' teaching and learning with respect to professional development.

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To examine the views of student-teachers on the process of OPO, its contribution to their learning and its promotion of their reflective teaching;
2. To obtain subject specialists' feedback on the process of OPO and their way of monitoring student-teachers' teaching and learning in this process;
3. To solicit student-teachers' and subject specialists' suggestions for enhancing and monitoring student-teachers' learning and reflective teaching through OPO; and
4. To further develop and refine the guidelines for enhancing the quality of OPO process and for facilitating student-teachers' teaching and learning.

### Methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were used in this project. Data were collected through mailed questionnaires and follow-up personal interviews. One hundred and twenty two year-one (74) and year-two (48) student-teachers participated in the study by completing a self-administered questionnaire which included close-ended questions and a specific open-ended question in order to allow for additional comments. The items of the questionnaire focusing on different aspects and the potential impact of the OPO were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" (5) to "strongly disagree" (1) (refer to Appendix I). Questionnaires and follow-

up mailings were sent to non-respondents. A total of 276 (140 year-one students and 136 year-two students) questionnaires were sent out and the overall response rate was 45%.

Face-to-face personal interviews were also conducted with 30 student-teachers and 10 instructors selected at random.

### Results/Findings

The major findings of the study are summarized below. The quantitative data from questionnaires focuses on student-teachers' views on the impact of the OPO, such as enhancing teaching skills, understanding teaching ability, and so on. The qualitative data from interviews includes elaboration of and comments on the OPO by both student-teachers and subject instructors.

#### Quantitative Data from Questionnaires

For the sake of brevity, when reporting the findings in the following, the "agree" and "strongly agree" response categories of the question items were collapsed. Students' responses were grouped under the following headings: (1) OPO as a component of the Programme; (2) preparing students for OPO; (3) monitoring of student learning in the OPO process; and (4) impact of OPO on student teaching and learning.

##### 1. OPO as a Component of the Programme

On the whole, close to three-quarters (73.8%) of the student-

teachers indicated that the OPO was an integral component of the Programme. About three-fifths (60.6%) agreed that scheduling one OPO visit for each semester in the first year of study was appropriate. Regarding the relationships between the OPO and the other courses of the Programme, the majority of them also agreed that the OPO complemented both the courses *EDUC 4011-12 Teaching Principles & Subject Instruction* (72.7%) and the *Supervised Teaching Practice* component of the Programme (69.7%). Though the OPO was regarded as an integral component of the Programme, more than half of the respondents (56.5%) thought that the OPO should be more structured.

##### 2. Preparing Students for OPO

Student-teachers responses show that not enough information had been provided in preparing students for the OPO, particularly with respect to explaining the objectives of this component and providing guidelines for conducting OPO. While only half of the students (51.7%) indicated that the objectives of the OPO were clear to them, about two-fifths (42.7%) agreed that they had not been given enough guidelines for conducting the OPO. About one quarter (26.3%) agreed that they had not been adequately prepared to benefit from the OPO. Regarding the assessment form to be used for observing and evaluating teaching in the OPO

process, the results were more positive. More than half of the students (52.9%) mentioned that the assessment form provided useful guidelines for them to conduct OPO and about two-thirds (66.4%) said that the form contained useful information on what important features to look for in OPO.

### 3. *Monitoring of Student Learning in OPO*

Monitoring of student learning involved two major aspects: (1) students' writing of an observation report; and (2) instructor's feedback on the written report. The findings show that slightly less than half of the students (45.9%) agreed that the observation report was an effective means of monitoring learning and also just more than half (53.7%) reported that instructor's feedback on the report was helpful to their learning. In both instances, about one-third of the respondents (32% and 34.7% respectively) were neutral regarding the mechanism for monitoring student learning. Few reported it was ineffective or unhelpful.

### 4. *Impact of OPO on Student Teaching and Learning*

The impact of the OPO was assessed by question items touching on a number of aspects relevant to teaching. The majority of the students agreed that the OPO had made a positive impact on their learning experience (80.9%) and some indicated that their learning experience in the OPO

had been very rewarding (58.2%). On the whole, they also tended to hold positive views about the OPO process. These positive views about its helpfulness in descending order included: (1) providing a learning opportunity to observe the complexity of teaching (78%); (2) developing the ability to evaluate one's own teaching (77.1%); (3) knowing more about various aspects of teaching (77.1%); (4) learning how to teach better (76.2%); (5) providing a learning opportunity to look at teaching from the evaluator's perspective (75.2%); (6) reflecting on one's own teaching (74.6%); (7) assessing one's own teaching ability (72.9%); (8) enhancing one's teaching skills (67.8%); (9) understanding better one's teaching ability (65.5%); and (10) giving one more confidence in learning how to teach better (60.6%).

### **Qualitative Data from In-depth Interviews**

In-depth face-to-face interviews held with interviewees (student-teachers: 30 & instructors: 10) highlighted the benefits of OPO as well as the areas for which improvement could be made. The accounts of the student-teachers and the instructors, subsumed under six headings, are briefly summarized in the following paragraphs. The areas of OPO examined include: (1) objectives; (2) sessions, scheduling, and arrangement for observation; (3) integration with other courses of the Programme; (4) monitoring process; (5) impact on student teaching and learning; (6) difficulties encountered

by student-teachers and suggestions for improvement.

### 1. Objectives of OPO

Some student-teachers indicated that OPO not only provided an opportunity for them to observe another teacher's teaching, but it also enhanced their ability to reflect on their own teaching. They maintained that through this mechanism they could learn from others' teaching approaches and improve their own teaching skills.

Instructors' views were similar to those of the student-teachers with regard to the objectives of OPO and its contribution to learning. Most of them maintained that OPO provided a valuable experience and could enhance student-teachers' reflection on their teaching. They further believed that through observation student-teachers could learn from others and put theory into practice.

### 2. Sessions, Scheduling, and Arrangement of OPO

Most of the student-teachers interviewed thought that it was appropriate to have two sessions for OPO and some suggested that the two sessions should be scheduled with one in the second semester of year one and one in the first semester of year two. This was different from the current practice, with one session scheduled in each semester of year one. Some of them further emphasized that the

period between the two sessions should be long enough to allow more time for them to reflect on their teaching.

Though most of the instructors indicated that the present arrangement of OPO was appropriate, some of them preferred to have the first session in the second semester. A reason to support this was that students should be given more time for reflection between their first *Supervised Teaching Practice* assessment, which took place almost at the end of the first semester, and their first OPO, which, in the current practice, was also scheduled in the same semester.

### 3. Integration of OPO with Other Courses of the Programme

When commenting on OPO, some student-teachers expressed that since OPO and *Supervised Teaching Practice* were complementary to each other, they should be integrated, while others mentioned that integration with the core course, *Teaching Principles & Subject Instruction*, was appropriate. Other courses suggested included *Classroom Management*, *Classroom Research*, *Psychological Foundations of Teaching and Learning*, and *Teacher Self Development*.

The majority of the instructors pointed out that there was an integration between OPO and the other courses of the Programme like *Teaching*

*Principles & Subject Instruction and Supervised Teaching Practice.* Similar to those mentioned by student-teachers, courses such as *Classroom Management, Classroom Research, and Psychological Foundations of Teaching and Learning* were also suggested to integrate with OPO.

#### 4. **Monitoring of Learning in OPO**

Student-teachers' views on the monitoring process of OPO were generally positive. While some mentioned that the assessment form was useful because it included a lot of items on which they could focus in their observation, others said that writing a report not only intensified what they had learned in OPO, but also gave them an opportunity to reflect on their own teaching. Still others indicated that their instructor's guidance in terms of briefing sessions and reference materials were useful to helping them to know about OPO.

Unlike those of the student-teachers, instructors' comments on OPO were somewhat mixed. While some of them thought that the monitoring process was adequate with reference to the assessment form and report writing, others remarked that it could be improved by: (a) video-taping the session observed; (b) sharing of the tape among classmates and their instructor; and (c) having a follow-up discussion on the session with the instructor.

#### 5. **Impact of OPO on Teaching and Learning**

The majority of the student-teachers stated that OPO had made a positive impact on various aspects of their teaching and learning. Some commented that OPO had enhanced their reflection on what they learned from the Programme, refreshed their teaching, and inspired them to try out different teaching methods in their classes. Others mentioned that through OPO they had improved their teaching skills by observing the strengths of others in teaching and avoiding others' weaknesses or mistakes.

Similarly, the majority of the instructors tended to have a positive evaluation of OPO with respect to its impact on student teaching and learning. They pointed out that it had not only given them an opportunity to reflect on their teaching, but also broadened their perspectives on how the same course could be taught in different ways by different teachers.

#### 6. **Difficulties Encountered and Suggestions for Improvement**

A number of difficulties in conducting OPO were reported by some student-teachers. Those deserving attention included:

- difficulty in finding a willing colleague for observation because most colleagues were reluctant to be observed by others in class;
- putting pressure on colleagues

- concerned;
- feeling embarrassed to give comments on experienced colleagues' teaching;
  - not knowing what the observers' role is and how to assess others' teaching; and
  - not feeling confident about their comments on others' teaching.

Suggestions from student-teachers for improvement included:

- a briefing session before conducting the first OPO;
- a set of guidelines or a demonstration to introduce the rationale of OPO and the skills in observing others' teaching;
- individual follow-up discussion with instructor to obtain immediate feedback.

With regard to difficulties encountered, most of the instructors echoed student-teachers' views. They agreed that it was difficult for the student-teachers to make arrangements with their colleagues for observation of teaching. Some of them also observed that student-teachers had not been given adequate orientation regarding objectives and skills, guidance, and support in conducting OPO. One commented that the monitoring of student learning in OPO should be reviewed as the involvement of instructors was rather minimal and instructor-student interaction was limited.

Instructors' suggestions for improving OPO were similar to those put forth by student-teachers. They included:

- orientation and guidance;
- better integration among the course *Teaching Principles and Subject Instruction*, *Supervised Teaching Practice*, and micro-teaching;
- a follow-up discussion session with the instructor; and
- experience sharing among classmates as a group.

### Discussion

The findings of this Teaching Development Grant (TDG) project have not only contributed to a better understanding of how student-teachers and instructors perceived OPO, but also shed more light on the role of OPO in the Programme as well as its operation, monitoring, and impact on learning and teaching. On the whole, both instructors and student-teachers confirmed the significant role played by OPO as an integral component of the Programme and its contribution to enhancing student-teachers' knowledge and skills in teaching, and developing their ability to reflect on their own teaching. Their views about its operation and monitoring suggest that there is room for improvement. The findings have highlighted three areas to which more attention should be paid in order to facilitate student learning:

- scheduling and integration of OPO within the Programme;
- pre-OPO orientation session for students;

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- support for students in making arrangements for OPO.

First, the data suggest that there is a need to better integrate OPO with the core course, *Teaching Principles and Subject Instruction (TPSI)*, on the one hand and with *Supervised Teaching Practice (STP)* on the other. In the present arrangement, though OPO is a part of TPSI and is monitored by the instructor responsible for teaching it, its operation shows that it is more like a stand-alone component somewhat loosely connected with the most relevant parts of the Programme like TPSI and STP. Better integration with TPSI could be achieved by explicitly linking OPO with TPSI in instructional activities and by incorporating experience-sharing and discussion sessions on OPO into the teaching schedule of this course, in addition to the end-of-the-semester session. Such integration could be deepened in view of expanding TPSI by creating a new course entitled *Seminar on Subject Teaching* for year-two students. This one-year new course, with a focus on reflective teaching, could serve as a platform to foster student-teachers' reflection on their teaching experiences in general and those in OPO in particular. Regarding integration with STP, since both OPO and STP are using the same Assessment Form in observing teaching, the close link between the two should be strengthened explicitly. During OPO student-teachers serve as observers and assessors, but in STP they are being observed and assessed. Integrating these two mechanisms well

in the Programme could facilitate and maximize learning if student-teachers understand the connection between the two roles and the experiences associated with them. Such integration between OPO and STP also contributes to learning when student-teachers reflect on their own and others' teaching. In addition, the findings suggest that the scheduling of the two OPO sessions with one in each semester should be reviewed. With the present arrangement, students do not have ample time for reflection between the two visits because the first STP and the first OPO session tend to take place in the same period close to the end of the first semester.

Second, the findings of the study highlight the need for an orientation session preparing student-teachers adequately to conduct OPO. This induction session should focus on briefing students about the objectives and role of OPO in the Course, explaining in detail to students the criteria in the Assessment Form to be used for assessing teaching, providing students with a set of guidelines for conducting OPO, and informing them of the expectations for them and the sources of support. It is expected that learning from OPO will be further enhanced if students have been given full information on OPO and have been instructionally and psychologically prepared prior to undertaking this task.

Third, in order to overcome student-teachers' difficulty in finding a willing colleague for OPO in their own schools,

formal support from the Department is needed. Though the success of this task depends a lot on the good will of colleagues, the Department could facilitate this by providing the observed with full information on the nature, objectives and expected learning outcome of OPO for student-teachers. This is to avoid and dispel any misunderstanding on the part of the observed that through OPO their teaching performance is being judged and scrutinized. It is recommended that a letter from the Department be sent to the colleagues concerned informing them of the objectives of OPO and inviting them to participate in this experience-sharing relationship. This informal relationship could become more formalized by developing into a mentor-mentee relationship within the school context.

### **Enhancement on Teaching and Learning**

Both student-teachers and instructors indicated that OPO had made a positive impact on student-teachers. As an integral component of the programme, it has contributed to enhancing student-teachers' learning and teaching by giving them the opportunity to observe, evaluate, and reflect on teaching in practice. Through their experience in OPO, student-teachers become more acquainted with different teaching styles and methods, are exposed to various ways of classroom management, and broaden their practical knowledge about teaching. OPO has helped to raise their awareness of their own teaching and facilitate their personal reflection, which is a

significant process for teaching and learning enhancement (Sivan, 2001) as well as for personal and professional growth (Henniger, 2004). In addition, the project has also identified several issues to be taken on board as recommendations for further enhancement of student-teachers' learning and teaching. These recommendations aim at

- maximizing student learning by integrating OPO with TPSI and STP within the Programme;
- preparing and equipping student-teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills for conducting OPO with an orientation session; and
- facilitating the arrangement of OPO by the Department by extending a formal invitation to the teachers being observed in the host schools.

### **Limitations/Difficulties**

Three main difficulties were encountered in the undertaking of the project. As a result, the project was delayed and had to be extended beyond the expected completion date. Firstly, student-teachers' response rate to the self-administered questionnaire was very low in the first round of data collection. To raise the response rate, two more rounds of data collection were conducted. Secondly, because of the sudden reduction in working hours of the part-time Project Assistant, the interviewing period for student-teachers and instructors was extended. Thirdly, because a problem arose with old software for qualitative analysis in the computer, there was a further delay in the progress of the project.

A new version of the software was purchased in order to solve this problem.

### Conclusion

On the whole, OPO as a component of the Programme has played a significant role in fostering reflection of their teaching among in-service teachers, which has had a positive impact on their learning. In order to further enhance student-teachers' learning in OPO, concrete recommendations were made to facilitate its implementation within the school context and to make it more structured and integrated within the programme.

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