



## Project Title: Using peer observation within a community of Associate Lecturers in Mathematics and Statistics

Keywords: peer observation; professional development

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## Executive Summary

This project stemmed from the first named author's continuing interest in developing scholarship in a community of Open University (OU) Associate Lecturers (ALs) living in Scotland and teaching Mathematics & Statistics (M&S) modules.



The strategic objective of “fostering a dynamic and inclusive culture” (The Open University, 2019a) notes the need to create conditions for all staff to thrive and be motivated. “Fostering a dynamic and inclusive culture ... by investing in staff to recognise and maximise their contribution to success”, (The Open University, 2019). The ‘paired-peer observation scheme’ and supporting face-to-face professional development meetings, detailed below, is one example of senior management staff in the M&S School, module team members and ALs working together to establish an academic community and collegiate culture. This is likely to become increasingly important as ALs become fuller members of what the university has referred to as “sustainable academic communities”.

The first named author's role as module chair in M&S and Nation Staff Tutor in the STEM faculty meant that development work in this community in Scotland was guided by strategic priorities of the School, Faculty and Nation.

One of the themes emerging from evaluation of subject-specific face-to-face professional development events in Scotland was that ALs were surprisingly lacking in confidence in front of their peers. Another theme was that M&S ALs initially felt uncomfortable about engaging with reflective writing and scholarship, even though as a group of university teachers their practice is indeed reflective and based on sound pedagogical ideas.

The theme of lack of motivation to prioritise engagement with reflective writing and scholarship, expressed by some M&S tutors, is noted widely in the literature, for example in Gardner, A., & Willey, K. (2016). There is a strong driving force in the UK (and beyond) for university teachers to become accredited by the Higher Education Academy (HEA). <https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/>. This provides university teachers with recognition of their practice, impact and leadership of teaching and learning within the UK Professional Standards Framework and demonstrates a commitment to improving quality of teaching to enhance the learning experience of students. It is, therefore, very important to encourage and develop ALs to work towards achieving HEA recognition, being mindful that this might require them to acquire different skills. In the OU, ALs can apply for HEA membership through our professional development scheme, Applaud, (The Open University, 2019b) and also directly to HEA.

In order to explore both of these concerns, a ‘peer observation’ scheme was introduced in this community. Peer observation among tutors does not happen routinely in the OU, though various approaches have been taken within the wider AL community in Scotland (Harper & Nicolson, 2013). The approach to peer observation, described below, aims to address some general criticisms (Hughes et al, 2007) and some concerns commonly associated with unpopularity of implementation of peer observation initiatives across institutions (Purvis et al, 2009), though there are successes

(Nash et al, 2014). The fundamental tenet of the opt-in paired-peer observation scheme was that observations should focus on being easily achievable in a tutor's busy schedule, with the customary essential ingredients of humour and humility (Schein, 2013). Feedback from the first round of observations confirmed that that peer observation, focusing on sharing of positive feedback between ALs, can contribute towards the fostering of a dynamic, mutually supportive community as a means of improving AL confidence and producing practical examples of good practice. The conclusion was that the paired-peer observation scheme worked well, as part of on-going professional development opportunities being explored in continuing scholarship by the first named author.

## Aims and scope of the project

The community of ALs in Scotland teaching M&S modules is well-established and collegiate (Wenger, 1998) with a long tradition of working together to share ideas, experiences and good teaching practice, (Schein, 2013).

The idea for this paired-peer observation scheme came from the second named author, who was a relative newcomer to the community, but already an active and enthusiastic participant. Supporting the development of the scheme was an opportunity for the first named author to align expressed appraisal and professional development needs within the community.

As noted above, feedback from previous professional development events in Scotland had indicated that

- Some ALs in the community are surprisingly lacking in confidence in sharing their practice with peers.
- Some ALs are reluctant to prioritise engagement with reflective writing and scholarship.

We hoped that the scheme would help to bolster AL confidence in sharing their practice with trusted colleagues within the community.

An important additional context was the substantial organisational change taking place at the time, not least of which was the implementation of the Group Tuition Policy, (The Open University, 2014). We hoped that the peer observation scheme, in addition to other initiatives within the community, would help to boost morale in changing times and continue to engender development of 'growth mindsets' (Dweck, 2012) for all.

The main aims for this eSTEEeM project were:

### For ALs in the community

- To highlight everyday good practice.
- To encourage ALs to focus more positivity when giving student feedback.
- To boost confidence and morale in changing times.
- To continue to encourage growth of scholarship.

### For the broader HE context

- An opportunity to showcase the pivotal role of ALs in distance education as reflective practitioners supporting students.

## Activities

The scheme was introduced to M&S ALs in November 2016 by the second named author as part of a session in a cross-faculty professional development conference in Scotland. The session also involved contributions from the first named author and the Head of School, who each expressed enthusiasm and support for the initiative. There had been much mirth-making during the event, which we believe contributed to the warm reception of the scheme.

As motivation for the scheme the introduction highlighted that ALs are generally aware of their own areas for development, but less so their strengths. Feedback within the community over many years has shown that ALs find it valuable to see what others do, both in their practice as an AL and “in real life”. While some ALs are confident presenters, others find it more difficult to volunteer. We wanted to encourage ALs to share their practice with just one other colleague in this ‘paired-peer observation’ initiative.

The ALs were then invited to take part in the paired-peer scheme, which would involve:

- Finding a partner by the end of December 2016.
- Agreeing to observe one aspect of each other’s practice before June 2017.
- While performing the observation think to yourself: “What does my partner do that I don’t, but that I like?”
- Writing up a few sentences and sending to your observee and copy-pasting to a Google Form.
- Feeding back at an event in June 2017.

### Some Guidelines

We wanted to encourage participation by stressing to ALs what the scheme involved:

What the observation scheme <i>is</i> ...	What the observation scheme is <i>not</i> ...
✓ An opportunity to see the good things done by others.	✗ Laborious or time-consuming.
✓ An opportunity to reflect on what you do well that you might not even notice!	✗ An opportunity for the observer to critique the observee.
✓ An opportunity to focus on giving positive feedback.	✗ Nerve-racking or stressful.

### Some suggestions and advice

Suggested areas for aspects of practice were: a face-to-face or online tutorial, TMA marking and a general email message to students, but these areas were not prescriptive. The ALs were free to choose a partner to investigate a particular area of interest or to have a partner with a similar interest chosen for them. Further advice for pairs included:

- Organise a date well in advance!
- Don’t put on a “show lesson” – be natural!
- Try to avoid the following words and phrases:
  - good, nice, great, excellent, wonderful, fantastic ...





### TMA marking: general advice

- “Imagining myself as the student reading the feedback was very useful, and I hope this will make me more empathetic when writing my own comments.”
- “The overall ‘tone’ of the marking is chatty with a light touch (without missing any of the key points). My own marking style is arguably a little more ‘fire hose’, which may be counter-productive for less able students, so my practice could benefit from taking a cue from the less intense style demonstrated here.”
- “I also liked her brief summary feedback at the end of each question.”
- “(After a student’s careless slip): ‘Don’t be annoyed with yourself – it happens! Just take it as a reminder that another check never hurts.’ Also, ‘Let’s be very careful with the choice of words here ...’, which seems a really nice way to introduce feedback on a written answer.”

### TMA marking: specific tips

- “[K]eep better records of previous contacts with students, and what they have struggled with before, in order to see what they have improved and so personalise my feedback better.”
- “I particularly like the use of stamps to point out very important concepts or where follow through marks were given; I have only used stamps for generic ‘good’ and ‘well done’ comments but I like the diversification.”
- “...showing specifically where marks are lost, where follow through marks are awarded, and using a different colour to highlight points of good mathematical communication.”
- “In a high score script, I think I read somewhere that we are supposed to give extra challenges; pose another question or extension to what was already answered.”

### Tutorials: specific tips

- “Think about using more prepared slides in my face-to-face tutorials and also extending this over to my OU Live sessions (all hand-written just now on a Surface).”
- “The use of Maxima was encouraged as a tool for checking answers, and there were screen shots so that students could see some of the commands that would be required.”
- “Asking them to show visually where they are up to, e.g. the Unit 9 mountain.”

The next section gives an account of the extent to which the outcomes of the project were met.

## Evaluation and discussion

Taking a Theory based approach to evaluation of this project (Weiss, 1997) the following logic model was created in order to explore the extent to which, and how, the activities carried out contributed to the overall project aims. The logic model wasn't created at the start, which with hindsight would have been preferable, but rather introduced during the project in order to help clarify thinking in terms of how the project has achieved its expected aims. Furthermore, it is hoped that this more fine-grained elaboration of expected outcomes will be useful for others to judge the relevance in their contexts.

Activities	Intended outcomes for ALs		
	Short term	Medium term	Long term
Set up pair of ALs to observe each other's practice.	I've seen my partner's work.	I've picked up a new idea.	On-going learning from each other's practice.
		My partner's practice has reinforced my own.	
	I've provided positive feedback on my partner's work.	Rehearsal of articulation of positivity in engaging with the work of others.	Improved correspondence teaching through reflective practice.
	I've received positive feedback on my work.	Reassurance that I'm doing a good job.	Increased confidence in sharing my work with others and further engagement within the community.
			Encourage development of scholarship.
Context	Activities carried out within an environment of trust in an established subject-specific community of ALs.		

**What has worked and why:** The first round of peer observations worked extremely well in many respects with enthusiastic participation and resulting impact on practice some examples of which are shown above. There is strong evidence of ALs “picking up new ideas” from each other: every response to the “one thing you will take away to help with your own practice” referred to a specific new idea for practice. We have no direct evidence from feedback that ALs felt either reassurance about their own practice or more confident in sharing ideas. It is reasonable to suppose without specific comment that receiving positive comment is reassuring and plausible that this might make ALs more confident to share ideas further, but our methodological decision to ask for brief feedback doesn’t allow us to demonstrate this with evidence.

Following the success of the first round of the peer observation scheme plans for a second round were developed and shared within the community at the next cross-faculty professional development event in December 2017. The second round, however, wasn’t completed. We think that a large factor in the success of the first round was the structure of

1. An event to introduce the scheme. (This can be face-to-face or online.)
2. The observation period.
3. An event to share ideas. (This can be face-to-face or online.)

We suspect that the main reason for non-completion of the second round was that we hadn’t noted a specific event for sharing ideas. Setting this “hard deadline” is important since our conviction is that the initiative must be achievable within an AL’s busy schedule and unless we all work towards a completion date it is likely that other work will take precedence.

We had also hoped that participation in this scheme would result in more ALs having confidence and increased motivation to begin applications for HEA membership, as it relates directly to the Applaud Principle, “Work collaboratively within the distributed OU community to support the learning of students, our colleagues and ourselves. (A6)”. There is no direct evidence, however, that participation in this scheme of itself has led to more applications. Further development of scholarship within the community is on-going, however, and the long-term effect of the scheme are yet to be determined.

**In what context:** The extent to which the context of the community in Scotland is important as the setting for the peer observation scheme is explored in on-going work by the first named author. We believe however that, that since participants already knew each other and were to give and receive only positive feedback, anxieties often attributed to peer observation about observing or being observed (Cosh, 1998) were minimised.

This project sought to address concerns expressed in the literature (Bell & Cooper, 2013) about peer observation being too narrowly focussed by giving participants freedom to choose which aspect of their practice to observe. It extends work of others (Jones & Gallen, 2016) by exploring both online and face-to-face observation opportunities within an established community with a tradition of sharing practice.

In conclusion, we can strongly recommend our approach for the first round of observations, noting the importance of our three-step process above, and its value in terms of impact on teaching practice. Feedback from ALs at a recent professional development event indicated no immediate appetite for another round of observations, however ideas from both rounds continue to provide food for thought and benefit to AL practice. We conclude, therefore, that the paired-peer observation scheme has worked extremely well as part of on-going professional development initiatives within the community.

## Impact and dissemination

All participants noted that as a result of this intervention they planned to take actions to develop their practice in various ways. The impact on students is beyond the scope of this project, but forms part of on-going professional development work in the community.

Our thoughts on peer observation was shared with colleagues in the wider higher education community through presentation papers delivered by both authors (Crighton & Potter, 2018a) and by the first named author (Crighton & Potter, 2018b).

## Acknowledgments

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We are delighted that the second named author is now a full-time member of OU staff, in the role of staff tutor. We are grateful for the development opportunities afforded by this project.

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