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Teach, Reflect, Grow: Empowering Aspiring Educators through Structured Observations

Yurgos Politis
Director SMARTlab Vienna, Austria
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7151-3741
yurgos.politis@gmail.com
Irene Lubbe
Director of Assessment, MPD
Medical and Health Sciences Faculty
University of Auckland, New Zealand
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0683-7234
irene.lubbe@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

Doctoral training is increasingly accepted for creating the conditions for the development of mature researchers equipped with essential transferable skills such as the ability to design and deliver good teaching, especially for those envisioning a career in academia. While doctoral candidates are primarily focused on research, there is a pressing need for them to develop pedagogical competencies and professional skills essential for independent leadership. However, the scarcity of continuous professional development opportunities in teaching poses a significant challenge. This article explores the

development and implementation of a structured teaching observation process within a foundational course for a *Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education* specifically aimed at PhD students. This process is designed to support the professional development of aspiring educators through a comprehensive, three-step observation framework involving pre-observation discussion, observation, and post-observation reflection. Our wholistic reflections highlighted that, while resource-intensive, the process was instrumental in fostering learning. Preparation and planning were highlighted as crucial for effective teaching. Engagement and confidence varied widely among students. The process cultivated an educator identity. Creativity was emphasised, though constrained in some cases by existing course structures or students' personalities. Reflection helped in developing metacognitive skills, while feedback fostered improvement and also highlighted the tension between peer and instructor perspectives. The integration of feedback from both professional pedagogic experts and peer PhD students enriches the learning experience, promoting reflective practice and continuous improvement of teaching skills. This dual observation process offers diverse perspectives, fostering a culture of constructive feedback and professional growth.

Keywords: Feedback, peer observation, PhD training, reflection, teaching observation

1. Introduction

Establishing a career in higher education (HE) depends on several factors – key among them is an academic's level of knowledge and expertise in their field as well as their research and teaching experience (Oliveira, Nada and Magalhães, 2025). The beginning of an academic career is either during an individual's doctoral training or after completing the journey, depending on the location of the higher education institution (HEI) (Kehm, 2006). Many HEIs value the research role above all others, due to the funding that is usually attached to it, the publications and citations it produces, and the impact it can create for both the HEI and the academic at reputational and prestige levels.

Therefore, becoming an academic necessitates research training to achieve a PhD academic credential (Oliveira *et al*., 2025). A PhD demonstrates that a doctoral graduate has reached a certain level of expertise in their field of study and has acquired skills that will allow them to be an independent researcher (IUA, 2021). However, teaching related skills such as didactics and pedagogy often do not enjoy the same level of prominence among the professional skills that early career academics need to be equipped with in order to be good educators, even though it is the most visible role academics engage in (Cassuto, 2022).

Due to the rapid technological advancements of the last few decades especially in terms of educational/assistive technologies, teaching has become more complex (Hyde, Clarke and Drennan, 2011). Despite academia's best efforts to improve teaching, these efforts have been initiated largely by individual academic levels, which have hindered the professionalisation of teaching at HEIs. It therefore comes as no surprise that academic teaching has been described as amateur in nature (Zimmerman, 2020), which can be attributed to academics' notion that good teaching is less about skills and more about personality and charisma (Cassuto, 2022).

Universities in some countries have addressed the need for faculty training on teaching related topics and skills through formal programmes, certificates, diplomas, or master's degrees in teaching in HE (e.g., UK, Ireland, and the Netherlands). In some cases, those (or comparable) qualifications are becoming increasingly expected from the HEIs. PhD training on teaching is unfortunately lagging, and only a few HEIs are requiring their PhD students to take a credit barring course on teaching (Rifkin *et al*., 2023) even though doctoral students in some countries are expected to develop professional skills such as teaching and mentorship (e.g., IUA, 2001 – Ireland). The case study presented in this article is from a doctoral training programme at an Austrian HEI on didactics and pedagogy called *Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education*.

This article presents the design and development of a teaching observation process that integrates professional, peer, and student feedback, implemented in an introductory/foundational course of the certificate. We will detail how the pedagogy and didactic experts

(professionals) engaged with PhD students (aspiring educators) taking the foundational course through a three-step teaching observation process: Pre-observation, session observation and post-observation reflection, and debrief. This process was concurrently carried out by fellow PhD-students enrolled in the course, providing both student (peer) and educator feedback to the observee. This article will elaborate on the process and the form acquired to support the professional development and growth of both the observees and observers. The research question for this study is *whether the teaching observation process will empower participants (emerging academics – PhD students) to become reflective practitioners*.

2. Literature Review: Teaching Observation in Higher Education

Imagine being part of a hiring committee tasked with selecting a new academic colleague with significant teaching responsibilities. Traditionally, the primary focus would be on each candidate's content knowledge and expertise, considered the most important quality for a university educator (Postareff, Lindblom-Ylanne and Nevgi, 2007). However, in recent years, the rise of the technological, pedagogical, content, and knowledge (TPACK) model and increased adoption in an educational context have expanded our valuation to include technological content competency – integrating technological innovations to enhance students' learning – and pedagogical content expertise, encompassing learning theories and principles, student motivation, and engagement (Smith, Kim and McIntyre, 2016; Stoilescu, 2015). Despite these evolving expectations, many academics lack formal teaching training or preparation (Koskinen and Koskinen, 2022).

This perspective aligns with Boyer's well-established and still highly influential description of good teaching, which encompasses student engagement, motivation through active learning, and the enhancement of higher order thinking skills such as critical thinking and creativity (Boyer, 1990; Brahm, 2023). Consequently, educators should prioritise effective curriculum design and development, followed by a reflective analysis of their teaching practices (Benson and Ward, 2013). Yet, how can the HE sector evaluate teaching? Benton and Young

(2018) have proposed a set of 13 best practices for teaching, advocating for the involvement of various institutional stakeholders such as students, colleagues, and the academic being evaluated. These 13 practices, while incredibly thorough, exhibit a level of generality that aligns more with formal teaching assessments. Consequently, they hold greater relevance from a managerial vantage point rather than an implementation standpoint.

Academics often seek curriculum improvements or are compelled to make changes predominantly based on student evaluations, sometimes relying solely on this source of feedback. Studies have indicated that type of feedback not to enhance pedagogical practices by default (Novák, 2023) because students generally lack the expertise to provide meaningful feedback on teaching practices (NASEM, 2020; Boysen, Richmond and Gurung, 2015). This, in our opinion, diminishes the appropriateness of their feedback, especially when used in isolation.

Reviewing academics' teaching can be categorised on a scale of formality. At the very formal end, there is the evaluation model, conducted by senior staff members to judge teaching performance, often used for tenure and promotion purposes. The middle of the scale is occupied by the developmental model, carried out by educational or academic developers, primarily used to diagnose issues and offer solutions. This model can be part of a teaching certification programme. At the less formal end of the scale is the peer review model, which involves discussions and reflections on teaching methods and approaches between colleagues (Cutroni and Paladino, 2023).

There are several ways the review can occur regardless of the model adopted. For instance, they can take the form of syllabus or programme reviews (Drew and Klopper, 2014) or peer partnerships, which may or may not also have a mentorship dimension (Wass and Rogers, 2021). The most common practice, though, is class observations (Davis, 2011), whether in-person or online, which involve the analysis and assessment of academic educators' teaching practices and the provision of written and verbal feedback that may enable and empower them to improve the said practices and approaches. This method has its own challenges and critics. Teaching observations require significant time and effort from both the observer(s) and

observee (Durham *et al*., 2018; Teoh, Ming and Khan, 2016) and raise questions about the value and trustworthiness of the feedback due to academics' lack of formal pedagogical education and training (Robinson and Hope, 2013).

Academics' feelings towards teaching observations can be mixed. While Jones and Gallen (2016) have found that assistant educators have overall positive views on teaching observations, they still express feelings of anxiety, apprehension, and frustration about the observation process, being unsure and uneasy that the observation might affect the class dynamic and thus not be a true reflection of a typical teaching session for that academic. Other studies have also indicated a mixture of positivity for the process, which they considered collegial and helpful, alongside some uneasiness (Andrew, Wallace and Sambell, 2021; Georgiou, Sharma and Ling, 2018; Whipp and Pengelley, 2017).

A significant point of contention, shared by both observer and observee, is the discomfort in giving and receiving negative or critical feedback to a colleague they are acquainted with (Cairns, Bissell and Bovill, 2013). This discomfort may affect professional relationships and, more importantly, not lead to desired positive pedagogic outcomes. Going through this process with a relative stranger can create anxiety for the observee (Hendry and Oliver, 2012). This type of anxiety can be alleviated through a more structured observation process that includes an induction element, such as an introductory workshop (Bell and Cooper, 2013). Conversely, studies have revealed that there is also a level of reluctance by some observers to provide negative or critical comments for fear of being perceived as mean-spirited (Reinholz, 2017). As a result, the feedback may lack substance, failing to offer the observee the necessary useful insights for personal growth and professional development (Nguyen and Pham, 2020; Richard *et al*., 2019). Some academics may refrain from giving their feedback due to a perceived or actual lack of pedagogical training and an unwillingness to be critical of a more senior colleague (Cairns *et al*., 2013; Nguyen and Pham, 2020).

A crucial point that may be underappreciated is the added value of having someone from a different discipline and background to observe your teaching. In this case, the focus shifts from the curriculum

(content) to almost exclusively pedagogical issues. The observer and observee could then discuss and reflect on the commonalities and differences in teaching practices between and across disciplines, trying to identify approaches, strategies, and techniques that can be adopted or adapted from a different educational context. This offers opportunities for cross-pollination of ideas and practices (O'Keeffe *et al*., 2021; Whipp and Pengelley, 2017). Moreover, this process can be more beneficial for both observer and observee since both parties may feel more comfortable sharing things they might not wish to share with colleagues from their discipline. They can learn from each other's practice, almost like a student in an educator's class (O'Keeffe *et al*., 2021).

The exchange of knowledge and experiences from other disciplines reduces the discomfort an academic might feel being observed and judged by a colleague, especially a senior one, and can enrich the pedagogical competence of educators. However, being observed by a colleague from the same discipline can strengthen and enrich the teaching content and materials. Studies have suggested that academics are more likely to engage in teaching reviews or observations and view the process and its outcomes more positively if they can choose their observer. Moreover, while they welcome being observed by a (friendly) colleague of the same discipline because of an established trust and value they place on their feedback, they equally want to be observed by an academic from a different discipline for a potentially different perspective (Carroll and O'Loughlin, 2014). Consequently, it makes sense to have two observers. This process can result in the improvement of educators' teaching practices if they can effectively process and utilise feedback from different sources, thus being reflective practitioners (King, 2004; Gurney, 2007).

The effectiveness of teaching observations (peer reviews) depends not only on the 'buy-in' by the academics, who need to understand and accept the value these have for elevating their teaching practice but also on the value a HEI places on its faculty's continuous professional development (CPD). Great teaching practices can be shared between colleagues through informal and/or formal settings (Palmer, 2017; Richmond *et al*., 2014). A structured teaching observation process contains both elements: It can be formal when it is

part of a course or programme (e.g., *Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education*) and informal in the sense that learning happens through discussions and reflections that can last beyond the formal CPD through partnerships, collaborations, or communities of practice.

This article showcases a university's efforts to improve teaching practices through a structured teaching observation process. In the next section, we will initially provide the context for the formal CPD programme and then detail the dual observation by a student peer and a professional from a centre for teaching and learning (CTL).

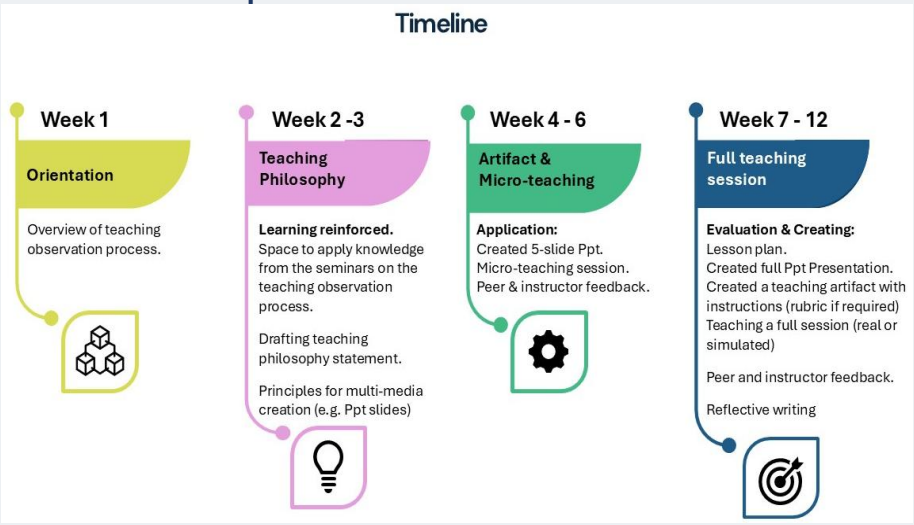
3. Teaching Observation Process

The teaching observation detailed here forms part of a *Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education*, offered to PhD students to professionalise their teaching, equipping them with skills and knowledge for academia. The observations occur during the first core module, *Foundations of Teaching in Higher Education*. We emphasised the importance of students conducting their teaching session authentically in front of an actual BA or MA cohort through a teaching assistantship (TA). A TA is a position held by a graduate student who assists a professor with instructional responsibilities, such as leading discussion sections, grading assignments, holding office hours, and occasionally lecturing. However, some students were either unable or unwilling to take that route and instead opted for the less authentic but consequence-free practicum sessions, teaching a mock session in front of a group of their peers. Regardless of the route chosen, all students in the seminars engaged in teaching artifact creation and curriculum design, including lesson planning.

To create the mock sessions, we introduced practicum sessions alongside the seminars for *Foundations of Teaching in Higher Education*. This allowed those without a teaching opportunity to teach their peers in the course. The practicum comprised 12 50-minute sessions, divided into three parts (cf. Figure 1). Weeks 1 to 3 (combined) reinforced and provided space to apply knowledge from the seminars on the teaching observation process, drafting teaching philosophy statements, and best practices for creating teaching artifacts (e.g., PowerPoint slides). In weeks 4 to 6, students prepared a few

slides (approximately five) for a 10-minute micro-teaching presentation, receiving feedback from their instructor and peers on their presentation style and suggestions for improvement. The novel aspect of the practicum was that in weeks 7 to 12, students who did not have an actual student cohort taught a topic of their interest and design to their *Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education* peers.

Figure 1
The Foundations practicum sessions timeline



(Source: Personal archive)

The first practicum session explained in detail the role of teaching observations and how it can benefit fledgling teaching practice, as well as the process involved. Students were asked to decide, in consultation with their PhD supervisors, whether to do the teaching observation through a TA or the practicum. If they opted for the TA, they had to identify a session that they would facilitate independently, choosing something they were knowledgeable and passionate about and delivering it in a 100-minute session (the typical session length for a MA class). Students opting for the practicum needed to create a 50-minute

session (the duration of the practice session) for a syllabus they had developed or could develop in the future.

Students were then asked to develop their teaching materials, including learning outcomes, a lesson plan, a PowerPoint presentation, and another teaching artifact by the end of week 6. Each student was assigned one of the two facilitators as their primary observer on pedagogical issues and asked to choose which of their peers they would observe. We noticed that in some cases, students from the same discipline paired up, while in others, students from adjacent social science or humanities disciplines did the same. In some cases, we allocated students along these lines when they failed to select. The peer observers acted primarily as content specialists, providing their own sphere of expertise.

The preparation phase was completed when students sent their prepared materials to both observers prior to the pre-observation meeting. Observers interacted with the observation form for the first time, filling in data on the session topic, course name, programme name, year, number of students, and session type (e.g., seminar, tutorial, or workshop). They also entered feedback/feedforward on the lesson plan, PowerPoint presentation, and other teaching artifacts submitted, seeking to gauge specific areas of teaching and learning where the student desired feedback (e.g., student engagement, materials and resources, activity planning, and timing). These formed part of the discussions during the pre-observation meeting, lasting approximately 30 minutes. The facilitator could also invite the peer observer to join, but this was optional. Additionally, the two students (observer and observee) could opt to meet separately if they so wished. The purpose was to reinforce the student's understanding of the CPD opportunity's value and benefit, provide answers to lingering questions, ease any anxiety or tension, and boost confidence if necessary. Feedback provided in the form was discussed, and areas needing improvement were highlighted.

During the observation session, each student could choose whether to introduce the two observers at the back of the classroom to their students (applicable only to TA teaching). In the practicum sessions, peers alternated between three roles: Educator/facilitator, peer observer, and student. Section 2 of the observation form was

completed separately by the instructor and peers, providing comments and suggestions on the following:

- Opening the session: Clarity of purpose; intended learning outcomes; (articulation); links to other sessions/modules/ programmes; expectations of the students in the session; any relevant reference to assessment.
- Main part of the session, part 1: Teaching and learning activities – appropriateness of format and structure; presentation and pace; instructor's knowledge and enthusiasm for subject; facilitation of discussions or other methods to enable deep learning; preparation (e.g., effectiveness of slides or handouts and selection of key passages or dilemmas for discussion).
- Main part of the session, part 2: Instructor/student interaction – creation of an inclusive environment; engagement of all/most students; instructor's rapport with students; ability to facilitate interest or enthusiasm in a specific topic; awareness and application of different levels of understanding (e.g., different questioning levels); professionalism, respect, and ability to facilitate student growth.
- Closing the session: Summary of key points from session; extent to which planned outcomes were achieved; links to future work; activities and assessment students will undertake after the session.
- Overall effectiveness of the session: Effective planning and pacing; clear delivery; appropriate choice and integration of materials and activities; extent of students' participation and engagement; establishment of an inclusive and learning environment; evidence of students' learning.
- Compliments: Highlighting the three most effective elements of this session.
- Developmental: Alluding to three areas for potential further examination, reflection, and development by the observee.

This feedback was recorded and provided to the observee for reflection. The post-observation meeting or debrief was scheduled either directly after the session or a week or so later, but relatively close to the

teaching occurrence, in order for the experience to still be fresh. The debrief was conducted dialogically, aiming to support and guide the student's professional development journey from a novice educator to a full educator. The discussion started with an open question about their overall impression and feelings about their teaching session, segueing into a detailed conversation about specific aspects, identifying positive areas, followed by areas for improvement and steps to achieve this, including listing further opportunities for professional development and growth. This process was enhanced through the reflective piece that the student submitted after the debrief.

4. Method and Methodology

Given that participants were not pedagogic experts, we opted for a hybrid model for teaching observations, enabling developmental feedback/feedforward to improve teaching and learning and recognising the value of professional growth through dialogue and reflection (Yiend, Weller and Kinchin, 2014). The research question for this study, as indicated above, is *whether the teaching observation process will empower participants to become reflective practitioners*.

The next step was to identify what information would be useful to the observees to initiate dialogue and reflection and what instrument could record that information. Nulty's dimensions of good teaching acted as a good starting point (Nulty 2001). These dimensions were meant to be assessed by all the participants at the same time after the teaching observation had occurred. Following an examination of the dimensions, we concluded that some of them (namely 1, 5, 6, 7, and 7.2) address constructive alignment as foundational aspects of curriculum design, such as learning outcomes, assessment, and teaching material (Biggs, Tang and Kennedy, 2022), which should be addressed before the teaching observations. Dimensions focusing on advanced content knowledge, pedagogical skills, personal characteristics, and a concern for students could be noted on the observation form during the observation (Dimensions 2, 3, and 7.1). Lastly, dimensions related to commitment to formative assessment procedures and improving teaching (Dimensions 4 and 8) should be reflected upon after the observation, following a suitable amount of time

(a few days) to allow for internalisation and meaningful reflection. Table 1 shows in the second column the full list of Nulty's dimensions and in the third column how they have been grouped to fit into our 3-step process. The observation form can be found in Appendix A.

Table 1
Re-structuring Nulty's dimensions of good teaching to accommodate the three phases of teaching observation

No	Nulty's dimensions description, 'Does the teacher [educator]…'	Dimension clusters	
1	…clearly convey the learning aims and objectives?	Before observation	1
2	…exhibit advanced content knowledge and pedagogical skills?		5
3	…exhibit suitable personal characteristics?		6
4	…display concern for students and their learning?		7
5	…engage with and commit to the use of formative assessment procedures?		7.2
6	…focus on encouraging deep learning outcomes?	During observation	2
7	…exhibit effective curriculum design?		3
7.1	…make appropriate use of the learning environment?		7.1
7.2	…make use of appropriate teaching materials and aids?	After Observation	4
8	…demonstrate a commitment to improving their teaching?		8

The next section contains the data from the reflection we (as authors and educators) engaged in as it relates to the teaching observations we conducted. The reflections are based on general observations and recollections (wholistically), as the observation forms can be an additional source of information. Author 1 (YP) observed 17 students through the TA mode and 16 students through the practicum (mock) mode. Author 2 (IL) observed 10 students through the TA and 11 students through the practicum mode. The observation period was

between autumn of 2022 and autumn of 2023. The data outlined in the following section stem from our broad reflections on the observations we undertook. These reflections, encompassing a comprehensive view, are not tied to any individual participant but rather aim at discerning themes and trends in the actions, behaviours, and attitudes of PhD students (emerging academics). Since this also forms part of quality improvement in the curriculum, ethics approval was not deemed necessary.

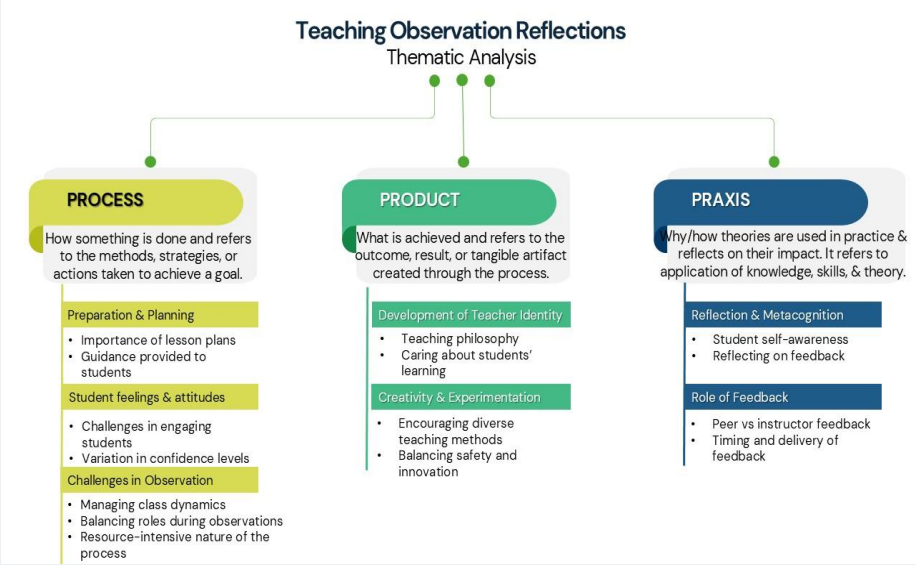
Each of us completed our reflections independently, reviewing the other's reflections only once we commenced the thematic analysis and coding phases together. We employed an inductive thematic analysis to identify and develop patterns of meaning within the data, which subsequently informed the emergence of key themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Following this, we conducted a coding phase, systematically searching for words or phrases that encapsulated salient attributes or nuances within the language of the text (Saldaña, 2016).

5. Results

The coding and thematic analysis phases we engaged in were heavily influenced by the process, product, and praxis framework. 'Process' focuses on how something is done and refers to the methods, strategies, and actions taken to achieve a goal; 'product' focuses on what is achieved and refers to the outcome, result, and tangible artifact created through the process; and 'praxis' emphasises why and how theories are used in practice and reflects on their impact.

It refers to the practical application of knowledge, skills, and theory in a real-world context (Figure 2). We identified three themes that were deemed relevant for the *process* component. The first one is *preparation and planning*, which raised the importance we placed on a well-thought-out lesson plan. The teaching observation process was structured since, 'we gave them a lesson plan template…to guide them' (IL).

Figure 2
Thematic analysis of our reflections on the teaching observations



(Source: Personal Archive)

There was a perceived correlation between the level of detail of the lesson plan 'and the level of effectiveness of the session' (YP). However, we did identify cases where during the planning phase of the teaching session, students did not appear to have consulted any material related to the programmatic curriculum and therefore were not aware of their learners' prior knowledge and skills: 'They saw their session in isolation, without trying to gauge their students' prior knowledge/skills and not trying to build/enhance them' (YP).

The second theme is *students' attitudes and feelings*, which has a dual aspect. Dealing with the variation of students' confidence levels featured prominently in the reflections. While we realised that most students were confident in teaching, there were some (notable) exceptions. We addressed this issue by either 'adopting a pastoral care role' (YP) and/or using the pre-meeting to provide them with 'some comfort and confidence for the teaching session' (YP).

There was also the matter of having difficulty engaging with students because the more experienced ones with teaching were 'more resistant to (instructors') feedback' (YP). These students had the attitude that they know what they are doing and do not need any help. Related to this point is the lack of engagement we noticed, which primarily manifested as 'students losing interest and motivation in the course after their teaching observation was concluded' (IL).

The last theme from the *process* component is *challenges in observation*. Evidently, a teaching observation is resource-intensive in nature. It takes a considerable amount of time to arrange the observation time, set up the pre- and post-observation meetings and 'writing constructive reports' (IL). However, we concluded that this was outweighed by the fact that students seemed to have 'benefitted from having received written (and verbal) feedback' (YP).

Another challenging aspect of an observation was trying to minimise the disruption we could cause as the observers. It is normal for learners to be curious about the strange person at the back of the classroom and for them to be distracted by our presence. We encouraged the students to inform their learners ahead of time of the teaching observation and explain to them how it will work. We tried hard to find a balance in our role during the teaching session by occasionally 'nodding supportively but not interfering' (IL).

Closely linked to this subtheme is the management of class dynamics in the practicum setting. The learners in that setting were the observee's peers from the *Foundations* course, and most of them either had taught or would be teaching a session in that setting. They appeared to be very attentive to the lecturing portion of the session and engaged almost enthusiastically in the discussions and activities designed by the educator. It felt like 'peers were at times too helpful and accommodating' (YP). They were helping each other in ways that were not authentic (based on interactions and behaviours we had observed in other settings) to pass the assessment, even though it was made clear to them that they could not pass or fail the assessment based on their teaching performance, but rather on the subsequent reflection on the whole process.

The *product* component comprised of two themes. The coding phase unearthed several topics related to the *development of teacher*

identity. During the pre-observation meeting most students wanted to converse about practical issues related to teaching, learning, and assessment. Some students though were thinking at a deeper and more critical level, and they were trying to identify elements of their teaching philosophy and style. That appeared to be more pronounced for the students doing their teaching session through their TA. They struggled to reconcile the way they would prefer to teach (that may have been influenced by the approaches we advocated in the *Foundations* course) with the teaching style of the main instructor of the course. They thus felt frustrated either because 'the teaching ways we suggested did not suit their personality…or because they may have felt they had to teach like the main instructors, which was not suiting them either' (IL).

Those students also seemed to be considering the effect that their teaching approaches and strategies may have on their learners' learning. They wanted to consider the appropriateness and feasibility of their learning outcomes, as well as their assessment and planned teaching material and activities. They 'appeared to care about teaching more and about their students' learning experience' (YP).

The second theme was *creativity and experimentation*. Throughout the *Foundations* course we were highlighting alternative ways to students in which they can teach compared to the traditional approaches, strategies, and techniques. As mentioned earlier, we also emphasised to students that their success in the course (from an assessment perspective) did not depend on their teaching performance. We therefore were encouraging students to move out of their comfort zones and try 'alternative ways of teaching and assessment' (IL). We encouraged them to adopt diverse teaching methods – methods that they did not experience before. Some students did this in a truly inspiring fashion to the point that 'in some cases I was impressed with their creativity' (YP).

There were other times though that students had to resort to more traditional teaching approaches, either because that was how the course was taught by the main instructor and they did not want to upset the *status quo* or because they 'were exposed to discussion as a default teaching method' (IL). It was also difficult for them to imagine teaching in any other way and/or they considered the traditional teaching approaches as more suited to their discipline.

The *praxis* component had two clear-cut themes: The first was about the *role of feedback* during this process, and more specifically how students viewed the instructor and peer feedback they received. Even though the instructor had vastly more pedagogical experience than the peer, it was interesting that some students valued instructor feedback more while others valued their peers' feedback more. This makes sense if we accept that 'the former I believe were student that needed pedagogical expertise on topics such as lesson planning, student engagement, and assessment. The latter I believe needed advice on the content; those were the students who picked a student for their field as their peer observer' (YP).

It was clear to us and was correct for most *teaching observations* that while we were the pedagogy experts and advising them on teaching and learning related issues, their peer was a content specialist and, in many cases, they could advise their peer on the content. Moreover, during a few of the debriefings and prompted by a comment made by the instructor, a student would mention a comment raised by their peer and 'they tried to make connections between the two sets of feedback' (YP). More often they would be pointing to the fact that the two sets of feedback were aligning. However, on a couple of occasions there were conflicting messages or different suggestions on how to address an issue. The students were seeking for clarity and an explanation for the discrepancy to determine how they proceeded.

In terms of the timing for the delivery of the verbal feedback, we differed as instructors. YP would set the appointment approximately a week after the observation in order for the students to have time to read through the written feedback, internalise it, and reflect upon the feedback (peer and instructor). On the other hand, IL gave the feedback directly after the observation whenever that was possible 'because in my mind, as time progresses you tend to focus too much on the negative things' (IL).

Another difference in our approaches to feedback was that in IL's observation in the mock setting, 'there were usually a few minutes after the teaching session and I elicited responses from the entire group' (IL). Those students were receiving feedback from their peers, who in that instance were acting as their learners. The benefit was that they were getting feedback from a range of perspectives, but the potential

drawback is that there could be too many voices pulling them in different directions and potentially causing the student confusion. The instructor assuming the role of a facilitator of the debrief is key in that circumstance in ensuring that the feedback is clear, constructive, and actionable.

The second theme for *praxis* is related to *reflection and metacognition*. During the debrief we sometimes must be somewhat critical (in a constructive way) of something that did not materialise as planned, or of something that in theory seemed feasible and appropriate yet did not work in practice. In those instances, we would raise the question, 'If you come across this situation again in the future how would you rectify it?' With this type of question, we were trying to make students self-aware of their teaching strengths and areas that require further improvement. We believed it was imperative that students are equipped with the skills to be able to identify areas for personal and professional growth 'and for me this is part of teaching the metacognitive skills' (IL). The advice we gave students in terms of their feedback to their peer was to be courteous and collegial, validating the aspects of the session that worked well. However, we stressed that they would also need to be constructively critical because 'if you do not know what you should work on and…should improve, then there is actually really no value in doing this (providing feedback)' (IL).

That could create a false sense of security that everything went well resulting in the possibility they could repeat the same mistakes. The depth of metacognitive skills varied understandably among the student cohort, but we were heartened to come across 'students (who) could articulate how they can enhance their students' learning experience in the future' (YP).

We were overall encouraged with the students' level of reflection based on the questions we posed during the debrief and the broader written and oral feedback they received. The last theme of *reflecting on feedback* featured rather prominently in our reflections. Reflection was a key learning outcome from the *Foundations* course and therefore it was a key topic in the syllabus where students were asked to reflect on different aspects of the course content such as their teaching philosophy statement. In some cases, students came to profound realisations about teaching, among them being the notion that their

teaching is not going to be universally accepted. They faced the reality that 'not everyone in the audience will like everything they are doing' (IL). Students would therefore have to adjust their teaching in terms of outcomes/objectives, the material/resources, and activities when they taught this session again in the future.

We were also very impressed with students that 'were making clear links between theory and practice, between principles and strategies/best practice' (YP). Those students were applying the knowledge and skills presented to them during the seminars in either a real-world context (for those teaching in their TA) or a simulated one (the mock teaching setting). A couple of students took one extra step by integrating previous knowledge and experience they gained from pedagogical training they received at primary or secondary school level. They noticed some commonalities in didactical and pedagogical principles and theories, but more importantly some differences and how they need to adapt their approaches for different audiences.

6. Discussion

The discussions and reflections students engaged in during planning and conducting a teaching session aimed to make them ponder who they are as educators or who they want to be if they lack prior teaching experience. This contemplation started when drafting their initial teaching philosophy statement. Throughout the programme, we emphasised that their participation in the *Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education* signified their interest in and commitment to developing and improving their teaching practices, leading to informed and educated choices about curriculum design. Consequently, they became more confident and motivated in teaching, potentially improving student learning (Gibbons *et al*., 2018; Stupnisky *et al*., 2018).

The three-phase (pre, during, and post) and dual (facilitator *cum* peer) teaching observation we introduced for the revamped *Certificate of Teaching in Higher Education* had a threefold purpose: First, it aimed to build confidence by allowing participants to plan and design the teaching session's elements in a scaffolded manner. The teaching observation is the core element of the *Foundations* core certificate course, designed so that seminar and practicum sessions assist

participants in creating learning outcomes for their teaching session, designing a PowerPoint presentation to enhance student learning, and providing practical information and strategies for managing a classroom environment. The facilitators' role in the pre-observation phase has a strong element of pastoral care by addressing participants' concerns and making them anticipate any difficulties or challenges they may foresee and steps they could take to mitigate for them. Second, it aimed to empower participants to become reflective practitioners. At the start of the *Foundations* course, the seminar and practicum helped participants to draft a full teaching philosophy statement, imagining who they want to be as educators or how they want to evolve. The post-observation phase provided time and space to reflect on the observers' feedback, engage in a discussion, and consolidate this through a reflective piece on the entire activity. Utilising feedback from different sources to improve one's teaching practice is a hallmark of exemplary educators (King, 2004; Gurney, 2007).

Third, the *Certificate* aimed to expose participants to new teaching methods. We wanted to introduce them to recent developments in teaching, learning, and assessment and inspire them to explore and experiment with approaches, resources, and techniques that might be uncommon or unfamiliar in their fields – challenging the *status quo* of signature pedagogies. By linking theory and practice through seminars and practicums and building their confidence, we increased the likelihood that some participants would adopt a new teaching style (Gibbons *et al.*, 2018). The willingness to experiment depended significantly on whether the participant conducted their teaching session through their TA or a practicum mock session.

Discussions during the teaching observation process raised interesting issues. Participants teaching in the practicum had freedom in choosing a topic and designing the session without real restrictions, teaching a mock class of their *Foundations* peers, making it a relatively consequence-free, low-stakes affair. Conversely, those teaching BA or MA students faced several restrictions, often unable to find a suitable session to deliver and constrained by the syllabus designed by a faculty member they could not always collaborate closely with. The most common and by far the most significant comment was that they felt unable to adopt a different teaching style, fearing it would not be

appreciated in the department, creating a stark contrast to other sessions and potentially harming their prospects of future work in that department. This was a sobering but realistic approach.

Following the first iteration of this teaching observation model and based on our own reflections combined with module feedback, we made two significant changes. We did not initially consider that some PhD students might not have taught before or even presented at a conference or seminar. To give them the opportunity to experience standing in front of an audience, we added microteaching sessions to the practicum, allowing each participant 10 minutes to present on a few slides and receive feedback on their teaching material and classroom presence, prior to the full teaching-session that would follow a few weeks later. The second change addressed the lack of depth in reflective writing. We introduced guiding questions in the *teaching observation* form to help participants reflect more deeply, resulting in more meaningful reflections and increased confidence in presenting and navigating the teaching environment. The questions were:

- What are you most proud of about your teaching session? How did your students react to the session (e.g., enjoyment, interest, engagement)?
- Do you think the students reached the intended *learning outcomes*? How do you know? If not, what are the next steps?
- What have you identified as area(s) for future improvement after the teaching observation?
- How will you address those areas?
- How did you find the *teaching observation* as a process?

We have the conviction that these changes resulted in deeper and more meaningful reflections and increased confidence in presenting and calmness in navigating the teaching environment.

7. Conclusions

Promoting excellent or at least good teaching in HE can be achieved by rewarding academic educators' good practices. The *teaching observation* model presented in this article supports this by offering an informal and student-centred caring approach, requiring a change of

mindset in both institutions and academics. HEIs need to provide space, time, and training opportunities for emerging scholars (experienced faculty too) to support professional development, while academics must engage in exercises to enhance their teaching and assessment skills and competencies.

In terms of the takeaway messages based on our reflections on the *teaching observations* we carried out as part of the *Foundations* course, those can be grouped under the *process, product*, and *praxis* categories.

Process

Preparation and planning were highlighted as crucial for effective teaching, with structured lesson plans being a key tool for students. Engagement and confidence varied widely among students, often linked to their prior teaching experience. Observation techniques and dynamics shaped the learning environment, balancing passive observation with active encouragement. The process was resource-intensive but valuable for the authentic learning experience it provided.

Product

The process cultivated an educator identity, helping students to regard themselves as educators and encouraging them to link theory to practice. Creativity was emphasised, though constrained in some cases by existing course structures or students' personalities.

Praxis

Reflection helped in developing metacognitive skills, with students learning to identify gaps and plan improvements. Feedback played a dual role, fostering improvement while also highlighting the tension between peer and instructor perspectives.

The *teaching observation* model described here addresses emerging academics' professional growth, providing them with the knowledge and tools to enhance their learners' learning experiences. It empowered them to do so indirectly, through the creation of effective lesson plans, enabling student engagement in activities and formative assessments, and establishing an inclusive environment. It can also be achieved directly by building academics' teaching related abilities and

skills, such as setting and communicating expectations, designing a coherent syllabus, linking programme offerings, and having an engaging presentation style. Additionally, they engage in deep and meaningful reflections on the kind of educator they aspire to be, shaping their teaching philosophy and understanding how it impacts their practice.

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Disclaimer: After the manuscript was compiled to the satisfaction of both authors, it was put through ChatGPT4o for editing, using the prompt, 'Please act as my language editor and suggest improvements to the manuscript. Focus on syntax, grammar, and flow.' Most of the suggestions were syntax-related issues. All suggestions were scrutinised, but not all changes and recommendations were implemented. ChatGPT4o did not add any additional content.

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10. Appendix A: Peer Observation Form

Peer observation of teaching is an opportunity for colleagues (both observers and observees) to mutually enhance teaching practice. It opens up dialogue through shared practice around the exchange of effective techniques, the addressing of shared challenges in teaching contexts, and reflection. The use of this form is optional. It is designed as an aide, suggesting potential areas of focus for observations and for conversations about teaching practice. You are free to include other themes, disregard prompts that are inapplicable, or use other means of taking focused notes about your observations.

General information about the teaching session

Name of person observed	
Name of observer	
Date and time of observation	
Course and topic of session	
Programme and year (if applicable)	
Number of students present	
Session type: (you may choose more than one)	❑Lecture √ Seminar ❑Workshop ❑Practical ❑Tutorial ❑Other

1. **Pre-observation**: The observee may wish to 1) briefly discuss areas of desired feedback, and/or 2) share a lesson plan or session notes ahead of the observation.

On which items does the observee want specific feedback? It could be *student engagement, materials and resources, activity planning, or timing*.

Session design refers to feedback on the planning document, or if none shared, observations about design.

Suggested areas of focus include outcomes (e.*g., learning objectives*), pedagogy *(e.g., appropriateness of activities, the balance between student and educator activity, or assessment methods)*, and structure *(e.g., effectiveness of structure, resources/equipment, or timing*), and preparation.

2. **Observation of the session**: The observer should take notes in this section and give it to the observee with verbal feedback.

Opening the session: This includes *clarity of purpose/intended learning outcomes; links to other sessions/modules/the programme; activity expected of the students in the session; and any relevant reference to assessment.*

Main part of the session Part 1 – teaching and learning activities: This includes *appropriateness of format and structure; presentation and pace; instructor's knowledge and enthusiasm for subject; facilitation of*

discussions or other methods to enable deep learning; and preparation (e.g., effectiveness of slides or handouts if used, or if applicable, selection of key passages or dilemmas for discussion).

Main part of the session Part 2 – Instructor/student interaction: Under this section we find *creation of an inclusive environment; engagement of all/most students; instructor's rapport with students; ability to facilitate interest or enthusiasm in topic; awareness and application of different levels of understanding (e.g., different questioning levels); professionalism, respect, and ability to facilitate student growth.*

Closing the session*, e.g., summary of keys points from session; extent to which planned outcomes have been achieved; links made to future work; and activities and assessment students will undertake after the session.*

Overall effectiveness of the session: *Effective planning and pacing; clear delivery; appropriate choice and integration of materials and activities; extent of students' participation and engagement; establishment of an inclusive and learning environment; and evidence of students' learning.*

Please highlight the three most effective elements of this session?

Please list three areas for potential further examination/reflection/ development by the observee?

3. Reflections by the observee:
What are you most proud of from your teaching session?
How did your students react to the session (e.g., enjoyment, interest, and engagement)?
Do you think the students reached the intended learning outcomes? How do you know? If not, what are the next steps?
What have you identified as area(s) for future improvement after the teaching observation?
How will you address those areas?
How did you find the teaching observation as a process?

Any additional comments

Reflection by the observer: What might you apply to your practice having completed this peer observation of teaching?
