

How to Implement Teacher Peer Observation in a School

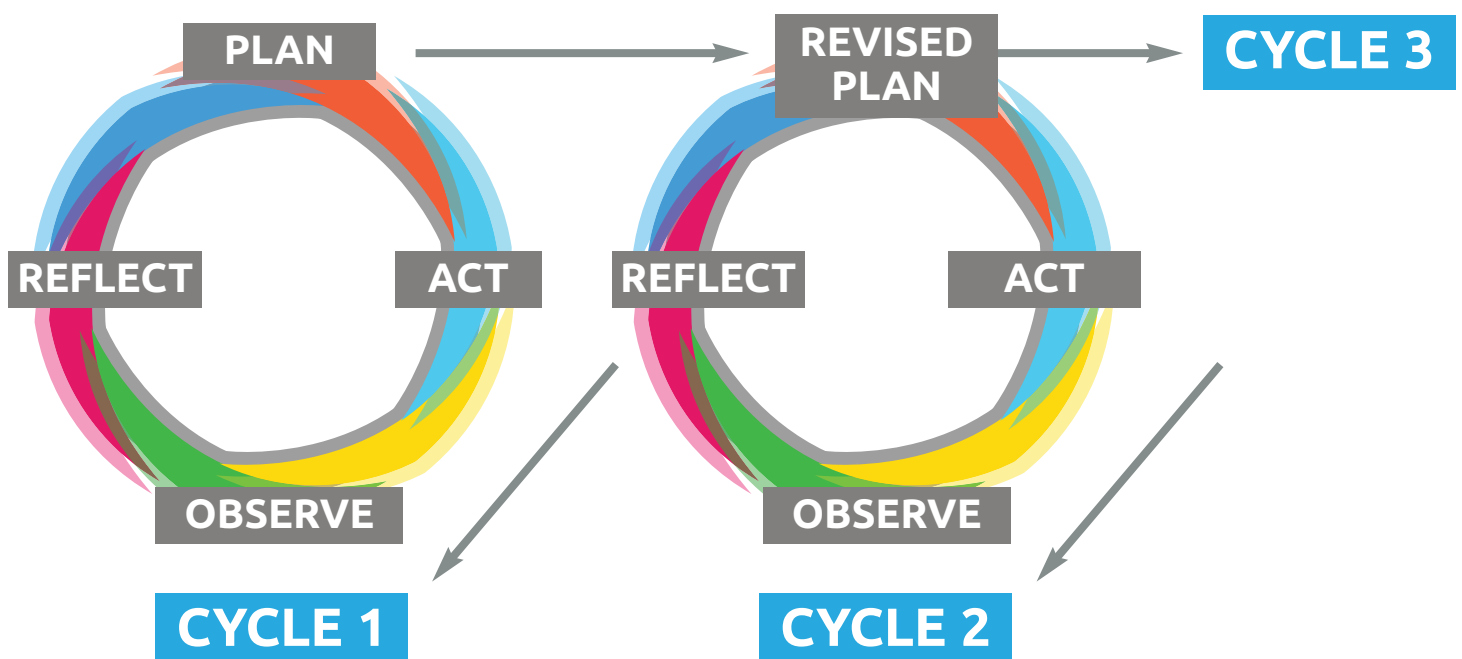
By Claire Kilroy

Teacher Peer Observation (TPO) is extensively researched and highly recognised as one of the most effective forms of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) amongst the teaching profession worldwide. It encourages an environment of collaboration and collegiality amongst teachers. It is a developmental activity in which teachers offer mutual support by observing each other teach while explaining and discussing what was observed. There is a sharing of ideas about teaching while professional conversations about teaching and learning flourish. There may also be a gathering of student feedback on teaching effectiveness which leads to reflective practice. New ideas are brought back into the classroom once witnessed and the barriers preventing observation or isolation felt by teachers are diminished. There are no negative outcomes to TPO but its often a difficult concept to introduce into Irish Post Primary Schools. I am going to discuss two methods of how I have implemented TPO into schools and what I have learned from the process. It's important to note that every school is different and leaders in this field need to reflect on what works for their school and tailor a plan accordingly.

The reason I feel passionately about implementing TPO into schools is because at times during my 12-year career as a Biology and Home Economics Teacher I felt isolated in the classroom, in need of additional support. I had lessons that went brilliantly and others that didn't evolve the way I had

planned it. I yearned for professional conversations with others about teaching and learning, as I knew that other staff members had skills that I lacked and vice versa. I engaged students in a reflective practice of my lessons and applied the critical feedback to better my lessons, but I was inquisitive to see for myself how other teachers delivered and executed their lessons. I felt passionately that a sharing and collaborative environment would benefit all.

In the academic year 2017 I completed my Master's in Education (M.Ed) entitled "An Investigation into the Implementation of a Practice of Teacher Peer Observation and Review within a school". At the time I was Acting Deputy Principal in a Voluntary Secondary School. In planning the implementation of TPO in a school it is important to avail of a critical friend, or a group of people that you can tease out ideas with and receive an alternative point of view. I formed a participant group of four teachers, the pairings consisted of teachers from the same subject department but of varying levels of experience. When choosing the groupings, it is of upmost importance that they have compatible personalities and a positive working relationship with a high level of trust. Research in this field advises to ask for volunteers from the staff for the participant group and allow them to choose the partner they feel comfortable with. If the pair observing each other don't have a high level of trust it will have a negative impact on the process.



WORDING OF THE FORM TO BE USED FOR TPO AND REVIEW

YEAR GROUP

NO. OF STUDENTS

TEACHER

SUBJECT

TIME

DURATION

OBSERVER

AREAS TO BE OBSERVED

OBSERVATION COMMENTS

FEEDBACK [KEY POINTS DISCUSSED]

ASPECTS OF THE OBSERVATION I WILL APPLY TO MY OWN CLASS

ASPECTS OF THE LESSON I FOUND VERY INTERESTING AND WOULD LIKE TO KNOW MORE ABOUT

SOME SUGGESTIONS FROM THE OBSERVER FOR IMPROVEMENT

Having reviewed my options, I decided that Action Research was the best approach to implement TPO. Action Research is cyclical consisting of three or more cycles, where planning occurs, the act of TPO takes place, there is opportunity to reflect on the process and make changes.

My role was to be a facilitator of the process, encouraging a platform for professional conversations and facilitating the observation process. Before each cycle we had a pre-observation meeting where we discussed what was going to be the focus of observation e.g. methodologies, questioning, assessment etc. The participants then observed each other and afterwards we had a post-observation meeting. This completed cycle one.

Cycle one solely focused on positive feedback. The person observing did not initially immediately provide critical feedback but in the cycle one post-observation meeting the participants asked for critical feedback as they felt that was the only way they could develop as a teacher. The participants used an observation template shown below. This they found, gave them focus and guidance during the observation.

We completed two more cycles observing a variety of practical and theory classes. I had decided to introduce TPO in the school in a non-threatening manner on guidance from research in the field.

The comments from the participants after the three cycles of Action Research were ones of positivity. Some thought it was great to experience watching somebody else and that it was a really worthwhile experience. Teachers commented on the

fact that what they gain you couldn't possibly put down in writing. It was felt by the four participants that if they were teaching that it would never have crossed their mind to do it that way. They agreed that TPO made them look at lessons differently. One or two teachers confided that the TPO process made them feel good about what they were doing. The more experienced teachers agreed that it's a way of keeping everybody fresh and keen to improve. With all the demands that are on teachers they admitted it actually was no more work. Therefore, overall it was a very worthwhile experience.

The final step in the process was to allow the four participants to give a formal feedback session to the rest of the staff on what a positive experience it was. The aim of this exercise was to share the experience and to encourage the development of a culture of TPO within the school.

I gained substantial learning from my research. It was clear that time and space for the initiative was a very significant factor. At times I had to put substitution in place, to allow the time for teachers to observe each other.

There was no major reaction from the students having another teacher present in the room, perhaps because they had the experience of teachers being present as part of the Droichead programme or probation observations.

The variety of levels of experience reflected in the partnerships of the participant group was worthwhile as both teachers recognised differences in their teaching and felt they benefitted from each other.



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The strengths of teachers in different areas became evident, both to themselves and to others participating. Teachers were exposed to different methodologies and there was a sharing of ideas. While teachers were observing, they reflected on their own teaching and became more confident about their own teaching as the Action Research developed.

The teachers found the feedback for improvement valuable and affirming. The participants stated that they felt more confident going into an inspection after engaging in TPO. A more collaborative approach developed and discussions on teaching and learning evolved outside of our meetings. Teachers questioned their own methodologies and engaged in a deeper self-reflection of their own practice. There was a stronger focus and engagement in teaching and learning in cycle three, compared to cycle one. I found that the teachers opened up about their vulnerabilities and insecurities and there was a willingness to engage and embrace new ideas and perspectives.

I met with participants two months after completing the three cycles of Action Research. The participants hadn't engaged in TPO due to a lack of time and the absence of a formal structure but had practiced methods acquired from the observation process.

Currently there is no directive from the Department of Education and Skills (DES) on TPO, it is merely a suggestion for School Self Evaluation (SSE). I strongly believe that to in order to ensure widespread take up and success across the school system, TPO needs an informal approach, yet structured within the timetable.

I have since moved on from the Voluntary Secondary School to a larger Multi Denominational ETB Secondary School with three times the number of staff. I had to reassess how to introduce TPO into this type of school. A participant group of four teachers would be lost within the staff so we had to come up with a different approach.

In my first year, I decided to set up a voluntary method of signing up for observation, recording the date of the observation on our Microsoft collaboration space "One Note". This failed miserably. I imagine due to the relaxed approach and the fact that teachers have an already heavy workload, it was seen as an extra chore and was put on the long finger. We went back to the drawing board and decided to introduce TPO under SSE, with teachers observing to zone in on our three strands of focus – Literacy, Numeracy and Learning Outcomes.

We formed Professional Learning Communities (PLC's), where three or four teachers were grouped together, within their subject departments. Each teacher was asked to complete two observations of another teacher in the PLC throughout the year. We decided to start small and informal, with no recording of observations, no constructive criticism, simply recording the observation date. The vision for the next few years is to grow and develop the process hopefully to the point where it is an integral part of our school culture.

We intend to increase the number of observations per year and eventually develop a traffic light system where teachers display a green signal on their door if they are doing a lesson where they feel comfortable with observation or a red if they are doing a lesson that they don't feel comfortable with an observer entering. It is our aim over the next few years to develop professional conversations about teaching and learning within the PLC's and subject departments. We have set up a teacher workspace in the school called *Cunámh*, provided specifically for these conversations, allowing a neutral space for critical feedback to take place.

To conclude, this is my experience of incorporating TPO into two very different school environments. As I mentioned previously, there is not a 'one size fits all' approach to TPO. It is vital that leaders of TPO assess their own school and create a plan of action that suits their needs. The scope for further development in this area is vast. There is potential to take the practice a step further, broadening the scope of the participants involved, with a greater mix of departments, or senior and junior staff involved or for the more courageous, using video footage of lessons to analyse teaching.

In a recent MLL department inspectors commended our engagement in the TPO process. Apart from this recognition from DES of it being a worthwhile activity, the benefits to the teacher are endless, with an obvious knock on impact on the learner experience. I would like to see a uniformed approach to TPO incorporated into schools across Ireland under direction from the DES and structured time allocated for it. But in the meantime, my advice to those considering TPO is to embrace it, start small and think big!